Helen

He tried to see through the curtains, tried to see the light he knew was kept on the other side, and listened to Helen whisper into the telephone on the kitchen wall. He sat on the sofa in the front room and chain-smoked, every now and again curling his socked toes in the rust-colored shag. He could turn on the TV, watch a soap opera or whatever else was on, but it was all the way across the room, and he figured it was enough to sit here in the dark and listen to her conspire, to sit here and not quite hear the words.

He could make out fragments of sentences, unfinished notes—"I can't talk now," he thought she said, and then, "I'll try." Or perhaps Helen said none of those things, and it was all a terrible mistake. He thought it might be wise to turn on the TV after all, but it was still all the way across the room, and hadn't gotten any closer.

"I can't stop," he heard, and then a garbled sound, something between a giggle and a sob, something probably neither, probably both.

He had called in sick at the shop, but "sick" wasn't the word. He had mostly just sat with the blackness, smoking and thinking. Sometimes not even that. At first Helen sat with him, tried to touch him. Then she would disappear. He would close his eyes with her being somewhere in space and time, and open them to her somewhere else. Once he opened his eyes and she was naked in the doorway, her hair done and draped over one shoulder, eyebrow arched like fishing line. The curve of her hips caught the light from the hallway. *You could start a war with just a shake of your ass*, he thought, but didn't say. He closed his eyes. Smoked.

She yelled, and he couldn't make out the words, just as if she were whispering. She screamed about how she wasn't sorry—*how dare you*, she kept repeating, each time lower, hoarser, like she was digging the bottom of some small tin. *How dare you*. Her small breasts jiggled indifferently before her. She cursed him for the verdict in his silence, blamed him for blaming others for all that was wrong. "Everyone gets what they deserve," Helen seethed, and then stopped, shocked by the admission, shocked by what it might mean. She sat down abruptly, clumsily, stared out the translucent curtains. He lit another cigarette, tasting the tobacco on his raw tongue. After some time, Helen took one without asking, lit it and smoked while walking absently about the room, dropping ashes on the carpet until she was almost gone, a beautiful, sad ghost on the edge of his smoke rings.

He had been keeping this vigil for three days not to prove a point, not to punish his young wife, but simply because he was incapable of anything else. He knew he was no longer the alpha, that he had lost the confidence of his pride. He knew it when he saw the strange, olive-skinned man come out of his house, out of his bed, deflating the fantasy of this marriage.

Helen's ghost flashed before him, a dark, purposeful *swoosh* across the carpet, a faint scent of drugstore hair dye. She was going prematurely gray, but never spoke of it; he would sometimes wake up to find reddish stains on their pillows; they were always gone by the time he got home from work.

The bedroom door closed gently; they were past the point of slamming. He looked briefly down the sliver of the hall he could see, a cut of light between the door and the floor highlighting how dark his space had become. It was almost winter, and the

nights came early; what little respite that came from the day was quickly waning, the inside and outside reaching equilibrium, the point where atrophy begins. He felt as if he was drifting in space, weightless, timeless. He lit another cigarette.

He could hear Helen rustling in the bedroom, the metallic squawk of sliding hangers, the broad *thud* of boxes being moved. He stared at his hands, barely visible. He thought he should do something, and let the thought pass.

She opened the bedroom door and used the room's light to guide her out into the hall, out into the living room and out to the front door. She was wearing tight jeans and a summery, loose blouse, despite the sharp chill in the air. "I'm going to get cigarettes," she said, a cliché, the profile of her face in the shadows—sharp, devastating—anything but.

"You should bring a jacket." He was surprised by the creak of his own voice.

Helen paused at the door, her slender hand on the jamb. She was looking outside. "I'll get you some, too," she said. She pushed opened the storm door and he could hear that it had begun to rain.

He had once lived on a street just like this one, a house just like this one, a few blocks away. He thought of those days, his father sitting on the front stoop in an undershirt after work, drinking Canadian Club, an army of kids running through streets and yards like madmen. He thought of the long summer days, and the nights that tried in vain to cool the world off. He thought of the night Mr. Jacoby died.

The Jacoby family lived across the street for as long as he could remember. Mr. Jacoby owned a little hardware store up in the strip of stores that ran parallel to the highway, past the Catholic school. He had two daughters, spread apart in age; one was a

few years older than him, just out of reach of ever really crossing paths. The younger was several grades behind him, too young to be of any consequence to him or any of the other boys.

It was the summer of ’63; he was eleven, almost twelve, and a bunch of neighborhood kids had stayed out catching fireflies and playing kick-the-can; empty boasts and honest laughter punctuated the petty victories of boys trying to grow into their size.

An unholy racket coming from the Jacoby house silenced the idyllic chaos—heavy pans crashed, drowning out the high-pitched tin clamor of the little can in the street. Mr. Jacoby was yelling, which in itself was not noteworthy among the open windows of summer. Sometimes, arguments would break out in different houses at the same time, and the cacophony would begin to merge in your brain, as if they were harmonizing with each other, a drunken, frustrated sort of evening music. Hell, even his own father, when he tied a good one on, had the pipes to make the shutters rattle.

Usually these things would build up, though; you would here a conversation, or pieces of one, and it would gradually grow, feed on itself. This came from dead silence, and exploded like a split atom. There was nothing, and then there were pans slamming and Mr. Jacoby’s nasally roar, mostly incoherent, like he was speaking in tongues, or choking on his own screams, a cornered, rabid dog being pushed off a cliff, trying to claw anything—saplings, weeds, rocks, air—to keep from going over. “You don’t know anything!” he kept howling. “You don’t know anything!”

And Mrs. Jacoby gave it right back. She kept screaming about a sickness, about being sick. Something about sheets, and stains. “I know *everything*!” she shrieked, and

the last word warbled, lost its shape. She didn't have the lungs to make the shutters shake, but he could hear her shake, and somehow that was scarier, scarier even than a whole town full of self-medicating dads.

The kids gravitated to the noise—slowly, absently, like little zombies, each taking one step closer than the last. Mrs. Hall, three houses down, called for her son Ralph to come inside right away. Ralph pretended he couldn't hear her.

The Jacoby front window became a screen into another world, into something flickering, mysterious, haunting. Husband and wife crossed in and out of sight, circling each other, pointing at each other, faces red, teeth yellow. Mr. Jacoby screamed things about his wife, things about her body. He was oblivious to the grass-stained children watching them both unravel.

Mrs. Jacoby shrieked back something about "never again" and her voice jumped a register, became itself untranslatable; she called him a bastard and that's when the line holding all the tension snapped, almost as if it was really there, as if you could see it, and Mrs. Jacoby went gliding across the room, something horrible in the grace of it. Mr. Jacoby whaled on her like *she* was bigger than *him*, like he was fighting for his life, and they watched in horror. Teddy Martin, who lived near the top of the hill, was the first to say something, a cracked, broken-wing "hey." Everyone jumped at the little sound, even Teddy. But he caught his breath and yelled it again, this time louder, more confidently: "Hey!" Ralph was next. And then the others. "Hey!" the children yelled, over and over again, sometimes in sync, sometimes not. One of them threw rocks at the siding.

Mr. Jacoby whipped his head toward the window, chest heaving, a vein throbbing at his temple. His hands were a deep red; he roared something fierce, Frankenstein-like,

and started toward the window. He paused, and looked around at the walls of his dining room, as if they were something foreign, something that had just been built up around him.

"Ricky!" His father was on the stoop, just out of focus. "Ricky, get your ass over here!" His voice was loud, but calm. He darted toward it, toward his father, and ran halfway up the stairs. "What the hell do you all think you're doing?" He could smell the whiskey on his father's breath.

He looked over his shoulder, saw an arm pull down the blind in the Jacoby window. The other kids had scattered. He turned back to his dad. "Mr. Jacoby just beat up Mrs. Jacoby bad," he blurted out, as if the sentence were a single, foul word that he wanted to spit up. He took a deep breath, sighed. "I think she's bleeding," he said, almost in awe.

His father looked at the drawn blind, and then back at his son. "Jesus," he swore under his breath. Then he grabbed a Lucky Strike out of his shirt pocket, lit it and exhaled with a heavy, smoky sigh. "Ricky," he said, and let the name trail off. He stared out into the street for a long beat. "What happens in a man's house is his business." A cough. "You've got to mind your own." He frowned at his father, who never looked back at him, just at the street. A back door clanged across the way; there was a loud *pop*, clear and sharp. He felt his heart stop, start. A few seconds later and there was a second *pop*, this one muffled, murkier. And then Mrs. Jacoby's scream.

"Get inside," his father said quietly, in a tone that ended any argument before it began. He ran in the house, his mother staring at him from the kitchen doorway, drying her wet hands, her eyes big as saucers. He went straight to the window and peered

outside, saw the dark outline of his father standing at the top of the stoop, shoulders hunched, head tilted down. He watched him make his way down the stairs and slowly cross the street as Mrs. Jacoby came running out of her house, face bloodied and swollen, pushing her young, skinny daughter, all legs and arms, in front of her. The refugees collided into his father, who dropped his half-smoked cigarette into the street, not quite holding them, not quite not.

His eyes opened to a *bang*. A cigarette still smoldered between his fingers. The sound had been the Caprice's door. He heard keys jangle and Helen blew in. She left the door open, and the light from the porch added some color back in the room. She was dripping with rain, dark hair matted against the sides of her face, framing her portrait. The colors of her mascara cried down the shutters of her eyes, a limited palette, a rainbow of bruises. She was shaking and watching him sitting in the dark, Buddha-like. She dumped a carton of cigarettes on the chair.

"You should have worn a jacket." The words floated out of his mouth, weightless, timeless, as if this were the daydream, the memory. An inhale of smoke; an exhale. "Where were you?"

She wrapped her skinny arms around herself, the water dripping from her edges, her elbows, her chin, the wavy ends of her hair. "I went to my sister's," she said.

Her sister was a pharmacy. She lived in what was called the country, but was nothing more than the outer suburbs, where the houses were older, placed on disheveled lots of land that lacked the ordinary perfection of this town's subdivision grids. She knew everyone to know, from every proverbial side of the track, owed everyone something, was owed something in return. Money was the lowest form of payment

within her walls; she had mastered the art of bartering at a young age, ran scams on top of scams, and parlayed those with new scams, things for things, always something tangible, something you could take with you.

He didn't worry about his sister-in-law; she was a cat that would always land on her paws. He knew she loved her little sister deeply, in her own way, and tried to protect her by keeping her medicated, by keeping the pharmacy always open.

Helen was not a cat, though. She stood shivering in the living room, turning the shag around her into something dark, matted, something brown to the point of black, like dried blood. She stared at the patterns, and he tried to imagine what she saw in that low-grade Rorschach test, what rabbit-hole poor Alice was tumbling down into, what pill made her larger, which one made her smaller.

"Who is he?" he asked hoarsely, lighting a new cigarette with his last while he waited for an answer.

Helen looked at him blankly. "I went to my sister's."

"I know," he said. "But before." Inhale smoke. Exhale. "Who is he?" Then, more quietly: "This one?"

She unfolded her arms. She wasn't wearing a bra and he could see the outline of her nipples through her damp, loose top. She bit her bottom lip, shifted her weight, thrust her right hip out. *You could start a war with just a shake of your ass*.

"Is that what you want?" he said, the words again weightless, the words again unreal.

She strutted toward him as if she were in heels, arching her foot, mashing her toes into the wet, ugly carpet—down, down, down; she strutted as if she were something

mechanical, coin-operated. She crouched down on the couch beside him, arched her back, thrust up her rear. "Is what what I want?" Her voice had changed, somehow lower and higher at the same time.

"A war," he sighed, behind a plume of smoke. She played with his collar, brushed her hand gently against his stubble. "I don't want to argue, baby," she cooed. "I hate it when we argue." He sat as a statue while she touched him, explored him, whispered kisses into his neck. He sat as a statue, and felt the dirty, cold rain drip off her body and onto his.

He knew everything. He knew she slept with other men. He knew it had never stopped, in large part because it had never started; it was the way it always was, it was Helen. He tricked himself into believing that the affairs would end with each milestone—*she'll stop when she gets a ring, or after the ceremony. When we have a home. She'll stop*. He thought he could prove himself worthy. He thought he could steal her away, make her a queen, live happily ever after. But the lie was his, not hers. Nothing changed. She let men come inside her, each of them kings, each of them not.

He sat as a statue, just as he had for months and years, sitting in the dark, smoking, pretending he couldn't see. He felt each drop of her rain fall onto his shirt, his pants, his skin; he felt each blot spread like a rose in bloom, or a pock-mark, and soak into him. He felt her wet lips on his neck, his mouth, and wondered what man's spit was being smeared on him, what man's cologne was mixing with his Winstons. Helen slowly ran her hand down the front of his shirt, like she had a thousand times before, down, down, down, between the legs of his jeans, cupping his crotch. He knew his was not the first cock she had reached out for tonight.

He smacked her, hard, across the mouth, sent her flying off the couch. He could see her stunned outline on the floor, the light from the porch creating crescents where the curves of her body were. He mashed his cigarette hard into the ashtray. A thousand voices exploded in his head, none of them his, and he jumped up from the couch, opened the door next to the kitchen and ran down the steps to the basement, flipping on every light in his wake along the way.

The basement was all clutter and boxes, the inherited detritus of their parents' homes. An old-fashioned side console with a record player built inside collected dust underneath a set of upside-down barstools that had no bar to partner with. Boxes of paper and glass lined the walls. An old couch, older even than the old couch they still used, sat in the middle of the open space. He went into a large closet, began tossing musty clothes behind him, a fireworks display of mauves, baby blues, scarlets, faded flower prints. He could hear Helen's step on the stairs, slow and creaking, and then faster, a light hammering, and he began to throw boxes and cloth about more forcefully, desperately. He could feel the war coming. The voices in his head were getting louder; they had been there all along, hiding in his statue, waiting to escape. The war was coming, an ambush, and he needed to be armed.

He grabbed the box, but it wouldn't open. He slammed it against the jamb and the top came off. He pulled out the pistol, standard Army-issue, with a shaky hand. He grasped it tightly, sweat running down his temple, along the edge of his jaw, the throbbing vein of his neck. He was making his own rain now.

He stepped out with the gun to his side. Helen stood at the bottom of the stairs. "Rick," she whispered, her eyes stuck on the pistol. She was calm, one hand still on the

edge of the railing. Then he put the gun in his mouth and Helen unfolded, every atom of her shaking loose of each other, right in front of him.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" she shrieked, something primal, something from deep in the dark matter between her organs. Her legs collapsed and her hands gnarled themselves into grotesque balls that shook about her head and face, itself fractured into a twisted howl. "NOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Her ass slammed to the ground, her legs splayed out in a spastic tantrum. She could only move her mouth in a gnashing, gurgling croak, the sobs overtaking her. Her body shook and she dry-heaved between her legs. She was drowning. She was drowning in a bone-dry basement. He closed his eyes, gathered himself. He was somewhere.

He opened them. He was somewhere else. He pulled the gun from his mouth, a thin bridge of spit trailing from the barrel to his lip, and shoved it under his chin. He stared at her, gagging and shaking on the floor. "What did he say?"

Helen's eyes darted about the room. She shook her head violently, then started coughing, hacking, phlegm and tears and sweat and rain sprinkling in all directions from her shivering, skinny frame.

"What did he say?" Louder. More alpha.

"Who?" she mouthed silently.

"When he blew the back of his head off! What did he say?" Yelling now.

Her head tipped over, her shoulders following. She slammed her face against her knees and wept. She looked back up, a streaked mess. "He," she tried, succumbing to the convulsions. "He . . . said . . . I . . . should . . . have . . . been . . . a . . . good . . . girl." Helen tore at her hair, scratched the side of her jaw. "He said . . . 'Helen . . . I love you.'

And then . . .," her voice fluttered as she tried to gain control of her breath . . . "and then he went out the back."

Her face fractured into a million pieces, slammed back together, fractured again. She bit her own knuckles. "Why would he say that?" Helen whispered. She collapsed in sobs until she was exhausted, fell silent.

After some time, the man led her back up the stairs, laid her down on the couch. He walked to the window, pushed aside a curtain, and watched the dead quiet of the street at night. This town was designed and built after the war, when men just coming back from triumph half a world away jumped to lay claim to their own little kingdoms, their own little monarchies.

His victory parade was a muted affair, without ticker-tape, as he inspected each room of his house, turning the lights on and off, marking the territory with the smoke from an unbroken chain of cigarettes.