

Oasis

The boy works below stairs. He saws and hammers, building some sort of trellis. It is dank and dusty in the basement. Outside it is summer at night. The hour is late. He doesn't worry about the time or its implications. Flowers glisten in the garden. The roses have gone and lilies bloom now, mournful but upright.

The boy who lived in the apartment below Helene smoked cigarettes. He avoided smoking inside as an effort of respect for the landlady's carpets and upholstery. He also appreciated the excuse to go outside.

Helene remembered the first night she came to the apartment. The dark, dense thicket surrounding the yard, the sunken lawn, the feeling of abandonment the place exuded. And then, the slight rustling, the shadowy movement of the young man in the vegetable patch. He'd offered a slight wave, an attempt at welcome without coming into the light.

Helene was a teacher. She taught children colors and words. She taught them how to play the xylophone. She showed them how to dance. She had learned to trust her voice, her own way of gesturing. Helene knew that she didn't know everything there was to know, but she was sure that she knew a lot and that she'd seen a lot. She was sure also of her feelings.

Helene loved teaching and loved children in the way that she loved flowers. She had tiny fingers and a soft voice, perfect for cooing at babies and singing lullabies.

She was the only child of social parents who lived in a retirement community in Florida. Helene was a loving daughter but she kept a secure distance between her parents and herself.

She had been in love several times in the twenty-odd years of her life. Helene was a person who never stopped wondering why people were cruel to children, to one another.

Night time was the time of quiet intimacy for these neighbors. One arrived home before the other, Helene usually the later. The boy's kitchen light would generally be lit. Often he was having a cigarette on the porch. Helene and the boy would exchange a few words. Their talk was generally about the garden, about the progress and health of the boy's plants. The abundant flowers were secondary to the boy, almost incidental.

The conversations were courteous but closed, each suspecting that on some level the other would prefer to be alone. Despite this, they connected over ideas. They were both students and spectators of art, both in terrible awe of the swiftly moving currents of culture, of the moment of their generation.

Night, when both the boy and Helene were safely sequestered at home, was precious to both of them. They began to share the unspoken understanding that each was there for the other, together in the same structure, the same house, while remaining safely separated by stairs and ceiling plaster.

Their lives were similar. They worked and idealized. They arranged the moments of each day around the discovery of how best to be alone. Neither questioned the other. Neither pried.

It sometimes troubled Helene that she didn't seek occasion to be closer to the boy. She had always been very interested in intimacy, in the excitement or the building up to being alone with another person. This interest was lacking in her relationship with the boy. A young man, a neighbor, a foreigner—she wondered at her maintained distance and sober regard for him. She wondered if his feelings mirrored hers.

Helene found herself passing time, living from quiet obsession to quiet obsession. She loved flowers, humble and exotic. She bought them and grew them and sketched them. She made potions

and tonics out of flowers. She let them die and dry around her, collecting like dust. She luxuriated in the mournfulness of flowers, their brief lifespans, their fragility.

Beyond flowers, Helene read. She drank and smoked, but never with the boy downstairs for company. She chose to do these things either alone or with co-workers and past classmates. Helene often tried to connect with these people over her interests. She found herself mostly underwhelmed, frequently depressed. And so she sought solace in sleep, in solitude, in substances.

Helene and the boy became familiar with each other's habits, schedules, tendencies. Each remaining a little bit afraid of the other. For many days straight they would miss one another in passing. After a usual period of this, they eventually found themselves together on the porch or in the check-out line at the neighborhood supermarket. These irregular meetings took on their own regularity.

Again, the garden would be mentioned. The idea for an improvement. The condition of the plants. The toxicity of pesticides. A need for rain.

The winter following the summer of Helene's move to the apartment was hard and heavy. Snow fell from the sky nearly every day. The boy shoveled nearly every night, but usually after Helene was secluded in her room, secured in her private occupations and contemplations. She could hear the scrape of the shovel for what seemed like hours on those nights. Confronted by his presence, she was grateful for their distance and she was grateful for his effort.

Once or twice she encountered him setting to the task, and one night the sky was so full of snow. Helene and the boy stood on the path together inside the gate. They stood squinting upward, opening themselves with breath and concentration to the beauty of the cold, the intimacy of nature, the sheer terror of night. They stayed outside together for several moments before parting, each to each's own work.

Helene and the boy ate dinner together once. The boy had prepared a meal for them to share. When Helene had arrived home that night her books and her bed and her cigarettes were calling her, demanding that she refuse his invitation. But she couldn't refuse.

She and the boy sat in his kitchen. They drank tap water and ate the slowly prepared meal that was rich and heavy with spices. Helene was barely hungry but she ate as much as she could, complimented the cook, endured second helpings.

They discussed the most basic eastern philosophy, Daoism, haiku. Helene thought to herself that this boy was not so much a poet. Throughout dinner, Helene wondered at the physicality and relationship of their bodies. In the boy's eyes and body she perceived kindness, courtesy, forgiveness. She perceived a balanced and even interest in them both. They travelled through the evening with intuitive procedure. Later on, when Helene would remember the meal, she thought it had been symbolic, but artless.

The meal had been hearty and generous. She sat with the boy while he washed the dishes. She noticed his lack of counter space, how he set the used plates and pots on the linoleum floor beside his feet before washing them in a sinkful of soapy, greasy water. A radio played low in the other room, the music muffled by dust, obstructed by clutter. When the boy suggested tea, Helene thought to herself, 'this boy has no concept of time.' Hours had passed. It was very late when she finally excused herself.

Once alone, Helene brushed her hair and scrubbed her face until it was shiny. She rubbed lavender oil on her skin. She played a record. The music felt rich and clear. Helene drank what was left of a bottle of wine. She looked in the mirror and watched her eyes grow brighter and brighter. She got into bed and fell asleep.

As Helene slept, the boy finished washing and ate some of the leftover food. He went outside and smoked two cigarettes before beginning to shovel the snow that had fallen during the meal. It was mid-morning when he fell asleep.

The winter progressed and the two young people felt the flow of their lives frozen within its depth. The boy gave Helene a ride home from a concert one night. Knowing that if he didn't, she would walk or stand waiting for the bus in cold.

Helene had been drinking at the concert. Throughout the ride she worked at comfort in the stale cold of the car. Near home, they turned into the narrow alley, deep with ice. Coated tree branches hung heavy over them. The rooftops and dumpster lids were covered with inches, with an opacity of snow. Helene felt a glimmer of something. She was transported, for a moment, to herself in a gliding gondola and willows softly dropping over a canal.

The boy maneuvered over the ice and pulled the car snugly into the garage. Helene felt a sadness as he cut the engine and the vessel became stationary—braked like a rock. Neither moved to get out of the car, and Helene found herself talking. She had always liked the sound of her voice inside cars, the way it changed—freed from strain and competition. Speaking softly, the words began to float out of her like smoke.

The subject was personal and sad. She knew she was taking advantage of the boy's patience and generosity, but she talked and continued to. She voiced images and senses that were precious to her, moments she knew would die barren if she didn't speak them then. Unspoken deaths with no memorial, with no hope of resurrection. And the boy appeared to listen. He was quiet and gentle and betrayed no signs of distraction. For this, Helene knew she would be ever grateful.

At the end she began to cry. Not out of passion or spontaneity. Just an inevitable gesture. And the boy placed his arm around her like a mechanism. And they stayed like that for a short time.

Helene soon felt cold and uncomfortable and she imagined that he felt it too. She disembraced him, put on her gloves and briefly kissed his cheek. They got out of the car and walked down the path together toward the house.



In late spring, Helene visited her sister in Virginia. She and her sister and her sister's fiancée walked in the area's green, green hills and gardens. They ate chicken salad and drank ice water and sweet tea. It had been about six months at this point. Helene's stomach was hard and round and she found herself absently resting her hands on it. Not in any kind of tender or sentimental way. Just some helpless movement of disbelief.

'This is my body,' she would repeat to herself. She felt fragile on the walks and outings. Heavy but also sure of her movements. She walked slowly requiring the others to wait for her.

In Virginia people were always telling her to sit down and rest. But all Helene wanted was to walk. She grew tired easily with the effort but she kept walking. Moving one hip, one leg, one foot and then the other. She knew that so long as she kept walking nothing truly awful would happen.

Helene was at a garden party full of young people, blond and colorful and lithe. She met a woman who was also six months along, and Helene surprised herself by comparing the curve of their front bodies. She looked down at her own smallness, surprised and alarmed.

Before this moment, Helene hadn't really considered the time, the counting of weeks and months. Occasionally, it had occurred to her that the seasons would prepare her for what was going to happen. The freezing and thawing of the earth, the dust in her apartment, the length of her hair. She attributed no meaning to the number of weeks or months or inches on her waist. She did what

she had always done, read what she had always read. She smoked and ate and slept and dreamed the way she always had.

It occurred to Helene in this garden in Virginia that something might be wrong with this approach. Something might be wrong with her, might be serious and abnormal.

Helene stood near the other woman. She remarked a softness about her, a heavy sponginess, like a peach or a grapefruit. Helene watched the woman closely and drew near to her. She smiled with the woman's expectations for understanding and recognition. She did this until a kind-looking man with a tan, whiskerless face and brown hair approached the woman and led her away.

As a result of her panic, when Helene returned from Virginia, she dedicated herself to softness and moderation. And she strained for signs, for measurements of growth. She willed her abdomen to swell. She willed her body to be still and quiet, concentrating deeply and intently on any semblance of movement inside her.

Helene began to take vitamins. She soaked her feet in Epsom salt and picked leaves from the raspberry bush in the garden for tea. Helene took nightly walks and centered her presence around the moon, willing herself over to its mystery, its changing phases and ghostly light. She wore comfortable shoes.

In the weeks following her trip, Helene started going to the beach. She suspected some significance in the water and the rhythm of the tides. The trip wasn't easy by bus, so one day she asked the boy if he would take her.

The beach Helene liked was rocky and remote. The two of them had to climb their way over rocks down to the water from where they parked. Helene would sit on a rock and close her eyes. She would listen to the rough water. She liked the wind, the tumultuous waves, the forceful, jagged tide.

On their first trip there, Helene terrified the boy by jumping off the rocks and into the obviously treacherous water. He was not a strong swimmer and felt incredible relief when, after a few minutes, Helene dragged herself out. The boy noticed the strain of Helene's body. The trembling of her arms, the quickness of her breath as she crawled on the rocks.

The next time they decided to go, the boy insisted on driving Helene to a scenic beach miles out of town. There, the sand was soft and fine like golden sugar. The water was blue and controlled. The sway of the tide was soothing.

It was at this beach that Helene began to realize what was really being asked of her. She began to suspect that in order for something to happen, she would have to give herself over to the coaxing of the breeze, the rhythm of the waves, the silk envelopment of the water. She would have to allow herself conformity and peace. Fruition would be withheld otherwise. Helene feared this.

It was in the water at this beach that Helene first felt herself become circular and dense, complex and buoyant. Here, she first sensed, in a slight way, her growth and nourishment. And it was in the water here that she first felt something, a strange movement within her. And Helene acknowledged herself to a presence beyond herself.

Helene and the boy drove home as the sun was warm and late in the sky. They stopped and bought lemonade. The boy chain smoked and talked about his garden. About the abundance of tomatoes, the speedy growth of the hedges. Helene sipped her lemonade quietly. She thought of the roses in the garden. How beautiful they were at the start of summer. How grateful she was to the person who had planted them. She reflected on their diversity and abundance. Sipping her lemonade quietly, and despite her tranquility, she mourned the certainty of their death.

As they pulled closer to the house Helene thought of the first night she saw the boy in the garden. She remembered the many nights she had come home and been startled by him, smoking and working in the hushed darkness.

It was dusk when Helene and the boy arrived home. The garden was vivid and lush. The air felt cooler within the gates. Greenery surrounded her. She smelled the roses. The sky slipped beyond twilight, into darkness. Helene thought how wonderful it was, the smell of roses in the dark.

A few days later the boy climbed up to the attic looking for a tool he needed to repair an old deck chair that belonged to the landlady. He rummaged through the dusty boxes. Soft and coppery midday sun shined through the window in the cool dark attic. The boy was intrigued by his search through the ancient objects and felt a sense of guardianship. He searched carefully and protectively, drawn from one islanded pile to another. As he treaded his way through the attic he found himself looking through a box on a sewing table beside the window.

The window looked out of the back of the house, over the garden and garage to the alley. The boy felt his gaze drawn out of the attic to the sparkling blue sky. He felt his resolve to work weaken and thought of taking Helene to the beach. As he circled around the idea, he glanced outside again. His gaze was arrested at the sight of Helene.

She was on the roof of the garage. She wore a thin cotton dress draped gently on her body. She lay positioned on her side, head resting on her upper arm. Her face rotated toward the sun, like the face of a flower. Helene's body formed a natural arc, an organic half-moon as it rested, and her skin and hair shined hot and brilliant on the roof of the garage.

For a single instant the boy was overcome. He was drawn out of his own self and into Helene's light, into her shape and matter. He was in awe of the way her hair reflected the golden

sunlight, the way even her eyelashes shimmered with glint and heat. In that moment, the boy felt an incredible, blinding loss of his own presence and an entire longing to touch Helene.

Shortly and seamlessly, though, he reassumed himself and continued his search for the tool. He would stay inside after all and work on the repair.

The baby came both quietly and not. Helene ultimately rendered both powerless and all powerful. She hadn't intended to rely on the boy to take her to the hospital when she went into labor, but in the heat of things it was simpler than calling a taxi.

Helene delivered the baby alone. She wanted no one in the delivery room except the nurses and doctor. The boy went home after Helene was admitted. She told him she'd be fine. He was unsure about his place and reasoned that his worrying would have the same effect at home as it would at the hospital.

When Helene and the baby were discharged she took a taxi to her apartment. The boy was not invited to see the baby until Helene had been back for a couple of days. She gave herself some time to adjust to the new smells and sounds of her now shared home. She was tired and lonely but mostly terrified of hurting or damaging the baby. She longed for solitude, a shell or membrane surrounding her that she could seal and unseal at will. The baby was ever intrusive. Helene was hopelessly, desperately in love with the baby.

She often remembered what it was like to be alone. With the baby there, doors and walls and windows meant nothing. Their magical value diminished for Helene.

Despite all this, Helene maintained the baby's health and growth and happiness. She tickled and cuddled and washed the baby. She surrounded the baby with soft things and created a habitat of light and security.

Soon the boy was welcomed into Helene's apartment. He cooked for Helene, took her shopping and babysat as needed. The baby loved the boy. And this left Helene feeling somehow both betrayed and incredibly relieved. It would have been impossible not to see how happy the child made the boy, and how the boy began to seem less lost.

As the baby grew, Helene and the boy's relationship changed only in its dependable regularity. They continued very much as they had before. Neither attempted to unlock one another's secrets. Neither sought intimacy.

When summer came, the three of them began to visit the beach together. Helene would swim while the boy played with and looked after the baby. The days at the beach were beautiful. Especially the last one.

In the late afternoon, the sight of the water changed from brilliant blue into silvery iridescence. At this time, an hour before sunset, Helene and the boy were both inwardly aware of their stationary place on the rotating planet. Each also aware of the certain and absolute absence of sunlight awaiting them. They found the beauty of this time both deeply sad and utterly irresistible.

The boy rested on the blanket with the baby. The soft, heavy sand cradled them both, creating in the boy a sensation of wholeness. Helene continued to swim. She slipped in and out of the silvery liquid. Sometimes she would find a sandbank so far off the beach that she appeared to the boy suspended, raised up gloriously above the surface of the water.

The boy permitted himself to be mesmerized, assured by the irreducible space of the water between them. Helene was slender now. Her form was narrow and graceful in the way of a child. The boy surrendered himself to her terrible power.

Helene looked back at the boy and the baby just once. As the light continued to change, Helene's form became fainter and fainter. And despite any sadness, the boy knew this was what she had wanted all along. He watched her follow the direction of the sun. He watched her until she disappeared.