

Helen on Eighty-sixth Street, by Wendi Kaufman

I hate Helen. That's all I can say. I hate her. Helen McGuire is playing Helen, so Mr. Dodd says, because, out of the entire sixth grade, she most embodies Helen of Troy. Great. Helen McGuire had no idea who Helen of Troy even was! When she found out, well, you should have seen her—flirting with all the boys, really acting the part. And me? Well, I know who Helen was. I am unhappy.

My mother doesn't understand. Not that I expected she would. When I told her the news, all she said was "Ah, the face that launched a thousand ships." She didn't even look up from her book. Later, at dinner, she apologized for quoting Marlowe. Marlowe is our cat.

At bedtime I told my mother, "You should have seen the way Helen acted at school. It was disgusting, flirting with the boys."

Mom tucked the sheets up close around my chin, so that only my head was showing, my body covered mummy style. "Vita," she said, "it sounds like she's perfect for the part."

So, I can't play Helen. But, to make it worse, Mr. Dodd said I have to be in the horse. I can't believe it. The horse! I wanted to be one of the Trojan women—Andromache, Cassandra, or even Hecuba. I know all their names. I told Mr. Dodd this, and then I showed him I could act. I got really sad and cried out about the thought of the body of my husband, Hector, being dragged around the walls of my city. I wailed and beat my fist against my chest. "A regular Sarah Heartburn" was all he said.

"Well, at least you get to be on the winning team," my mother said when I told her about the horse. This didn't make me feel any better. "It's better than being Helen. It's better than being blamed for the war," she told me.

Mom was helping me make a shield for my costume. She said every soldier had a shield that was big enough to carry his body off the field. I told her I wasn't going to be a body on the field, that I was going to survive, return home.

"Bring the shield, just in case," she said. "It never hurts to have a little help."

Mom and I live on West Eighty-sixth Street. We have lived in the same building, in the same apartment, my entire life. My father has been gone for almost three years. The truth is that he got struck with the wanderlust—emphasis on "lust," my mother says—and we haven't heard from him since.

"Your father's on his own odyssey," my mother said. And now it's just me and Mom and Marlowe and the Keatses, John and John, our parakeets, or "pair of Keats," as Mom says. When I was younger, when Dad first left and I still believed he was coming back, it made me happy that we still lived in the same building. I was happy because he would always

know where to find us. Now that I am older, I know the city is not that big. It is easy to be found and easy to stay lost.

And I also know not to ask about him. Sometimes Mom hears things through old friends—that he has traveled across the ocean, that he is living on an island in a commune with some people she called “the lotus eaters,” that he misses us.

Once I heard Mr. Farfel, the man who’s hanging around Mom now, ask why she stayed in this apartment after my father left. “The rent’s stabilized,” she told him, “even if the relationship wasn’t.”

At school, Helen McGuire was acting weird because I’m going to be in the horse with Tommy Aldridge. She wanted to know what it’s like: “Is it really cramped in there? Do you have to sit real close together?”

I told her it’s dark, and we must hold each other around the waist and walk to make the horse move forward. Her eyes grew wide at this description. “Lucky you,” she said.

Lucky me? She gets to stand in the center of the stage alone, her white sheet barely reaching the middle of her thighs, and say lines like “This destruction is all my fault” and “Paris, I do love you.” She gets to cry. Why would she think I’m lucky? The other day at rehearsal, she was standing onstage waiting for her cue, and I heard Mrs. Reardon, the stage manager, whisper, “That Helen is as beautiful as a statue.”

At home Old Farfel is visiting again. He has a chair in Mom’s department. The way she describes it, a chair is a very good thing. Mom translates old books written in Greek and Latin. She is working on the longest graduate degree in the history of Columbia University. “I’ll be dead before I finish,” she always says.

Old Farfel has been coming around a lot lately, taking Mom and me to dinner at Italian places downtown. I don’t like to be around when he’s over.

“I’m going to Agamemnon’s apartment to rehearse,”

I told Mom. Old Farfel made a small laugh, one that gets caught in the back of the throat and never really makes it out whole. I want to tell him to relax, to let it out. He smells like those dark cough drops, the kind that make your eyes tear and your head feel like it’s expanding. I don’t know how she can stand him.

“Well, the play’s the *thing*,” Old Farfel said. “We’re all just players strutting and fretting our hour on the stage.” Mom smiled at this, and it made me wish Old Farfel would strut his hours at his apartment and not at our place. I hate the way he’s beginning to come around all the time.

When I get back from rehearsal, Mom is spinning Argus. It’s what she does when she gets into one of her moods. Argus, our dog, died last summer when I was away at camp.

My mother can't stand to part with anything, so she keeps Argus, at least his ashes, in a blue-and-white vase that sits on our mantel.

Once I looked into the vase. I'd expected to see gray stuff, like the ash at the end of a cigarette. Instead, there was black sand and big chunks of pink like shells, just like at the beach.

My mother had the vase down from the mantel and was twirling it in her hands. I watched the white figures on it turn, following each other, running in a race that never ends.

"Life is a cycle," my mother said. The spinning made me dizzy. I didn't want to talk about life. I wanted to talk about Helen.

"Helen, again with Helen. Always Helen," my mother said. "You want to know about Helen?"

I nod my head.

"Well, her father was a swan and her mother was too young to have children. You don't want to be Helen. Be lucky you're a warrior. You're too smart to be ruled by your heart."

"And what about beauty? Wasn't she the most beautiful woman in the world?" I asked.

Mom looked at the Greek vase. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all ye need to know."

She is not always helpful.

"Manhattan is a rocky island," Mom said at dinner. "There is no proper beach, no shore." My mother grew up in the South, near the ocean, and there are times when she still misses the beach. Jones, Brighton, or even Coney Island beaches don't come close for her. I know when she starts talking about the water that she's getting restless. I hope this means that Old Farfel won't be hanging around too long.

Every night I write a letter to my father. I don't send them—I don't know where to send them—but, still, I write them. I keep the letters at the back of my closet in old shoe boxes. I am on my third box. It's getting so full that I have to keep the lid tied down with rubber bands.

I want to write "Mom is talking about the water again. I think this means she is thinking of you. We are both thinking of you, though we don't mention your name. Are you thinking of us? Do you ever sit on the shore at night and wonder what we're doing, what we're thinking? Do you miss us as much as we miss you?"

But instead I write, “I am in a play about the Trojan War. I get to wear a short white tunic, and I ambush people from inside a big fake horse. Even though we win the war, it will be many, many years before I return home. Until I see my family again. In this way, we are the same. I will have many adventures. I will meet giants and witches and see strange lands. Is that what you are doing? I wish you could come to the play.”

Old Farfel is going to a convention in Atlanta. He wants Mom to go with him. From my bed, I can hear them talking about it in the living room. It would be good for her, he says. I know that Mom doesn’t like to travel. She can’t even go to school and back without worrying about the apartment—if she turned the gas off, if she fed the cat, if she left me enough money. She tells him that she’ll think about it.

“You have to move on, Victoria,” he tells her. “Let yourself go to new places.”

“I’m still exploring the old places,” she says.

He lets the conversation drop.

Mom said once that she traveled inside herself when Dad left. I didn’t really understand, but it was one of the few times I saw her upset. She was sitting in her chair, at her desk, looking tired. “Mom, are you in there?” I waved my hand by her face.

“I’m not,” she said. “I’m on new ground. It’s a very different place.”

“Are you thinking about Dad?” “I was thinking how we all travel differently, Vita. Some of us don’t even have to leave the house.”

“Dad left the house.”

“Sometimes it’s easier to look outside than in,” she said.

That night I dreamed about a swan. A swan that flies in circles over the ocean. This is not the dark water that snakes along the West Side Highway and slaps against the banks of New Jersey but the real ocean. Open water. Salty, like tears.

At play practice, I watch the other girls dress up as goddesses and Trojan women. They wear gold scarves wound tight around their necks and foreheads. They all wear flowers in their hair and flat pink ballet slippers. I wear a white sheet taken from my bed. It is tied around the middle with plain white rope. I also wear white sneakers. I don’t get to wear a gold scarf or flowers. Mr. Dodd wrote this play himself and is very picky about details. Tommy Aldridge, my partner in the horse, was sent home because his sheet had Ninja Turtles on it. “They did not have Ninja Turtles in ancient Greece,” Mr. Dodd said.

Mr. Dodd helps Helen McGuire with her role. “You must understand,” he tells her, “Helen is the star of the show. Men have traveled great distances just to fight for her. At

the end, when you come onstage and look at all the damage you've caused, we must believe you're really upset by the thought that this is all your fault."

Helen nods and looks at him blankly.

"Well, at least try to think of something really sad."

Old Farfel is taking Mom out to dinner again. It's the third time this week. Mom says it is a very important dinner, and I am not invited. Not that I would want to go, but I wasn't even asked. Mom brought in takeout, some soup and a cheese sandwich, from the coffee shop on the corner.

I eat my soup, alone in the kitchen, from a blue-and-white paper cup. I remember once at a coffee shop Mom held the same type of cup out in front of me.

"See this building, Vita?" she said. She pointed to some columns that were drawn on the front of her cup. It wasn't really a building—more like a cartoon drawing. "It's the Parthenon," she said. "It's where the Greeks made sacrifices to Athena."

"How did they make sacrifices?" I asked.

"They burned offerings on an altar. They believed this would bring them what they wanted. Good things. Luck."

I finish my soup and look at the tiny building on the cup. In between the columns are the words "Our Pleasure to Serve You." I run my fingers across the flat lines of the Parthenon and trace the roof. I can almost imagine a tiny altar and the ceremonies that were performed there.

It is then that I get an idea. I find a pair of scissors on Mom's desk and cut through the thick white lip of the cup toward the lines of the little temple. I cut around the words "Our Pleasure to Serve You." Then I take the temple and the words and glue them to the back of my notebook. The blue-and-white lines show clearly against the cardboard backing. I get Argus's big metal water bowl from the kitchen and find some matches from a restaurant Old Farfel took us to for dinner.

In my room I put on my white sheet costume and get all my letters to Dad out from the back of the closet. I know that I must say something, to make this more like a ceremony. I think of any Greek words I know: *spanakopita*, *moussaka*, *gyro*. They're only food words, but it doesn't matter. I decide to say them anyway. I say them over and over out loud until they blur into a litany, my own incantation: "*Spanakopitamoussakaandgyro, Spanakopitamoussakaandgyro, Spanakopitamoussakaandgyro.*"

As I say this, I burn handfuls of letters in the bowl. I think about what I want: to be Helen, to have my father come back. Everything I have ever heard says that wishes are granted in threes, so I throw in the hope of Old Farfel's leaving.

I watch as the words burn. Three years of letters go up in smoke and flame. I see blue-lined paper turn to black ashes; I see pages and pages, months and years, burn, crumble, and then disappear. The front of my white sheet has turned black from soot, and my eyes water and burn.

When I am done, I take the full bowl of ashes and hide it in the vase on the mantel, joining it with Argus. My black hands smudge the white figures on the vase until their tunics become as sooty as my own. I change my clothes and open all the windows, but still Mom asks, when she comes home, about the burning smell. I told her I was cooking.

She looked surprised. Neither of us cooks much. “No more burnt offerings when I’m not home,” she said. She looked upset and distracted, and Old Farfel didn’t give that stifled laugh of his.

It’s all my fault. Helen McGuire got chicken pox. Bad. She has been out of school for almost two weeks. I know my burning ceremony did this. “The show must go on,” Mr. Dodd said when Achilles threw up the Tater Tots or when Priam’s beard got caught in Athena’s hair, but this is different. This is Helen. And it’s my fault.

I know all her lines. Know them backward and forward. I have stood in our living room, towel tied around my body, and acted out the entire play, saying every line for my mother. When Mr. Dodd made the announcement about Helen at dress rehearsal, I stood up, white bedsheet slipping from my shoulders, and said in a loud, clear voice, “The gods must have envied me my beauty, for now my name is a curse. I have become hated Helen, the scourge of Troy.”

Mr. Dodd shook his head and looked very sad. “We’ll see, Vita. She might still get better,” he said.

Helen McGuire recovered, but she didn’t want to do the part because of all the pockmarks that were left. Besides, she wanted to be inside the horse with Tommy Aldridge. Mr. Dodd insisted that she still be Helen until her parents wrote that they didn’t want her to be pressured, they didn’t want to do *any further damage*, whatever that means. After that, the part was mine.

Tonight is the opening, and I am so excited. Mom is coming without Old Farfel. “He wasn’t what I wanted,” she said. I don’t think she’ll be seeing him anymore.

“What is beautiful?” I ask Mom before the play begins.

“Why are you so worried all the time about beauty? Don’t you know how beautiful you are to me?”

“Would Daddy think I was beautiful?”

“Oh, Vita, he *always* thought you were beautiful.”

“Would he think I was like Helen?”

She looked me up and down, from the gold lanyard snaked through my thick hair to my too tight pink ballet slippers.

“He would think you’re more beautiful than Helen. I’m almost sorry he won’t be here to see it.”

“*Almost* sorry?”

“Almost. At moments like this—you look so good those ancient gods are going to come alive again with envy.”

“What do you mean, come alive again? What are you saying about the gods?”

“Vita, Greek polytheism is an extinct belief,” she said, and laughed. And then she stopped and looked at me strangely. “When people stopped believing in the gods, they no longer had power. They don’t exist anymore. You must have known that.”

Didn’t I get the part of Helen? Didn’t Old Farfel leave? I made all these things happen with my offering. I know I did. I don’t believe these gods disappeared. At least not Athena.

“I don’t believe you.”

She looked at me, confused.

“You can’t know for sure about the gods. And who knows? Maybe Daddy will even be here to see it.”

“Sure,” she said. “And maybe this time the Trojans will win the war.”

I stand offstage with Mr. Dodd and wait for my final cue. The dry-ice machine has been turned on full blast and an incredible amount of fake smoke is making its way toward the painted backdrop of Troy. Hector’s papier-mâché head has accidentally slipped from Achilles’ hand and is now making a hollow sound as it rolls across the stage.

I peek around the thick red curtain, trying to see into the audience. The auditorium is packed, filled with parents and camcorders. I spot my mom sitting in the front row, alone. I try to scan the back wall, looking for a sign of him, a familiar shadow. Nothing.

Soon I will walk out on the ramparts, put my hand to my forehead, and give my last speech. “Are you sure you’re ready?” Mr. Dodd asks. I think he’s more nervous than I am. “Remember,” he tells me, “this is Helen’s big moment. Think loss.” I nod, thinking nothing.

“Break a leg,” he says, giving me a little push toward the stage. “And try not to trip over the head.”

The lights are much brighter than I had expected, making me squint. I walk through the smoky fog toward center stage.

“It is I, the hated Helen, scourge of Troy.”

With the light on me, the audience is in shadow, like a big pit, dark and endless. I bow before the altar, feeling my tunic rise. “Hear my supplication,” I say, pulling down a bit on the back of my tunic.

“Do not envy me such beauty—it has wrought only pain and despair.”

I can hear Mr. Dodd, offstage, loudly whispering each line along with me.

“For this destruction, I know I will be blamed.”

I begin to recite Helen’s wrongs—beauty, pride, the abdication of Sparta—careful to enunciate clearly. “Troy, I have come to ask you to forgive me.”

I’m supposed to hit my fist against my chest, draw a hand across my forehead, and cry loudly. Mr. Dodd has shown me this gesture, practiced it with me in rehearsal a dozen times—the last line, my big finish. The audience is very quiet. In the stillness there is a hole, an empty pocket, an absence. Instead of kneeling, I stand up, straighten my tunic, look toward the audience, and speak the line softly: “And to say goodbye.”

There is a prickly feeling up the back of my neck. And then applause. The noise surrounds me, filling me. I look into the darkened house and, for a second, I can hear the beating of a swan’s wings, and, then, nothing at all.