

Joanna Howard

Helene, Draft of a Girl



To begin an emblem, I offer the shorthand of my life: My arrival came quite late. Recently this fact reasserted itself. After a long day of driving to a picturesque inn on the cape, I arrived much too late. The restaurant was already closed, and inside only a faint light emerged from behind the potted palm. The party had already dispersed. My girlfriends, what was left of this meager group from the deep past, had forgotten to mention several specifics of the reunion. I doubt it was spiteful. It was simply that it didn't register on any of them to be careful in arranging things with me. And the ladies were not waiting. Though this was no surprise. Even on the long drive along the coast, I had been unable to image any other scenario than one in which I was left here alone on the dark sidewalk. It had been so many years since the four of us had been together, or so it would seem, *together with me*. (They had of course been together without me for many years). Outside the restaurant, the empty streets of this fashionable tourist district were quiet and quaint. Fairy lights dangled in the lindens. Dainty and high-end shops kept tasteful vitrines. I attempted to look beyond the faintly mirrored glass of the restaurant window to a place deep within where some scrap of movement seemed to betray a person. A rap on the pane, and then the quick flicker of the last man slipping out the back. I breathed a certain relief. He escaped out the back door, and I dashed off across the street to my car. In our opposite retreats, we had a similar thought in mind: only to get back to the safety of a quiet, if empty, home.

Had there been a time when I still loved them, the three old girls? Yes, but it had been nearly 20 years. And I do remember it, if not well, at least *well enough*. There were four couples at the rented cabin in the mountains for the holidays that last time we were all together. For the first few days, we exhausted ourselves at various outdoor sports in the thin, cold air: long hikes, skiing, and an assortment of rustic house chores in this far-from-modern locale. On Christmas Eve, the men attempted, for the first time in their lives, to roast a leg of lamb. We assorted wives were grateful for the evening, and with our children raucously occupied with each other, we sat about lost in our own minds. We scattered about the cabin with books and knitting. Only one, the best of my girlfriends, stayed in the kitchen on a bar stool, making helpful suggestions, and in general being one of the boys in a way that men seem to find appealing. Inevitably, when chaos ensued, and a column of smoke came up from the burner of the stove, in her drunken good humor, she grabbed up a hot pan only to drop it instantly on the floor. From the living room, where I knelt before a coffee table, I watched as my own husband swooped naturally over my friend and collected the boiled potatoes in the palms of his bare hands. They were both blatant and blithe in their complicity. He dropped the potatoes back into the pan, and then glanced over his shoulder in my direction, but I continued on, flipping through a book of photographs. I adjusted the rather uncomfortable blouse my best friend had given me for Christmas, something which was much more in that woman's style than in my own: low-cut, feminine, in general open and revealing. At the time, I couldn't quite put all the pieces together. Exuberant

laughter poured out of the kitchen and several of the other wives put their heads up almost long enough to suggest that they cared what their men were about. I suppose, it was in this instance, as in so many before, that I tried to remain unmindful of the coming onslaught.

On New Year's Eve, that same year, we followed the European tradition of dropping molten lead into a crock of cold water. The others melted filings in the bowl of a bent spoon over the flame of a candle, and then each in turn, with a quick snap of the wrist, dropped the liquid lead into the water. The shape, which emerged predicted the future, though only with careful interpretation. One by one, they extracted magnificent mounds from the water: jagged, faceted indications of their lives to come. When my turn finally came, my gesture was off completely, and the metal burst apart on the surface of the water into so many slight drops. The fragments I pulled from the water could certainly not be reassembled. I wanted to try again, but fate rarely has more to offer the second time around, and what could be worse than confirming one's future in shards? And somehow, letting them know that I actually believed in this ridiculous ritual, seemed far worse than whatever was yet to come.

In those days, my mind easily snarled. I could pace for hours, and never resolve anything. It was one of my least attractive qualities. My husband had told me so many times before. On our last day at the cabin, the men went off on a long walk through the woods, and I watched from the balcony, as they all gathered around my husband, one of them held his elbow as he moved through the trees, another kept stopping him, moving into his path, and then as if remembering himself, continued on along beside him. They made a pretty set, all of these fit professional gents in their jackets and scarves, and their country gumboots, with their thick dark hair poking out beneath stocking caps. In a way, I could tell that they might very well be interchangeable. It had yet to occur to me that we girls might also be interchangeable, though no one seemed to be looking my way. From the bottom of the hill my husband watched me pacing in my shawl, before he finally got it off his chest. This first major schism, the first parting of ways. I would no longer see any of them, not for a very long time, even in passing.

Now, it is later in life than ever before, and my youngest daughter rests all her sullen weight on a campus bench in the Berkshires, while the college band marches through the quad playing a fight song. It's lurid New England fall, and it's parent's weekend, and there are all too many of us, trying to mingle with students as though a memory of youth manifests itself physically when called upon. Quite a few fit-looking dads attempt a pick-up match of soccer. This unfair distribution of spirit is alarming. My ex is among them, with cut and bloodied knees making a display of his potency. I don't know, who he is trying to impress, but it is certainly not me. It really does not occur to him to feel that this is an awkward event, for the three of us. That shows how totally he has erased the effect of me on his life. If he regards me, out of the corner of his eye, it is only as a novelty. That something about the making of him, the forming of

who he is today, is somehow tied up in our years together, is likely the only positive emotion he can possibly offer me. What I make of myself, or what I have failed to make of myself, is my own problem.

My daughter, now in her late twenties, has never really managed to blend into her generation. Perhaps because I had her so late in life, or perhaps, because for so long, I have forced her to be my best friend. If only the rest of her could be so delicate, so porcelain, as the fingers which now rest against her temple, instead of cakey and startled. She remains, even in this enormous group, unaccompanied. When she speaks, she speaks in her usual ugly way, about betrayal and trust before sinking into a sweated lump. Her periodic complaints about her father, however terse, are perhaps a gesture in some way toward caring for me. I have no idea if she talks to him. Certainly, a part of me would like to think that at *some point* she becomes animated. Some part of her wants to spend our time together roughly silent. All that is forthcoming from her end is another blocky reminder of myself. The less said, the more remembered. And that is something I'm firmly against. I have no desire to let my memory have the upper hand.

Rather, I prefer to hold onto only the few brief moments of my life worth noting. For good or ill. Namely, that in my girlhood dreams walked tyrants and invalids from films. Such memories are just the memory of a fantasy, once so real it occupied my mind entirely. For instance, in the dim flicker of the cinema, while my head began to ache from the shuddering light, I recall only a wagon train, and an attack, and that when the damsel's shoulder was pierced, and held to the wheel, there was someone to cut away the fletching. And, in lighting gunpowder in the groove of the shaft, the hero (gunslinger, outlaw, sheriff) could draw it through this precise hole in the body, and cauterizing, seal the wound from the inside out. Oh happy fantasy.

Or, there is another memory. That in the beauty of my youth, in another country, the country I was born in and in my parents home, in the last year of the war, there was a day when the phone began to ring, and in the distance was the sound of something falling from the sky. Then a greater sound. The staircase collapsed beyond the open bathroom door: glass strewn, uncrossable path. A beam, from overhead, had joined me in the tub. I remained in the bath for a time, until, with sovereignty, I passed over this newly bejeweled field. The house was now open-aired looking onto the scrap of a courtyard. I had broken something, and beyond this, something had entered me. This memory of shrapnel and shards in the body, and my foot which, in turning, turned a bit more than before, this stays with me. A gammy leg I would carry forward. This bit garnered for the duration.

Or, there is a correction of one final scene in that other country which I knew so well, a memory shortly from before the bombing. A parachutist, whose chute had failed to open, who I watched falling into my father's freshly plowed field. Every bone in his body was fractured by the fall. I watched him through the faceted colored glass of the staircase window.

Is it my memory or my fantasy that returns me there now? For it seems, that at this moment I can finally drag him inside to care for him. The dark figures may not emerge from the wooded edge to claim and allocate. Nor later, the distant report of the pistol may not call out in rejoinder. Better still in this final possession, as I put together the two memories I have of this house, this war, as in a dream we connect the disparate and forge a new narrative, I finally may meet him on his own ground. We two cross the shattered courtyard, ruptured, fractured, unable to move in space ever again as we had before. He has gained a curious new aspect, his features in new alignment intersect, and the organs of my body have now been replaced with stained glass. In light of this, they must be held very carefully, very gently, inside me.