

**The Boy**  
by Robert Reed

**The mass market paperback edition of the Robert Reed's latest novel, *Marrow*, is just out from Tor Books. Mr. Reed tells us the inspiration for the following story came from two sources. "At a flea market, my wife bought one of those Christ-with-the-flock-of-sheep prints. She claims that she only wanted the frame, but somehow the Savior remains in his home. Nicely combed and very long hair; almost feminine, in some ways." He also had a tall adolescent boy come to the front door and ask if he could pick one of his flowers. Those two incidents got the author thinking about a simple what-if.**

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*Dies Veneris.*

A throbbing finds Helena.

It is warm and insistent, and in a small hard way, it feels angry.

For a slippery instant, the sensation is her own. Her heart is thundering, or maybe a sick artery is pulsing deep within her brain. Then she finds herself awake, realizing that a lazy after-lunch nap must have ambushed her, and as she sits up in bed, breathing in quick sighs, the throbbing turns from something felt into a genuine sound, and the sound swells until the loose panes in her windows begin to rattle, and the air itself reverberates like the stubborn head of a beaten drum.

A car passes. Smallish, and elderly. Nothing about it fast or particularly dangerous. But it is endowed with oversized speakers, their unlovely, thoroughly modern music making the neighborhood shiver.

Helena watches the car as far as her lilacs.

Then it vanishes, and the rude noise diminishes, and she lies back on her pillow, considering. Considering how much time she has, and her mood. Twenty minutes left in her lunch hour. A six-minute drive to work, if traffic cooperates. Her right hand tugs casually at her zipper. An after-lunch indulgence, she's thinking. She thinks about one man, then another. But the music returns, and her window glass rattles until it stops in mid-throb—a cessation of sound that startles in its own right.

Helena takes a breath, and holds it.

Through the windows, a person appears. A male person. On foot, strolling with purpose along her narrow driveway.

Helena feels embarrassed for no good reason. She sits up, telling herself that nobody can see her. And even if they could, she was doing nothing but enjoying a dieter's lunch and an innocent nap.

Her doorbell rings.

Helena gives her zipper a tug before slipping into her front room.

She's not sure what to do. Nothing is a viable, sensible option. Stand and wait and do nothing. Because caution is always sensible, she reminds herself. Just last week, another local woman was raped, and they still haven't found the monster responsible. But then the doorbell rings again, gnawing away her resolve. Cathedral bells, it's supposed to sound like. But it's a cheap wireless bell that she installed herself, and the batteries are dying, and a bright sharp hum lingers. She can still hear the hum as she unbolts and opens the front door. Standing on her tiny concrete porch is a tall thin boy. He looks to be sixteen, with few pimples and a neat diamond-shaped scar standing on his right cheek. She doesn't know his face. Or does she? Placing a hand on the locked latch of her storm door, Helena begins with a soft cough, then growls, "Yes?"

The boy seems to be staring at the rain gutter, eyes held in a half-squint and his narrow body held erect with his hands empty at his sides and his young, surprisingly deep voice saying to someone, "You're going to think this is retarded." Apparently speaking to her, he asks, "Can I pick one of your flowers?"

She thinks nothing at all. Except for a sudden relief that he isn't a rapist ready to crash through the glass. Why did she open her door to a stranger? How much good sense does that show? Even if it's daylight, in a good neighborhood... !

"Ma'am?" he prompts.

She says, "I guess. Of course."

Then she smiles, her expression going to waste.

The boy says, "Thank you, ma'am," without ever looking at her face. He seems embarrassed, turning and stepping off the porch, following the narrow walk to the driveway and the driveway out to where his ugly little car waits.

Helena closes her door and bolts it.

By the time she looks outside, the boy is carrying a single red tulip by the stalk. Her tulips are past their prime. One good shake, and that blossom flies apart. But no, he seems to be careful. Considerate. Climbing behind the wheel, the boy gently sets the flower on the seat beside him, then starts the little engine with a coarse rattle that brings back the music. Unchanged. Deep, and rhythmic. A male singer chants about some burning issue or love, but she can't quite make out the words, standing at her window, watching as the boy pulls into her driveway in order to back out again, turning back the way he started, again vanishing somewhere past the soft pink lilacs.

Helena can't help but wonder who's getting her flower.

Her big sedan is parked beside her very little house. East is the quick route. But today, Helena steers west. For a moment or two, she considers all the good sensible reasons to be curious about a stranger passing through her neighborhood. But she's not actually following the boy, she promises herself. Slowing at the corner, she looks ahead and then right, seeing the little car parked on the street, and silent. Nobody sitting inside it now.

The boy stopped in front of Lydia's house.

Unsure what she's thinking, Helena turns right and slows, staring at the brick bungalow with its little porch and little windows, its blinds and drapes pulled shut. She catches herself nearly stopping in the middle of the street. Then she accelerates, but only a little bit. And always staring.

Lydia's car is nowhere to be seen.

But her daughter's sporty little red car is in the driveway. For some reason, Sarah is home from school today. That bright and pretty girl whom Helena has always liked, and been friendly with, and occasionally felt motherly toward. And the blinds have been pulled shut. And Helena still isn't sure what she is thinking. Except that she has the burning premonition that someone here needs to be given a good sharp warning.

*Dies Saturni.*

Helena loves men.

And in all the good modern ways, she tries to understand and respect them.

Men are relatively common at work. Coaxed by the courts and changing times, state government has made heroic efforts to find room for qualified citizens of every ilk. Not that her male co-workers hold their share of the high posts. In most cases, departments are still ruled by gray-haired women with political minds and provincial morals. But some men have risen higher than Helena ever will, and she doesn't begrudge them their successes. Not at all. They are good smart and decent people, and each one deserves every opportunity that he has earned, or that he has been given. No person journeys through life today without holding such a charitable view toward the other half of her species. Helena believes. And she says what she believes whenever the occasion demands it.

When she's with her male work-friends, it seems as if they can chat about anything, without taboos. Office gossip. Politics. Crude jokes, and insulting the old religions. If handled with care, even romance and sex are viable topics. Helena likes to believe that the men are pals and confidants, and that they genuinely trust her. She definitely wants to feel worthy of their trust. But as with everything, there are limits. Her closest friends are always women. Single, like her. Or dykes. Most with children, while a few are involved in some kind of marriage. Sitting in the breakroom with her girlfriends, or sharing a pitcher of beer after work, she hears herself

speaking out of a different part of her mind. With women, she's more likely to use questionable language. To speak frankly about sex. And on occasion mention God and Christ without the modern scorn. Likewise men in the company of other men have their own mores. More than once, Helena has eavesdropped on their conversations. They can be the most modern, civilized creatures. Wealthy in their own right, and educated, and loyal to their nation and their assorted families. Yet despite all that, they forever carry a useful fatalism and a deep and abiding fear. Centuries of slow reform have built this world, and its considerable freedoms. But in their harsh jokes, they expose their real hearts. Everything they have won can vanish again. Suddenly, without the pretense of fairness. Each time they mutter "Bitches," their ancient fierceness betrays itself. Even when their curses are dressed up in smiles and laughter. One of them whispers, "Stupid cunt," and that's all it takes for them to laugh together, happy beyond words, and the woman listening at the breakroom door has no choice but to grimace, and shiver.

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Yet this isn't the old world; the new freedoms lift everyone higher.

In this enormously prosperous society, a single woman has her own rich opportunities, and risks, and the responsibilities that come with these blessings. Helena has owned her little house for twelve years. With the bank's help and approval, of course. She does all of the vacuuming and dusting. Whenever the urge and energy strike, she redecorates one of her little rooms, and she does as she pleases with her grass and gardens. No sisters or fellow disciples offer their poor advice, or goodhearted criticism, or forbid what you so much want to do. Like that weekend morning when Helena decided to paint her trim and her little garage. It was her impulse. She was the one who drove to the paint store. She selected the bright shade of blue and the ordinary white. Then she saved herself a small fortune by doing the work herself.

Mostly.

Lydia had just moved into the neighborhood. She brought her daughter and an older son, plus their father. Callan, the father, was a part-time presence. Home some nights. Other nights, absent. He worked construction jobs and as a bartender and sometimes a handyman for hire. He was a smiling, handsome fellow. A little short, but not too short. Boyish in the face, but old around his dark eyes. The consequence of being a smoker and a determined drunk, no doubt.

Lydia's property sits perpendicular to Helena's backyard. It was a Saturday afternoon, sunny and warm, and Helena was busily painting the backside of her garage. Callan was standing behind the fence, making small talk while watching her backside. In the most offhand fashion, she admitted that she didn't like climbing too high on her ladder, which was why she hadn't finished the trim just beneath the peak of her house. No, Helena wasn't begging for favors. She took pride in doing her own fix-it jobs. But Callan took the confession as a plea, and laughing in that fearless way that only men can, he told her, "I'll do the ugly for you. How about that?"

She heard herself say, “If you don’t mind. I guess.”

But he turned away and started for Lydia’s back door. “If I’m going to do this chore,” he explained, “I’ll need a good shot of vodka first.”

He was a talkative, usually pleasant drunk.

After the painting was done, Helena invited him inside her house. No vodka, she warned. But she had beer. And Callan happily drank her beer, regaling her with stories about his adventurous little life. He had done his stint in the Service, he boasted. Australia, then the Middle East. “Eleven kids on three continents,” was his favorite boast. Which was an astonishing, almost baffling number. How could so many women allow themselves to get pregnant with his seed? Callan’s charms were simple and probably didn’t reach very deep. By his own estimate, he wasn’t particularly bright or creative. Really, his only substantial claim was that he was an exceptional lover. “Enough cock for two men,” he promised, sitting on her sofa with the spent beer cans crushed at his feet and his knees apart and his pants hiked up high and tight.

Helena decided to call his bluff, asking, “Is there enough cock for two women?”

He blinked, flashing a boyish grin as he sang out, “Always, darling. Forever!”

This was eight years ago.

They slipped into her bedroom, and plopping down on the bed, Helena instructed him to undress as she watched. Callan seemed perfectly happy. But once he was naked, stroking himself to prove his boast, he happened to glance above her tall dresser. A picture hung there. Helena had bought the picture at a garage sale. For its frame, she explained. Wider than it was tall, with an arching and halfway ornate backbone, the frame was made of some cheap metal meant to resemble brass, embossed with a vine and flowers that might or might not be honeysuckles. She had kept the picture inside because she hadn’t found any other that quite fit the frame, she told him. Though in some ways, she rather liked that image. There was something comforting about seeing Christ sitting among the flock.

Men can be extraordinarily superstitious.

Callan, particularly. He immediately dropped his prick. His erection began to fade, the scared blood in full retreat, and with a suddenly soft voice, he announced, “It bothers me. Would you get it out of here?”

Helena had to laugh, but to mollify the man, she covered the offending image with her paint-spattered shirt. Yet Callan remained ill-at-ease. It took another twenty minutes to get him back into shape again, and then, he wasn’t particularly fun. Tentative. Self-conscious. Far from the horny maverick that he’d promised in the first place.

Lydia knew about the two of them.

But Helena and her neighbor remained friendly, if not friends, and it was a subject neither woman brought up. Nor did it need to be. Men were free to sleep with whomever wanted them. Besides, she and Callan screwed just a few times, in all. It wasn't as if Helena intended to bear Callan's twelfth child. Frankly, she had better taste than poor Lydia. When and if the time came, there were legions of potential fathers better qualified than that charming and superstitious little drunk.

Then five years ago, Callan seemed to vanish.

At first, it didn't seem remarkable. But several weeks became several months, and his dented old truck still wasn't parked against the curb. The sun and rain began to fade the oil spot on the pavement, which was very strange. And that's why one day, standing at the back fence, Helena asked about him.

Lydia is a handsome, raspy-voiced woman. She responded by staring off into the distance, then with her voice soft and certain, she said, "Really, I don't believe that's even slightly your business."

Which was probably true.

A week or two later, on a pleasantly warm Saturday afternoon, Helena was kneeling in her front yard, weeding. And suddenly Callan's old truck appeared, chugging past her house and pulling up onto Lydia's yard, the drunken man staggering out of it and up the porch steps, holding a whiskey bottle by its neck as he shoved his way into the house. Lydia's windows were open; Helena couldn't help but hear the shouting. And where the curtains were open, she could see the combatants moving. Or standing perfectly still. In some strange fashion, it was a pleasure to watch their fight. Helena's little life seemed suddenly peaceful and perfect; not having children or permanent men were blessings, plainly. Callan screamed incoherently. Lydia cursed him horribly. Little Sarah was begging them to get along. Please! Then her older brother warned someone to shut up. And that was followed by the hard quick *pop*, and a terrible silence instantly settled over that sad little house.

Moments later, Lydia staggered from the back door, one hand pressed against her bloodied face. Helena was standing in her own backyard by then. Lydia seemed to glance her way, her expression shifting and unreadable. Then on rubbery legs, she walked to the next house on her street, and a few minutes later, the police and medics descended, burly officers restraining the drunken man by his arms and ankles, and Lydia climbing out of the ambulance long enough to shout, "You fucking dick-faced asshole!"

Callan had always boasted to Helena about his innate luck. "That's why women want kids from me," he loved to explain. "They want what I have. How everything always comes out right for me in the end."

Helena took a day of vacation to attend the trial. And for a little while, it seemed as if the famous Callan luck would hold. Callan's son took the stand. A burly teenager with his father's good looks and easy charm, he changed his story, trying to convince the jury that his mother had injured herself by falling. He certainly told a convincing lie. But then Lydia put her hand on the Bible and pointed straight at Callan, telling the eight women and four men on the jury, "He hit me. Here." She pointed at her swollen, broken cheekbone. "Here," she repeated. "He's the one responsible."

Neither lawyer asked for the daughter's testimony. Perhaps because she was so young and so obviously distraught by this tragedy.

Nor did anyone call on Helena. And she didn't offer her opinions, either. She didn't want to appear to be a busybody or a fool, telling what she might have seen, or what she thought she had heard, all while looking through windows some fifty feet away.

Callan's sole defense was that he couldn't remember anything. He had drunk that much, and the horrible day was lost to him, and for everything that he might have done, he was sorry sorry sorry.

The jury deliberated for a heartbeat, it seemed.

They decided that Callan would live in custody for thirty years, working every day inside one of the sprawling factories where men indistinguishable from him could make restitution for their significant, nearly unforgivable crimes.

Which was how it should be.

But for weeks, Helena couldn't sleep through an entire night. Odd dreams would awaken her, and persistent fears kept her awake, eyes staring up through the suffocating darkness, her mind darting. No, Callan wasn't a good man. What could be more obvious than that? And she herself hadn't seen or heard anything conclusive. If anyone had let her take the stand—a huge assumption, that—then she would have offered nothing but a vague impression. As she watched the fight, and listened, it seemed to her that it was Callan who was standing in front of the kitchen window, both hands on the countertop to keep his drunken self upright. And when his son screamed, he said, "Shut up, you bitch!" And the sharp sudden *pop* came while Callan was still holding tight to the countertop, fighting to keep the pitching of the earth from throwing him down.

But even if that was true—even if the son had struck Lydia—how could Helena have helped anyone by talking? If a mother wants to protect her first-born, then what good would words from nosy neighbor accomplish?

No, she kept telling herself, she'd done what was best.

Or at least, what was the least awful.

But she couldn't stop thinking of Callan. Feeling sorry for that drunken man-child. She would remember him naked in her bedroom, happily playing with himself ... and she invented an odd and complex fantasy where the picture on the wall hadn't spoiled the first moment, and their affair grew into something larger and more permanent. She discovers what is good about him, then she cultures it. And slowly, with patience, she makes Callan into a man worthy of a woman's trust and love.

The sun would eventually rise, illuminating the opposite wall, and the picture.

One morning, tired enough to cry, Helena rose from her bed and pulled the picture from its hook, intending to put it away. But as so often happens when you take down an old picture, she looked at it carefully for the first time in years. Christ sitting in a pasture, she saw. The delicate, lovely face looking more European than Middle Eastern. That long silky hair and the deep, eternal eyes. And those tiny hands gently cradling the face of a newborn lamb.

What was the Daughter of God saying to the animal? she asked herself.

What great and ancient wisdom of peace and charity and love was being wasted on that stupid, stupid beast?

*Dies Solis.*

Helena hasn't attended church in twenty years. But sometimes she feels a strange envy when her oldest neighbors—women and the occasional shriveled up man—drive slowly past in the early morning, dressed in their best clothes, having somewhere important to be. Even though she isn't a believer anymore, the old tugs remain. The faith of a childhood can't be purged. Ever. And there is a piece of her that can't even grieve that fact. Even now, she can still worry about her immortal soul.

Instead of church and prayer, Helena spends her mornings pushing her lawn mower. The machine is cheap and loud, and it smokes, and it's old enough that it lacks any modern safety features. Which makes the chore into a little adventure. One misstep, and she can lose a big toe or maybe half of her foot. Images of carnage help her concentrate, and afterward, she can feel as if she has accomplished something large.

This is late morning, and she is struggling with the corners of her backyard. Two elderly women approach without being noticed. Their first shouts go unheard. But then Helena senses motion, and she turns, startled to see them. The mower dies with a last puff of oily smoke. She just stares at the round faces and the long white hair. Then to her mother, she asks, "What's wrong?" because something definitely is. She asks both of them, "What are you doing in town?"

Mother says, "Shopping, eventually. And to see you, dear."



Both women are dressed for church. But their wide leather belts have been loosened and dress shoes have been replaced with comfortable gray sneakers.

Aunt Ester explains, “We started out after early service.”

Ester never misses church.

“You should have called first,” says Helena. “I could have had brunch waiting. And I wouldn’t be such a mess.”

“You look good and honest,” says Ester.

Mother says, “Honey.”

That single word alerts Helena. She looks at her mother’s sober expression, and again she asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Both women say it.

Then Mother adds, “We just wanted to tell you in person.” And she pauses for a dangerous moment, gathering herself before saying, “We’ve sold the farm. We got an offer ... a very generous one ... and it’s time, we decided....”

Helena wipes her forehead with her driest hand. “Who? Who gets it?”

“One of the local corporations,” says Ester. She’s a large woman—one of the largest that Helena has ever known—and not just because of her dimensions. Ester is a creature of substantial beliefs and strengths. Doubt is foreign to her. A weakness, and good reason for disgust. Hinting at some old debate, she looks at Mother and shakes her head once, for emphasis. Then she admits, “We’re old women. Not enough of our kids want to be farmers. And the corporations are the only ones who can make us comfortable in our retirement.”

“The house, too?” Helena squeaks.

“Oh, we keep that,” Mother interjects. “That and the surrounding ground. For as long as we want to live there.”

*We* are seven women, in all. Mother and Ester and another sister, plus four unrelated women. They became Disciples of Christ together in a bonding ceremony some forty-five years ago. Their sprawling farm was a gift from their various mothers. And it was an amazing success for Mother and Ester, since their mother’s old farm was the smallest and poorest portion of the dowry.

“We could have left it to you and the others,” says Ester. “But with these new rules ... well, it makes it impossible to keep things together....”

Taxes, she means. And the fair inheritance laws.

Helena starts to say, "I understand."

But Mother interrupts, telling her, "Nothing changes until next year. Officially."

Helena nods.

Trying to look anywhere else, her eyes wander. Past the steel chain and post fence is a tiny square of grass. Lydia's backyard. Lying on a faded green blanket, basking in the late spring sun, is the daughter. Is Sarah. She wears nothing but a tiny swimsuit and a pale, springtime tan that by summer will have turned to a brown gold. She's a pretty black-haired girl with her mother's wide hips and prominent bustline. Eyes shut, ears embraced by headphones, she seems immune to the world around her. A self-involved woman-child, Helena thinks. Probably fantasizing about her tulip-toting boyfriend ... and now Helena blinks and turns away, shaking her head for every good reason.

"What's this flower?" asks Mother.

"Fritillaria," Helena says.

"It's beautiful," she says. "Don't you think so, Ester?"

A luxurious emerald stalk and thick leaves have risen out of the perennial bed, sprouting large crimson flowers that are pointed downward. To Helena, the plant resembles one of those ornate antique lamps from the days of the Great Queens and their farflung Empires. Quietly, she says, "Smell it. But carefully."

Her aunt keels. Sniffs. Says, "Ugh."

"It's a difficult odor," Helena concedes.

Mother risks her own little sniff, then says, "I don't mind it." Straightening, she tries to show a big smile, saying, "Maybe we could grow them in our garden. Where do you find it, darling?"

Helena tries to reply.

But Ester interrupts, announcing, "I don't think we need such a thing."

She says, "It reeks like a skunk."

Mother says nothing, and everything shows on her face. The color has drained out of her. Her features instantly turn to cold wax, and the eyes seem to focus on a faraway point, and in the same instant, they turn blind.

Ester tries to laugh, saying, "Now, now. Don't pout."

Helena stares at the clipped grass, holding her breath.

"You know perfectly well," says the older sister. "Frances won't like its

looks. And Eve is sensitive to *every* bad odor.”

“I know,” Mother whispers.

“Fritillaria is a big white bulb,” Helena offers. “You plant it in the fall. The same depth you plant tulips.”

“Cock depth,” says Ester, repeating the bawdy old joke. Then with an artificial cheerfulness, she tells her sister, “We’ll let you put one or two of these monsters up by the old barn. Eve never visits the barn anymore.”

“I don’t either,” says Mother.

Ester conspicuously ignores her.

Mother takes a breath and turns and says to the garage, “Come down and see us sometime, darling.” She says, “Soon,” as if pleading. And before anyone can offer a word or make the tiniest sound, she marches for the gate, leaving the backyard as quickly as she can without actually bursting into a run.

Ester shrugs as she always does, laughing at her baby sister’s peculiarities. Then she glances across the fence, asking, “Is that your little neighbor girl?”

Helena stares at her aunt.

Saying nothing.

Ester feels the stare, and calmly ignores it.

“She’s grown into quite the pretty young thing,” the old woman declares. The undisputed leader of her disciple, now and always, she glances at Helena, and winks once, then adds, “A girl like that ... shit, I could plow an entire county with all the eager young cock she could lure in. Don’t doubt it, darling!”

*Dies Lunae.*

Helena glances at her bedstand clock, measuring how long she has to fiddle with her always difficult hair. Only a few minutes, she realizes. So she does a hurry-up job before rushing out the door with the sack lunch that she fixed last night. Callan used to tease her about her punctual nature. He would spy her as he was heading out to his newest job, or as he was arriving home from an all-night drunk, or maybe he was just standing out in the yard, waiting for Helena. He would wave and laugh, and without a care in the world, he would shout the predictable words:

“I could set my watch by you, woman. You’re that predictable!”

The simple memory gnaws. For no sensible reason, Helena finds herself debating her nature with an imaginary Callan, muttering to herself as she backs out of the garage and onto the street. Saint Judith Boulevard takes her straight to work. Honestly, there have been plenty of times when she arrived late. Because of weather,

or traffic mishaps, or sometimes they'll hold a big rally down at the parenthood clinic. But not this morning, she notes. The clinic is at the corner of Judith and New Hope. A low brick building without windows, it is surrounded by a high iron fence and pivoting cameras. Just a dozen quiet protesters are patrolling the sidewalk this morning. A listless group, they hold hand-painted signs overhead. Two serious men for every earnest woman. Which is typical of these groups.

A bearded young man carries a red-lettered sign.

"Life Is Always Precious!" Helena reads as she drives past.

Then she isn't thinking about Callan anymore, or the protesters, either. Just like that, her conscious mind is swirling, ancient memories suddenly so fresh and raw that it's all she can do to keep her car on the road.

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Sometimes the department head invites a few of her favorites out for drinks after work. Today's excuse is an excellent ranking by the Auditor's office. Helena doesn't want to be included, but she's beckoned and feels obliged to make an appearance. Have a beer, then slip away. That's her plan. But some sneaky soul refills her glass from the common pitcher, and what can she do? Sit and take part. Ignore her mood, and ignore the day's tensions. And whatever happens, she reminds herself that she needs to smile.

Her supervisor sits beside her, increasing her secret misery.

Morris is a tall, long-legged man, and a decorated veteran, who served as a lieutenant in the final Asian wars. People in a position to know claim that he was only a lowly supply officer, and that he was wounded only because of incredibly bad luck. Or good luck, depending on your perspective. Even today, scars on a man are supposed to have weight and a curious beauty. They prove bravery and suffering and devotion to higher causes. But on Morris, that raised chunk of flesh on his throat is nothing but ugly. It always draws the eye, making Helena notice that his neck is ridiculously long, and the rest of him is pale and soft, and in so many ways, homely.

At one point, when he's sure that the department head is paying attention, he says to Helena, "We've adopted another one. Did I tell you?"

He has. Several times.

But she knows to smile and ask, "Is that so?" with a feigned ignorance.

"From a little city-state," he continues. "Hue. On the southeast coast."

The department head—a corpulent, gray-haired woman at the end of the table—leans forward on her elbows, asking, "Now how many does it make, Mr. Morris?"

“Eight,” he declares happily.

Maybe it’s the beer, or maybe beer is her excuse. Either way, Helena prods him, saying, “I bet it’s another girl.”

“Naturally,” he booms. Then with a self-congratulatory laugh, Morris flips open his wallet and passes around the newest family portrait. A glance is all that Helena needs. Eight girls of various ages, from various parts of Asia, stand among his own five children. His handsome and astonishingly energetic wife kneels down in front. They supposedly have a monogamous marriage. Very modern, and scrupulously fair. Morris never sleeps around. “I was a virgin when I was married,” he will tell anyone who mistakenly brings up the subject. “And my wife is the only lover for me.”

Everyone at the table has heard Morris describe his vital, heartfelt beliefs.

But the department head likes to watch his performances, and she prompts him by saying, “You’re doing these young ladies such a service.”

“We just wish we could save more,” he replies. A predictable and pretentious man, he can’t resist telling the world about his virtuous soul. He always uses the same words: “We” because his marriage is the perfect partnership. And “save” because everyone knows where these lovely little girls come from.

Amused looks are traded between the women.

He seems blind to their grins. With a heavy, overly dramatic voice, Morris warns, “There might come another war in China. Manchuria and the South are feuding again, and the Viets are trying to make new alliances.”

Asian politics are complex and frequently horrific. Helena rarely bothers sorting out who’s angry at whom, or which ones wield nuclear weapons, or which of these angry little states are going to be supported, for a day or two, by the Western Powers.

“Too many balls are in charge over there,” Morris tells them.

Helena breaks into a cackling, half-drunken laugh.

The gray-haired woman gives her a look. “Now darling,” she rumbles. “Wouldn’t you want to help save a few of our little sisters?”

The beer makes Helena clumsy.

Makes her bold.

“I want to help,” she claims. Except with her next breath, she points out, “These countries are nightmares. For our sisters, and the men, too. And sometimes I think, ma’am, that maybe our policies are a little bit to blame—”

“Nonsense,” Morris interrupts. “Obviously, you’ve never lived in Asia.”

“I guess I knew that,” Helena replies.

Her co-workers laugh quietly. Women and the few men, both.

Morris licks his lips, then adds, “You certainly didn’t give up five years of your life trying to put that continent to peace!”

She stares at his ugly face, and the scarred neck.

Then she surprises herself, remarking, “Everyone knows about you. You were inside your air-conditioned office, hiding between file cabinets, and a piece of shrapnel slipped through and nicked you, and you didn’t let them stitch you up because you wanted to have a good pretty scar.”

An astonished silence descends.

Morris’ face is even paler than usual, his eyes round and cold, his expression moving from shock into utter embarrassment.

Helena feels ashamed, a little bit. She blinks and drops her gaze. The Morris family portrait has been passed around the table, ending up in front of her, and something in it catches her interest. She picks it up, ignoring the adopted daughters and the perfect wife and mother. And she disregards Morris’ blood-daughters, too. Instead, her gaze focuses on the lanky teenage son standing in the back row, looking put upon by the camera, his face tilted and the diamond-shaped scar obvious on his cheek.

I know that face, she keeps thinking.

Then she remembers where she saw him, and the photograph slips from her hands, sliding into a ring of condensation.

Morris rescues his picture, wiping it dry against his sleeve, trying hard to kill Helena with hard looks and a pouting lower lip.

*Dies Martis.*

She fully intends to go to work today.

But when she’s half-dressed, Helena has an abrupt change of heart. Standing in her bedroom with her little television playing, she isn’t consciously listening to the news. But then the newscaster describes another rape not twenty blocks from her front door, and a cold suffocating dread takes her, and with an old woman’s frailty, she suddenly collapses on the edge of her bed.

The morning weatherman appears. A roundish middle-aged fellow, he smiles warmly, looking utterly harmless for the camera. With a practiced jolliness, he describes approaching fronts and the promise of heavy rains. And somewhere in the

midst of his forecast, Helena calls the office to say that she's under the weather and perhaps she'll recover by tomorrow.

For most of the morning, Helena lives like a sick person. A light breakfast. Comfortable clothes. A stack of unread magazines, and she parks herself in front of her big television. But the game shows and talk shows—normal fare when she's dying of the flu—can't seem more absurd or trivial. Which is why she finally changes into gardening clothes and slips into the backyard, telling herself more than once that she doesn't care how it would look if someone from the office were to drop by.

A little before noon, Sarah arrives home.

Helena is on her knees, fighting the good fight against creeping Charlie. Just a glance tells her what is happening. The girl practically sprints from her car to her front door, and a moment later, curtains left open by her mother are closed, and the blinds are closed, and Helena can almost taste the air of expectation holding sway.

It's lunchtime at school, she reasons.

And she rises and removes her knee pads and moves to the front yard with her favorite clippers in hand.

The tulips are in ruins. But the lilacs are at their peak. She clips free three lavender flowerheads, then wonders if she's an absolute idiot. But no, the deep heart-like thrumming of a stereo finds her, and she strolls off the end of the driveway just before the boy appears, finding her waiting in the street, her free hand lifting, demanding that he stops.

If anything, he seems worried.

Scared, even.

But he brakes and kills the music and rolls down the window, saying, "Yeah?" with a hint of anger in his voice. Abrupt, and very male. He seems to be asking himself who is this crazy lady standing between him and his girlfriend. "What is it?" he sputters. Then, "Ma'am."

"Give her these flowers," Helena tells him.

He notices the lilacs. Finally.

And a wave of recognition grabs him. He blinks and glances at her face, then at her house. He barely looked at her face until now. And Helena isn't an ugly woman, even if she's nearly middle-aged. Men still appreciate her figure and her face, and she tries to show the best of both as she leans into the open window, forcing him to take her gift as she asks, "What's your name, son?"

He opens his mouth, then remembers to speak.

“Luke,” he blurts.

“Luke,” she repeats. And she stands again as he takes the flowers by their stalks. “My name is Helena.”

He says, “Yeah. All right.”

This isn't going well. Of course she had no idea any of this would happen today, or that it would ever happen. And she isn't even certain what she wants to accomplish now. But the panic builds on his splendid young face. His looks come from his mother, Helena decides. He has to suspect some kind of trouble. An old lady's trap is waiting. But he finally takes her little gift willingly, which is always a good sign.

Hoping to escape, the boy says, “Thank you.”

“You're quite welcome, Luke.”

Eyes forward. Hands on the wheel now.

Then she says it.

“Let me give you fair warning,” she tells him. “Are you listening, Luke? You need to know. Sarah and her mother can be very hard on men. Unfair, and treacherous.”

He looks straight ahead, and bristles.

Then without another word, he turns on his ugly music and drives away. Not slowly. But not moving fast, either.

\* \* \*

Just once, Helena visited Callan in prison.

The arrangements were involved and laborious, mostly because he wasn't her relative and there was no child between them. Forms were filled out, then filed. Then she drove north and west for part of the day, coming to a small city dressed with concrete walls and endless reaches of electrified wire. Again, long forms demanded her attention, and her signature was matched against every signature on file. Then a pair of quiet women searched her thoroughly. Clothes. Hair. Mouth. Other cavities. Nobody expected to find anything, but it seemed important to embarrass Helena in enormous ways. Which is what they accomplished, sure enough.

Forty thousand men lived inside that strange and dangerous city. And the one man whom she had sought out was almost a stranger to her.

No carefree drunk was laughing at his plight.

Callan wore a long number on threadbare prison clothes, and he stared at his guest with a calm, steady, and irresistible anger. What had happened to him over the



last few years, she could only imagine. Men were dangerous. Always. But men living only with men, in such circumstances ... it made her want to cry just to think about it...

He said, "Helena."

He said, "So sit. If you want."

They were inside a large airless room part way filled with couples like themselves. A dozen couples, perhaps. But this was one of two visitation days in the month, and out of forty thousand inmates, only twenty of them had company.

A small tragedy, it was, set against the rest.

Quietly, without patience, Callan asked, "What do you want, Helena?"

"How are you?" she blurted.

He said, "Great, actually," and showed her a bleak little smile.

"Really?" she sputtered.

"Absolutely." Then he pulled up the sleeve of his jersey, making a muscle and showing a glimmer of the former Callan. "I'm sober now. And look how fit I've gotten...."

She didn't notice the bicep. What caught her gaze was the star and crescent scars cut into his flesh. There was an odd cult popular among male inmates, she recalled. Something called Islam. It had its own prophet—a mystical man born in the Dark Ages—and its armies had attacked the remnants of the old Roman Empire. But the Pope, in her wisdom, managed to build a consensus. A union of nations. Divisions and schisms that had split the early Christians were healed, at least temporarily. Then loyal heroic men under the Pope's guidance had obliterated the Islamic armies. And for better than a thousand years, that religion had pretended to be extinct.

Callan meant to show off his scar.

And Helena had come here to tell him, "You didn't hit Lydia."

She blurted those words, then took a huge breath before adding, "I was watching you. You couldn't have. It was your son, I'm almost sure."

If anything, he seemed unsurprised by her declaration.

Bored, almost.

"I couldn't testify," she continued. "It would have been my word against Lydia's. And that wouldn't have changed anything."

Her lover nodded, and for the moment, he seemed to be hunting for the

proper response. Then he quietly told her, “It doesn’t particularly matter, Helena,” and he leaned across the smooth plastic table, the steel links of his manacles rattling gently. “Do you know why it doesn’t matter?”

“Why?” she squeaked.

“If my boy hadn’t, I would have. Hit the bitch, I mean.”

She sat motionless, feeling scared and sorry. And perfectly confused.

Then Callan sat back like the conquering hero, winked with a shadow of his old charm, and remarked in the most offhand manner, “Do you know what else? If I got out of here today, this minute, I’d do worse. A lot worse. To pretty much every one of you ugly slits.”

*Dies Mercurii.*

Curiously, Helena wakes that next morning feeling ill, but despite a burning nausea and a suffocating fatigue, she dresses herself and fixes her hair, leaving for work just a few minutes late.

But a traffic tie-up pounces on her.

Nothing is moving at the intersection. Too late, Helena turns on her radio, listening to a bulletin about a bomb scare at the clinic. It takes the police forever to redirect the traffic around the roadblocks. She arrives late, and as a reward, she learns that Morris will be in meetings the entire morning. Three different women give her the news. “A reprieve,” one of them calls it. Then the woman laughs and clucks her tongue, adding, “You really told him. Nobody thought you had the balls, Helena. But they’re big as peaches, aren’t they?”

All morning, Helena plans to lunch at home, allowing herself to build a robust little fantasy about herself and Sarah’s boyfriend. She imagines them chatting amiably beside the lilacs. Then she’ll lure him indoors on some errand that only a tall boy can manage ... something in the bedroom ... and what happens next changes each time she thinks about it, always reaching a point where she’s aroused as well as frightened by her thoughts, and disgusted with herself, and in a strange way, thrilled by the feeling that she has absolutely no control over the flow of her sick, lonely mind.

But she doesn’t drive home at noon.

Half a dozen co-workers want to take her to lunch instead. Their treat. And with no room for choice, it’s easy to tell them “Yes.”

The restaurant is squeezed inside a substantial old home. Antique photographs decorate the walls, most of them portraits dating back to the pioneer days. Beefy, frequently pregnant women stand in a row with their fellow disciples, their shared husbands kneeling down in front, each of the men looking scrawny and strong from

constant work. Helena counts the faces on the nearest wall. Between the standing women and their kneeling men are the children. Maybe two smiling girls for every smiling boy. Accidents would have claimed a few of the missing. And disease, since they are the weaker sex. And the coming Asian wars will eventually slaughter them by the millions. But what astonishes and sickens Helena is that the boys are smiling, as are their fathers. These long-dead souls who couldn't own property, or vote, and who rarely even learned to read. Yet these aren't the pained grins of people staring into the sun. No, what she sees is the honest bright smiles of happy people looking at a future full of nothing but purpose, place and genuine promise.

Helena eats half of her lunch, if that.

A note is waiting on her desk when she returns.

"Come see me," it reads. Then the sloppy signature: "Morris."

His office is larger than hers, and more important. Yet when he looks up, Helena's first impulse is to laugh. Morris is a very odd creature, and she can't help herself sometimes. But instead of laughing, she simply says, "Yes, sir."

"Close the door," he begins.

There are new laws, and new ways of gaining retribution. Which is why she says, "I think we'd both like to keep the door open. Just to avoid misunderstandings."

Morris blinks, then mutters, "Fine."

He says, "Then why don't you sit. If that's all right, Helena."

She settles in front of his desk.

The man shakes his head. Then with a practiced air, he asks, "Have you recovered from all that beer?"

"Yes."

"Good." He clicks his tongue with a measured disgust, then tells her, "I'm going to blame the insults on your drinking. I want you to know that."

He wants her to relax. To say, "Thank you so much, sir."

Instead, she picks up the framed photograph set on his desk. It is his family again, perhaps two years ago. The wife looks younger and prettier, but Morris himself is unchanged. And his son is shorter, and infinitely younger, looking lost among all those smiling girls. Quietly, she asks, "What sort of boy is he?"

Morris blinks. Asks, "Who?"

"Luke," she says. Too quickly.

But he decides that he's mentioned his son's name in the past. And maybe he has. Maybe he simply doesn't remember. With a measured fondness, Morris says, "He's a good child."

"Good in school?" she inquires.

"In all things. Why?"

The diamond-shaped scar is missing from the cheek. In a world currently without wars and no quick way to prove themselves to women, young men try to follow the old ways, giving each other elaborate wounds for no better purpose than to show that they can be stupid, without anyone's help.

"Thank you, sir," she says finally. "It was the beer. Yes."

Thinking that he has won, Morris grins.

She sets down the portrait, and sighs, and as she rises, she asks, "Is that all?"

"You were late this morning," he offers.

She mentions the bomb scare at the clinic.

Which Morris already knows about. He nods and sneers, telling Helena and everyone eavesdropping on them, "I hate the idiots. These self-proclaimed warriors for morality and justice...!"

She stares at a random point, saying nothing.

"This is the fairest, richest society on the planet," Morris promises.

Which Helena believes, too. Always, and she could never make herself think otherwise. Yet she hasn't the breath to tell him that she agrees with him. The best she manages is a vague nod and an expression that might be confused for a smile. Then with a quiet tone, she points out, "In this society of ours, you've done extremely well."

Believing that this is a compliment, Morris nods, and halfway laughs, and says, "I like to think so. I do!"

*Dies Jovis.*

Awake well before dawn, Helena dresses in comfortable trousers and a warm shirt, eats a toasted muffin, sips strong coffee, and while it's still dark outside, she leaves home.

A simple clarity has possessed her. She promises herself that she'll call work from a toll phone. A day of personal time, she'll request; some nebulous family business demanding her attention. In her mind and whispers, she practices her conversation with the receptionist, and if necessary, with Morris. But then the sun is

up, and there aren't any phones to be found, and it's gotten too late to call now anyway. And that's when she discovers that she doesn't particularly care, her guilt tiny and easily buried under things ancient and huge.

Every passing town has its church. A sect or schism was brought by the first disciples to settle these lands, and a century later, the same flavors of Christianity hold sway. The shape of the church is a clue about the faithful within. The buildings can be round and soft-edged, or they can be tall and imposing. Granite and marble are popular in the oldest sects, while the newish Unity houses—still found only in the cities—are elegant, friendly structures filled with sunshine and empty crosses.

By contrast, Helena's childhood church was a simple, almost Spartan building, its foundation made of native rock and bone-white mortar, its walls and roof and hard pews made from whatever wood was cheapest on that particular day. But as a girl, it seemed like a wonderful structure. Beautiful, even. Helena wanted to believe that other girls and boys envied her for having such a pretty church. What she liked best—long before she understood the painful symbolism—was the building's color. In her mother's sect, a house of worship was always painted a brilliant crimson. Every wall, every cornice, and even the wooden slats on the roof. The blood of the Christ, for all the world to see.

That's what Helena was eventually taught, by the priests and by Aunt Ester.

Years later, she can't even pretend to remember much of the Scriptures. What comes back now are a few poetic phrases, plus the lurid, sad, and endless stories that Ester told with a tireless zeal. What she remembers is her horror, then deep anger, at the idea that Joseph would abandon Mary when she gave birth to God's daughter. Because the Savior couldn't be a woman, that man had believed. "And that was the first sin of the men," Ester would remind her. "But not their worst sin. Not by a long, long ways."

Helena's favorite Gospel is Judith's. She was a prostitute turned disciple, as several of her sister disciples were, and she wrote about the love and redemption offered by her Savior, and the peace that will find everyone in Heaven.

Cora's Gospel is her aunt's linchpin—a harsh, explicit text written by a noblewoman who carefully listed the tortures inflicted on the Christ by the Jews, then by all men. But even inside that wrenching work, there is forgiveness. And a kind of morality. Like the old Roman centurion who placed himself between the soldiers and the Christ, ordering the rapes to end, then giving the condemned prisoner a long sip of water mixed with wine.

But Ester always refused to see the man's kindness.

Quietly but not softly, she would remind her niece, "That man still helped them carry out the sentence. The punishment. Our Savior was hammered onto that cross and put up into the sun, naked except for the blood flowing from her scalp and her hands, and from her brutalized vagina."

Helena remembers crying and asking a little question of her aunt.

She can't recall her exact words. But it was about men. Were they all so awful? she wondered aloud. Are they always so untrustworthy, and cruel?

She very much remembers Ester smiling instantly.

Surprising Helena.

Then with a wink and dry quick kiss to the forehead, Ester told the doubting young girl, "No, honey. No. We won't let them act that way again. Ever!"

\* \* \*

Within sight of her childhood home, Helena turns onto a side road.

She drives slowly and carefully, following what is little more than a pair of ruts across a stony pasture. If she gets stuck now, people will find out. Mother will, and Ester. And for every reason, that would be intolerable.

A little thicket of wind-beaten trees stands at the crest of the hill. Helena parks where she won't be obvious, and after the long drive, she needs a moment to stretch and regain her legs. The walk itself takes just a moment. Her heart has been pounding for a long while, and her breathing is quick and shallow. But her head is clear, perfectly focused. What she assumes will be the difficult trick—finding the exact spot—proves easy. A slab of pink granite, brought by the glaciers and gouged by their sliding mass, lies in the center of a tiny clearing. With trees on all sides and a few spring wildflowers blooming amidst the green grass, this ground could be confused for a garden. A wind blows, cool and damp. Then Helena hears someone sighing. She gives a start, then realizes it was her own sigh. She is that nervous. That ill at ease. So she tells herself to breathe deeply until she feels steadier, and stronger, and only then does she kneel beside the flat pink rock, knowing its feel before her fingers can touch it.

This is where they brought Helena's baby brother.

Ester and the other disciples walked up here to pray over the newborn, and Helena remained in the house, quietly caring for her exhausted mother.

She already had boy cousins, and just last year, two other women in the house had given birth to sons. Facts that she understood, even as a child. Hadn't she been taught from the beginning that farms needed only so many hands, particularly with the new tractors and pesticides making every chore easy? Didn't she understand that for the last fifteen centuries, give or take, God had willingly, even happily taken away the souls of boys who wouldn't live out the day? This was how things were done. It wasn't to be talked about, ever. It was a private family matter, and it was their family's business. Ester and Mother had spoken at length, night after night, until Mother agreed with what was best. But of course, they didn't know if it was a girl or a boy. Helena could have found herself with a sister. That was a vivid, buoyant hope

that lasted right up until the little penis stuck out at them. And really, she would have preferred a baby sister. That's what she kept telling herself, and telling herself, cleaning her mother with old towels and neither of them speaking a word until Ester and the other women returned, nothing in their hands but an empty blanket too small to do anything but swaddle a little baby.

Helena can remember bolting past them, out the back door and into the snow.

It was mid-winter. Cold and windy, with the land white and hard. She wasn't a fast runner, but the women were even slower. Helena followed the footprints in the snow. She reached the hilltop first, expecting to find a coyote chewing on her little brother. But there was no baby. Just more footprints, and the granite slab, and she stood on the slab until Ester put a big hand on her shoulder, gasping hard, throwing her own coat over the girl to keep her warm. Saying to her, "There wasn't any pain, darling. No suffering at all."

Which was a good thing, wasn't it? But why was Helena crying?

Then Ester pulled her from the rock, telling her, "You should let him rest now. All right? Let him have his peace."

Peace was another good thing.

"Where did you put him?" Helena remembers asking.

"In a grave. Of course." Her aunt kneeled now. A big woman incapable of feeling the snow and the cold, she looked at her niece with dry hard eyes, then calmly reported, "I dug the grave last autumn. In case."

Looking down at the stone, Helena realized that it had just been set there. And she kneeled, trying to reach under it, struggling to pull it up and bring out the boy before he suffocated. And then someone else grabbed her, someone who could cry, familiar hands tugging as the woman sobbed, her mother's spent voice saying, "It's too late, darling. Honey. It's for the best. Just try to believe that, will you...?"

Along one edge of the pink slab was a different shade of pink—a vivid smear of blood already frozen hard and slick by the brutal chill.

Long washed away by rains and melting snow, the blood is. Yet the woman puts her face to the stone now, kissing the exact place, and for an instant, if that, she can taste the salt and the rust of all the world's dead.

\* \* \*

Helena drives back into the city without recalling the intervening miles. It's a wonder that she didn't have an accident along the way. But she arrives just after noon, driving slowly past her house and turning the corner, the boy's ugly little car parked in front of Lydia's house. Helena isn't sure about anything. What she wants is as a mystery to her. For that moment, she tries desperately to find some way of gaining control over the boy. Maybe she can threaten to tell his father about his

sexual adventures. Or she can threaten to tell the police about his stealing her tulips and lilacs. A groundless complaint on a young man's record is almost impossible to remove, she knows. What matters is that she can gain some powerful, persistent role in his life. Then, she tells herself, she can protect him from the countless hazards in a world far too large for anyone to understand.

She hears herself—her silly, half-crazy thoughts bringing her nothing but shame—and now she watches herself drive past Lydia's house and around the block again, then out onto Saint Judith, not stopping until she reaches the clinic.

Today, it seems quiet. Peaceful. A light rain is falling, and only the most determined protesters have shown up. Helena parks up the street and walks toward the low brick building. A bearded man puts down his sign and approaches. "You don't want to go in there," he tells her.

She says to him, pointblank, "Why? Are you going to give me what I want?"

He blinks, and gasps softly.

"There aren't any men in my life," she continues. "And if you haven't noticed, I'm not a young woman anymore."

Not another word comes from the protesters.

The cameras pay close attention to Helena, recording her calm, determined features in case she proves to be a new activist. Inside the front office, she remembers to smile. The receptionist has forms ready to be filled out. A nurse takes her into an examination room and asks general questions about her history and present health. Then the nurse leaves, and after a little while, the doctor appears. A man, of all things. Isn't that interesting? Each remembers to smile at the other. Sitting across from Helena, the doctor flips through the forms twice. Then with a puzzled tone, he says, "Is this an oversight? You didn't check your preference box."

"Let me see," says Helena.

He hands the clipboard and forms to her, and waits.

Then she hands them back again, saying, "You're right. I didn't check either one."

The relentless amazement makes her smile again, and with a quiet certainty, she adds, "Really, sir. One way or the other. It will be what it will be."

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