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Cast of Characters

HELEN, impossible to tell how old she is. Suffice it to say that seventeen years ago, she was in her prime.

SERVANT, about a decade older than Helen, hard to say.

IO, about a decade younger than Helen.

ATHENA, a goddess, yet Helen's age.

MENELAUS, Helen's husband, a veteran, middle-aged.

Time and Place

Egypt, about seven years after the end of the Trojan War.

Yet she gets some cable.

Should the play be performed in two acts with an intermission, the break should occur immediately after Athena's exit.

Acknowledgments

Helen premiered at the Public Theater (George C. Wolfe, Producer; Michael Hurst, Managing Director) in New York City on April 3, 2002. The director was Tony Kushner and it featured the following cast and crew:

HELEN	Donna Murphy
SERVANT	Marian Seldes
IO	Johanna Day
ATHENA	Phylicia Rashad
MENELAUS	Denis O'Hare
Set Design	Michael Yeargan
Costume Design	Susan Hilferty
Lighting Design	Scott Zielinski
Sound Design	Gina Leishman
Production Stage Manager	C.A. Clark

The 2002 premiere production of *Helen* at the Public Theater would never have happened without the audacious leadership of George C. Wolfe as artistic director and his dedication to new work. Nor would it have been possible if Tony Kushner hadn't championed of the play of a fellow writer and generously committed himself to directing it.

These acknowledgements are long overdue.

HELEN

adapted by Ellen McLaughlin

FROM THE PLAY BY EURIPIDES

(The play takes place in a hotel room in Egypt. It's a fairly upscale hotel, perhaps with a dash of colonial Victorian detail, but there can be some slightly kitschy elements in the decor as well as several touches that clue us into the fact that we are indeed in Egypt. There is a large television set of the boxy, glowing, sixties type, complete with rabbit ears. It's pointed away from the audience and toward the glum if attractive woman sitting on the bed. She is surrounded by a certain amount of feminine debris—make-up, nail polish, clumps of Kleenex, a waxing kit, that sort of thing. There might be a number of aging bouquets of flowers. HELEN's hair is down. She is wearing a beautiful undergarment, a gown of some kind, covered by a stunning robe. She holds a large, ornate flyswatter in readiness. She stares out at the audience, listening.)

HELEN. It's just a matter of time. It starts with one and then the next...I spend the whole day killing them. One by one. Until they're all dead. And then night comes. And it's finally silent. And that's my doing. But then every morning it starts all over again when the first one makes itself known. *(Listens.)* This is the nature of my existence. *(Turns her attention to us.)* It's not...it's not a *punishment* exactly, I mean I'm not in Hades... You know, that poor sap Sisyphus, with the rock? No. For one thing, I'm not *dead*, and this is...the whole set-up *(She gestures around:)* it's all very... I mean, I have nothing to *complain* about, it's just...it's just that nothing ever happens, I mean NOTHING EVER HAPPENS. No one comes, no one goes, except the help, if you could even call her that—these Egyptian help, they need a lot of help, if you know what I mean... And then there are flies. Not a lot. Just enough. Enough to make you want to rip your face off, if you could, and I can't, of course. If I could have done *that...* *(A moment of depression; she shakes it off.)* I've actually gotten rather good at it. I mean, it's not *surprising* that you might excel at something when it's the *only thing you do all day every day for seventeen years*. But see, here's the thing, each slaughter is remarkably like...an event. It makes the day, um, *occur* somehow. Here in my sanctuary from all that *(She gestures outside.)* I kill flies. *(She hears a fly. She smiles and puts up a finger. Expertly she stalks her prey and then—thwack—swats the night table. She lifts the swatter to inspect the body, then darts the swatter beneath it and carries it off stage left, as if transporting a flapjack on a spatula. We hear a toilet flush. She reenters.)*

Ah, the first little death of the day. I often think it's the best. Except, of course, for the last.

Surprising isn't it? In this hotsy totsy hotel. But that's Egypt for you. Positively teeming with life. All that muck. River ooze.

(Suddenly, she is seized by a fragment of poetry. This poetic mode always seems to come out of nowhere and when it's over, she doesn't quite know what to make of what's happened to her.)

"As when flies in swarming myriads animate the spring air—haunting the herdsman's stalls and spinning in buzzing circles over the pails of new milk—in such vast multitudes mustered the long-haired Greeks upon the plain."

(A slightly perplexed moment.)

The war. Every now and then these snatches of poetry go through my head. I can't explain it, and I never know when it's going to happen. Maybe I make them up. Or maybe my unconscious mind is tuned to some frequency—WGR-EEK, or something, who knows? But it's the only news of the war I get. God knows there's nothing worthwhile on *this* piece of crap. *(She smacks the television with her flyswatter.)* It's hardly worth bothering. *(She turns the television on.)* I mean, look at this. Barbarian nursery rhymes, cooking shows, bowling, endless foreign soap operas with tinny music and shiny polyester costumes. It's maddening. *I have no idea what's going on.* You go looking for something with *relevance*, a larger sense of what is happening and the best you can do is the Weather Channel, which... It's the only network with anything like *global concern* and yet... Look at it! Record highs, record lows. Spiral clouds of color graphics that spin bumpily toward a coast and stop, spin and stop...and there they are, there they always are...those amiable people in sports jackets standing in front of a livid map of some place you can't... quite...make...out...and yes, they're gesturing with their pointers and they're presumably talking about some sort of *front*, cold or hot, wet or dry or *(She screams in frustration.)* IS THIS NEWS? THIS IS ALL SO UNHELPFUL!

(She bangs the top of the set with the flyswatter.) There's a war going on, people, right underneath those cumulus clouds! Could we maybe get a graphic of *that*? *(She changes the channel.)* MORE MAKE-UP TIPS. WHO WATCHES THIS SHIT?

(The SERVANT enters.)

NO, I DON'T WANT A FACIAL. NO, I DON'T WANT ANOTHER MANICURE. MY FINGERTIPS ACHE AND THEY'RE TOO SHINY.

SERVANT. Cow to see you, Madam.

HELEN. A what?

SERVANT. A cow. Anxious for an interview.

(HELEN lifts an eyebrow.)

She's Greek.

HELEN. Send her up.

(SERVANT exits.)

First time in *years*. I mean (what am I talking about?) EVER. FIRST TIME EVER anyone other than, you know, the *help*, has entered this room... Oh, fabulous. (*Futzes with her clothing happily*.) A CONVERSATION. And with a Greek! Albeit a Greek cow, but apparently a talking one. (*Puts a hand to her heart*.) I really must get a grip. Remember who I am, and all that, but oh, maybe she can tell me *what the heck has been going on!*

(*She hears and then sees a fly. She swats it efficiently and carries it off to the toilet. We hear a flush. IO enters. She is not in fact a cow anymore, though she has retained the white ears. Other than that, she is quite human, attractive and a bit hyper. She wears a plush white hotel robe—hieroglyphs indicating the hotel name on the pocket—and hotel slippers. HELEN enters.*)

IO. Sorry to barge in like this. I just got to town and, my God, when I heard there was someone on the top floor who spoke Greek, I mean, I just *had* to talk to *someone*. I haven't talked to anyone in ages, I mean I *literally* haven't talked to anyone in ages. I was until recently a cow.

HELEN. (*Nodding, getting the facts*.) You were a cow.

IO. Yeah. Four legs, tail, moo, milkable, the whole bit.

Years like that. Awful. But since I arrived in Egypt I've just been feeling so much better. Practically back to normal. Except for the ears.

HELEN. I kind of like them.

IO. Some slight glitch. They keep telling me they'll work it out—

HELEN. —They do nice things for your face.

IO. You really think so? Thanks. I'll be glad to get rid of them though. I've been working with such a limited color palette. I mean I have been a *slave* to white for years now. And you know how white spots. It's just impossible to keep clean when you're on the road. (*Pause*.) You know who you look like?

HELEN. Yes.

IO. (*Dawning realization*.) No, really, it's uncanny.

HELEN. Yes. I do.

IO. Oh my GOD. DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE?

HELEN. Pretty much, yeah.

IO. What are you doing here? You're the queen!... Of Sparta! Shouldn't you be in...Sparta?

HELEN. I'm actually supposed to be in Troy at the moment.

IO. Troy?

HELEN. (*Unsettled that she has to explain this:*) There was a whole ker-fuffle with a sort of contest between the major goddesses, it was a big deal. And the upshot is that there's been this *huge*... 'cause everybody *thinks* that I'm in... (*IO is still clueless.*) Gosh, you *are* out of touch... What happened was that this prince of Troy named Paris was for some reason the judge of the contest and Aphrodite promised me to him as a bribe so that he'd choose her as the most beautiful goddess. I guess it just kind of *slipped her mind* that I was already married. But hey, she's a goddess, what does she care? So Paris sails over to Sparta pronto for a visit and we just knock ourselves out for him. Endless banquets every night, tours of the capital, state functions, dances. House guests. You know the deal.

IO. Was he cute?

HELEN. Pretty dreamy. Coffee colored skin, lots of hair, a way of sort of *taking you in* when he looked at you, like he was sort of *dying*. Real style—you know how foreign men are—top notch fabrics, nice drape, no pockets, just...but not *too*...I mean, he had *taste* but he didn't make a big *thing* of it.

IO. Uh huh.

HELEN. (*Trying to remember:*) And he smelled like oranges...and... and crushed rosemary.

IO. Yummy.

HELEN. That's what I thought. Of course my husband, Menelaus, was just completely clueless. Told one hunting story after another while the two of us were playing footsie under the table. I'm not *proud* of what I did, I'm just *saying*... The guy was a charmer, you know, and I'd been doing the wife-of-the-great-man bit for, like, *years*, nothing but Chanel suits and sensible shoes day in day out. And as for the sex, it had been strictly missionary position since the git-go—years of staring at the ceiling while he went at it. And, and, he *hummed*.

IO. Hummed?

HELEN. Yeah, all the time. I mean ALL the time. His eyes would glaze over and he'd just... (*Hums tonelessly.*)

IO. Yow.

HELEN. This is what I was up against. So when Menelaus leaves us alone for a few days while he goes to visit his mother or something, well...

IO. So, what? you eloped? Vanished into the night?

HELEN. So the story goes. One of the stories anyway.

IO. Weren't you, like, *there*?

HELEN. Well. No. Hera gets this bee in her bonnet about the whole thing—says I'm the reason she lost the contest basically, and she decides to replace me with some *copy* of me, I mean she looks just like me except that she isn't, you know...*me*. She's made out of *cloud* or something... So anyway she gets this *copy* to go to Troy with Paris and cause all this trouble while she spirits me, the *real* me, here. To Egypt. Where nobody knows me. And the TV reception stinks and the front desk will just NOT listen to my special needs and there doesn't seem to be a dry cleaner on the entire CONTINENT who can press a simple PLEAT to save his LIFE, for Pete's sake.

IO. Why did she do that?

HELEN. Hera? Who knows? It was probably all about preserving my virtue, whatever *that* means.

IO. Yeah, she's really into that.

HELEN. I just wish she could have let *me* make the call on that one.

IO. So, would you have done it? Gone with him? (*Slightly melodramatic:*) Betrayed your husband, your people, your country for love?

HELEN. I honestly can't remember. It's been so long since I felt like I could make a decision of any kind... Who knows? I might have just made out with him for awhile. He was pretty hot. It wouldn't have hurt anyone. It's not like I wanted anybody to *die* because of it, for Goodness' sake.

IO. Of course not.

HELEN. It would have been something my *own*. A little mistake, or a little dalliance, something I could maybe *learn from*, you know? In a personal-growth kind of way. *But they just don't give you a chance*. It's, like, you are not *allowed* a private life, you know?

IO. Oh, I *know*. How long have you been here?

HELEN. Seventeen years, three months, nine days.

IO. (*Slightly stunned, but covering:*) Huh. O.K.
So how long is this supposed to go on?

HELEN. Well, the way the story is *supposed* to go, last I heard, is that I wait out the war—

IO. The war?

HELEN. (*Increasingly disoriented by Io's cluelessness:*) There's a war out there, there *should* be a... (*Recovering, she starts from the beginning:*) See, the way my father set the whole thing up was that whichever suitor married me—I had *loads* of suitors—

IO. (*Nodding, she remembers this:*) —Like thousands—

HELEN. —Exactly. The deal was that the other suitors had to agree to join an alliance with the winner if anyone, you know, *abducted* me, or—

IO. —Oh, I remember this—

HELEN. —So, I'm basically assuming that—

IO. — (*Suddenly getting it:*) There's a WAR, being fought in YOUR NAME—

HELEN. —Precisely. Between the Trojans and the Greeks.

IO. Wow. No wonder you bailed.

HELEN. Bailed? Excuse me, darling, I was replicated and...dema-terialized.

IO. Not before playing footsie for awhile.

HELEN. (*Slightly thrown:*) Oh, that was nothing. I was just bored and...it wouldn't have... (*Regaining focus:*) So the idea is that I wait out this war and Menelaus swings by and picks me up after it's over. That's of course if the Greeks *win* it. And if Menelaus isn't killed, or doesn't die on the journey home. And then, on top of *that*, it's got to occur to him that the woman he's got in the boat with him isn't me. And of course, the whole thing depends on if he manages to stumble into this particular Egyptian hotel.

IO. That's a lot of ifs.

HELEN. Tell me about it.

IO. In fact, the whole thing seems, excuse me for saying so, a little unlikely. Have you ever tried leaving?

HELEN. What do you mean?

IO. You know, getting in the elevator and... (*She makes the gesture of descending.*)

HELEN. (*Slightly put off:*) I don't think *that* would work.

IO. But the elevator's great, I just came up in it, no problem—

HELEN. —That's not what I mean. I mean I'm supposed to wait here, in this room, until he comes. And he's supposed to take me home. That's the way it works.

IO. And if he doesn't?

HELEN. (*Unsettled:*) I...It's... He has to come, eventually, it's just... (*Pause.*) He'll be here. It's just a matter of time.

IO. (*Unconvinced:*) Uh huh. (*Pause.*)

Well, this *is* a cushy set-up, I have to say. Even if the reception's crummy. I mean, I'll trade you the last seventeen years of my life, no problem.

HELEN. It must have been awful.

IO. Crazy awful. (*Shudders.*) Oh, that poor cow. Years and years, I was just—

HELEN. —Excuse me, before you...I mean, I do want to hear your whole, you know, *saga* and everything, but I'm sorry I just have to ask—You mean you've heard *nothing* about a war?

IO. Um...I have to admit I kind of tuned everything out there for awhile. It's not like I could *ask*... And people don't tend to talk to cows, as a rule. (*She tries to think.*) I guess I knew there was a war. But then there always seems to be a war, because there are always refugees. There were so many of us. I wasn't alone. And they're mostly women. I mean look. There we are.

HELEN. (*Confused:*) That's just the Weather Channel.

IO. (*Mesmerized by the image:*) No, it's us. It's the spinning masses of refugees, swarming the globe like clouds of bees—swirling in a twisting wash across the face of the earth, trying to achieve invisibility. That is our great goal. It took me years. I don't even know how I did it. I guess I just lasted long enough to cease to be of interest. The gods looked elsewhere and gradually forgot me. I still don't understand why it happened in the first place. There I was, a vaguely happy shepherdess, minding my own business, when suddenly a whirlwind descended and lifted me from the lip of the hill. I felt myself being kneaded like dough, like mud under a chariot wheel, and all the while the wind sighed in my ear speaking to me in some warm language I couldn't understand.

HELEN. (*Nodding:*) The ravishment of Zeus. Mother told me all about it.

IO. But before whatever was about to happen could happen, everything stopped for a sickening moment and I could hear the approach of something else, a screaming, sliding descent from a vast distance. It sounded like an enormous bird, sharp beak open, talons spread.

HELEN. Hera, of course. Breaking down the door. Trying to keep Zeus's wick clean.

IO. You could feel the suck of air as she rushed down upon us. But in the second before she arrived I lost my body... He took it from me. Or really, it was more like being jammed into the casing of another body, stuffed like rags into an urn or something. I looked down and saw my new self—a cow. This tent of a body heaving and echoing like a drum. And all the while I could sense the goddess hovering above me as an eagle hovers over its prey. I tried to scream and that was when I realized the worst of it. That I was mute now as well. All thought, all feeling locked now in my wide swinging head. A cow. It's been a hell of a thing.

HELEN. You're Io, aren't you? (*IO nods.*) That's a terrible story.

IO. Yeah. And the strangest part is... It made a kind of awful sense. Even then. Because I had only just arrived at the moment when my body didn't seem to belong to me anymore. Like it wasn't just *mine*. I could feel this distinct... I don't know...like when I walked past a group of men... Suddenly there was this girl, this other girl, the one they were looking at, who was...well, *me*, I guess, but also, I mean she was, I was looking at her, at *me*, *with* them and I felt what they felt for her which was a kind of... (*She is disoriented and disturbed.*) I don't know. (*Pause.*) You know?

HELEN. Yes.

IO. It's not that I wanted to be a cow. That was horrible. But it did relieve me of the particular confusion of being a girl. Having to live inside a body which was so desired and yet so detested.

HELEN. But that's what it is to be beautiful.

IO. Boy, they must really loathe you.

HELEN. (*Flattered:*) That's a sweet thing to say. As it happens they do. I've heard I'm the most hated woman in history.

IO. Really? Well done. Must be lonely. Being her.

HELEN. (*Poetic mode:*)

"She is the dream to which we cling
That shining, shifting, darting thing
Her face is blinding as the sun

Her depths are sounded by no one
So we drift on her legend and drown there.”

IO. Sad. Pretty though.

HELEN. Well, that’s me all over. I wonder what that’s from.

IO. Gee, I don’t know. I haven’t been able to keep up, you know, with the whole poetry scene...

HELEN. Maybe it’s the gods. Messing with my head. Because they can.

(Pause.)

What do you think they want from us?

IO. The gods? All I know about the gods is what I learned from the suffering of my own body. Hera set a gadfly on me and he drove me in a dance of anguish across the face of the earth. He was my halo, that gadfly, circling above me before landing, time and again, to bow his sharpness to the tortured white. I was never free of him. Oh, the landscapes we saw together. The length and breadth of the known world. We crossed it all. There was one night when I kicked and howled, prancing unwilling down the Persian coast. The moon was twinned like a double cherry in its own reflection on the glassy sea. I watched it extract itself from itself and leave its ghost behind to stare up at it as it made its stately arc up the sky. *(Pause.)* He showed me the world, my gadfly—and I finally learned to see it for what it is—just another hide stretched on pain. No different from my own tortured landscape of welts and weals. Every one of them a site of misery. My poor body, it was a terrible place and we made it together, my gadfly and I. It took years. Maybe we made it for God.

HELEN. For God?

IO. I don’t know. I guess I have to believe my misery was sacred. After all, it’s the only gift they ever gave me. *(Pause.)* I’m sorry, it’s just that I haven’t spoken in so long—

HELEN. —I haven’t either. Really talked to anyone. It seems we’ve both been subject to...peculiar existences.

IO. I do think sometimes about the life I might have led if I’d never been noticed. If I’d lived out my days safe in the hollow of the one mountain, never out of earshot of the dull bells of my own herd.

HELEN. You could go home. Now that it’s over.

IO. No. It isn’t over. I’m still one of the refugees. We can never go home. We wouldn’t recognize it. It wouldn’t recognize us. That girl’s life was not to happen.

HELEN. (*Pause. Then, abruptly:*) So what's up for you now? Off to the tourist attractions? Maybe do some shopping? See the sights?

IO. I don't know. I might just head back to my room and stretch out. I'm still a little zonked from all the traveling. I love my room. It has a door. And a lock. And hippopotami *everywhere*, even the bidet has these little *ears*... Do you use yours? I'm a little flummoxed as to how one is supposed to—

HELEN. —My what?

IO. Your bidet?

HELEN. Oh, I don't use anything. Well, I mean, I use the toilet to flush the flies, but that's pretty much it.

IO. You don't use it to—? I'm sorry, I don't understand.

HELEN. I don't seem to have any bodily needs.

IO. (*Flabbergasted:*) *What?* Like you don't eat or...you don't *eat*?

HELEN. No, I haven't eaten anything in years. Not even in the old days. I was always on a diet and I guess it just...*stuck*.

IO. God, you must be starving.

HELEN. I wouldn't know. It's hard to say *what's* going on in there.

(They both look at HELEN's body.)

I'm probably exhausted too, but who knows?

IO. Wow. I wish I could do that. It's always been such a struggle for me to control my desire for, you know, food and stuff, I've just been such a—

HELEN. —Cow?

IO. Exactly.

(They laugh.)

HELEN. No, you don't.

IO. What?

HELEN. Wish for this. It's terrible. Once you abandon your body you can never return and that means you can never really feel anything again. Hunger, fear, anger, delight, each is played on the only instrument you have, the body, your body, and if you can't hear it, feel it, you've lost a hold of your very self. What is yours.

IO. Could you go back?

HELEN. What? Back inside my body somehow? At this late date?

IO. Might be worth a try. It's done wonders for me, I gotta say.

HELEN. (*A little panicky:*) I don't think it's possible, I think, you know, the gods might—

IO. —Well, it's up to you. (*Pause.*) It's a nice room. I guess you could stay here...indefinitely.

HELEN. Do you know what they have in store for you?

IO. The gods? Not much, I hope. I mean, after the last few decades, just the *idea* of a Do Not Disturb sign brings tears to the eyes.

HELEN. Oh, not to worry, you will be left alone for years and years. Enjoy.

(IO exits.)

(*To the heavens:*) O.K. What was *that* about?

(*To us:*) Of course that makes no sense. That was Io. Io was *way* before my time. I've heard that story since I was a kid. I was raised on that story. She was one of the first of the endless host of Zeus' unwitting, unwilling amours. My mother was one of them, and she was long after Io. I mean, Io's part of a myth so old I know like nine versions of it. And despite what she wishes, Zeus hasn't forgotten her, even if Hera has. He's just biding his time. And of course he *will* impregnate her soon enough, but this time he does it by touching her gently—a ravishment so uncharacteristically sweet she names the child born of it Epaphus, "light touch of a hand." (*It just gets stranger and stranger the more she puts it together.*) And he becomes the king...of Egypt... Ages ago. There are monuments all over the place. (*This is quite disturbing.*) I don't understand. (*Attempts to shake it off.*) But then (*Shrugs.*) that's Egypt for you.

Everybody ends up here sooner or later. Even the dead. Even the fictitious. And they all carry their stories with them, like balls of wool they wind and rewind over and over. Telling themselves and all their variations, as if they'd never come to an end. As if the echoes were never too faint to hear.

(*Pause. Mounting anxiety:*) This is impossible. And still no word of the war.

(SERVANT enters, wheeling a garment rack of several identical gowns.)

Any telegrams? (SERVANT shakes her head.) Any letters? (SERVANT shakes her head.) Phone messages? (SERVANT shakes her head.)

SERVANT. Are there ever?

HELEN. No. But I thought perhaps today... (SERVANT *shakes her head then gestures toward the rack ala Vanna White.*)

I can't decide. You pick.

(The SERVANT performs a little drama of deliberation then yanks one of the dresses off the rack and begins to put it on HELEN.)

Well, she was intelligent. For a cow. If uninformative. I mean, here she's traveled the entirety of the known world and she has absolutely bupkus to say about the biggest war that's ever taken place. Ever.

(Poetic mode:)

"Two mighty armies poised in deadlock on the bitter stones of Ilium. They hold between them the pride of the world and their clangor will wake the woe of the ages."

Does that ring a bell?

SERVANT. *(Shrugging cryptically:)* Greek poetry.

HELEN. *(Noticing the dress she's wearing for the first time:)* Oh, why did you pick this one? I *hate* this one! *(The SERVANT rolls her eyes.)* Do my hair.

(The SERVANT begins to arrange an elaborate coif.)

You're *sure* there was nothing?

SERVANT. I was just at the front desk. There's nothing for you. Nothing at all.

HELEN. Tell me a story.

SERVANT. Let's see. Once upon a time there was an incident. What shall we call it? An abduction? An elopement? The beginning of the end of the world? *(Pause.)* An incident. And forty-six household servants—staff, secretaries, and security personnel flooded the local police station. Quite a scene. And every one of them had a story to tell.

One maid clutched a ring she said had been pressed into her hand by the lady of the house as she'd been dragged weeping down the hallway. "Tell my husband I love him," the lady had gasped through her sobs, "and tell him he must find me!" Touching. Yet the gardener said he'd heard the lady and the visiting gentleman giggling together in the gazebo where they had camped out like children, with a blanket and graham crackers stolen from the scullery. In the spill of light from the full moon, he could see them slapping each other's naked buttocks and playing sordid games with their flashlights. On the other hand, a secretary said that she'd seen her mistress, mink coat shrugged over a negligee, run silently across the library to throw open the French doors. The smell of freshly cut grass flooded

in as she ran barefoot down the long lawn that ended at the harbor and a waiting ship.

There were as many stories as there were people to tell them. Each one patiently taken down by nodding tired men. The night wore on. Then the real fun began. Because then the detective sketch artists were brought in to do their work. Forty-six remarkably similar renderings of an abductor were brought forth but when it came to the abductee, well... There was no consensus on any single detail, from the color of the eyes to the length or even color of the hair. The sketch artists were wild with frustration. They'd never done such insipid work; none of the pictures satisfied them. They grew pettish, ripping up their sketches and stalking out to the water cooler, such that the witnesses themselves could be seen in the hallways, murmuring encouragement, coaxing them to go back in and try again. Face after face they drew but each was strangely disappointing. Just one more vapid beauty. Each one lovely to be sure but hardly unique, hardly, well, what *was* it one expected of that face? Something. Something no one had yet found a way of describing. The police chief finally calls it a night and sends everyone home. He rubs his aching eyes and yawns. He walks between the desks, each one stacked high with conflicting narratives. All he can hear is the sound of the sketch artists. They refuse to go home. In the breaking dawn he listens to the swoop of the pencils, the slough of the erasers, the low cursing, the quiet agony as they work and rework, portrait after portrait, not one of which will ever satisfy them.

(The hairdressing is complete.)

HELEN. *(Quietly disturbed:)* I do worry about the world. This splitting of image from being never bodes well. The first knock-off only begs for another. Copy spews forth copy, an infinite proliferation, like a nuclear reaction. Each replication spawning yet another generation of duplicates until she moves like a virus through a city, facing you at every turn. Her name spelled out in the night sky. Her pictures blown like debris to be tread underfoot and washed into gutters. She is everywhere.

SERVANT. Hard to believe there ever was an actual Helen. Just some woman. With breasts that swell or sag, hair that grows, menstrual cycles—

HELEN. –THOUGHTS! THOUGHTS! SHE HAS AN INTERIOR LIFE! SHE'S NOT JUST A BODY!

SERVANT. *(Continuing unperturbed:)* Someone who belongs to herself and not to the world. See, there is the *image* of Helen and that does not belong to her. It's ours. She is part of us, like our dreams, that Helen. Something we see on the back of our closed eyelids

when someone says, for instance, “the most beautiful woman in the world.” We possess, it turns out, so much of her. Images of her crying at state funerals, sleek in black, the mist of a veil only adding to her beauty. Or she see her sitting on some podium, looking attentively at the back of her husband’s head as he stands there pontificating, unheard. He knows she is there, blazing behind him. He knows no one is looking at him. Except her, of course. And that is enough. We have tracked the nature of our times on her body. Eras of greed are displayed for us in her cycles of embarrassing weight gain, her mortifying battle with her demons. We pored over the least flattering shots, those furtive, ungainly escapes into limousines, her skirt rucked up over her thick haunches. Or there were the times she starved herself like a saint for us, when her dresses hung limp on her and her eyes sunk like bright stones in her bony face. Then we clucked our disapproval and shook our heads, feeling something we couldn’t name—was it pity? (*She considers this, then rejects it.*) No. Just revulsion, really. I mean look at her. She never knew when to stop. Thank goodness. Because still we hungered for her. Image after image. We couldn’t get enough. We made her sleep with the lights on, her window shades up, so that we could press our noses against the windowpane and watch her dreams slide over her face.

(HELEN *shudders, as if shaking off a nightmare.*)

HELEN. I’ll tell you the one I hated most. The simpering vulnerable one. With skin like spun sugar so soft and sweet your jaws ached when you looked at her. Those wet eyes. That high breathy voice. The head always cocked to the side like a not-too-bright cocker spaniel who has to be told everything twice. (*She puts out a hand to have her nails buffed.*) But that was only one role in an infinite repertoire. She was...spectacularly accommodating.

SERVANT. She was a child, and yet a whore.

HELEN. An angel, and yet a goddess of sex.

SERVANT. She slices, she dices...

HELEN. She walks, she talks, she’s remarkable.

SERVANT. She *was* remarkable. How did she do all those things at once?

HELEN. Oh, I don’t know. Sometimes I think it is impossible to pull it off, embody all those contradictions and still be so...vacant. No wonder she...disappeared. How could anyone keep it up? You just get worn out, sick to death of trying to slot into everybody’s personal fantasies. Having to be so *visible* all the time... She never had

a minute to herself. It was consuming her. It was terrible, it was—
(Pause.) That's enough! My cuticles are throbbing! Leave me alone!

(The SERVANT exits, taking the clothes rack with her.)

OH MY GOD, I CAN'T STAND IT ANYMORE. I NEED SOME INFORMATION. SOMETHING TO LIVE ON. IT'S LIKE SWALLOWING DUST FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS. *(To the heavens:)* IF I DON'T GET TO GO TO TROY COULD YOU AT LEAST SEND SOMEONE OVER HERE WHO CAN TELL ME ABOUT IT?

(Suddenly, amidst great fanfare, ATHENA enters in complete regalia, looking pissy.)

ATHENA. Would you simmer down, for goodness sake? They can hear you clear back to the ice machine.

HELEN. Athena? What are you doing here? You hate me.

ATHENA. Well, who doesn't, if it comes to that?

HELEN. Have you come to tell me about the war?

ATHENA. The war? Oh, that's been over for ages.

HELEN. Over? Who won?

ATHENA. We did.

HELEN. We did?

ATHENA. O.K., so when you say "we," you mean who exactly? Your big buddies the Greeks, whom you betrayed? Or your dear friends the Trojans whose civilization you're responsible for destroying?

HELEN. Um. Both I guess.

ATHENA. Well, then you won. And you lost. Horribly. But that's true of everyone. It was a very long war.

HELEN. Has the house of Priam fallen?

ATHENA. Oh, gosh yes. A smoldering ruin.

HELEN. Is everyone in the royal family gone?

ATHENA. *(Trying to remember:)* Ummmmmm, nnnnnnnnyes. Yup. Not a soul left.

HELEN. All dead? Even the women?

ATHENA. As good as. Last I saw they were lining them up on the beach, assigning them to various warriors as slaves.

HELEN. What about the queen?

ATHENA. Hecuba? Oh, she was given to Odysseus, not that he really wanted the old bag. She was quite upset. Straw that broke the camel's back kind of thing. It was the end of a really bad week for her. Legendary bad. Oh, they'll be talking about her for years. I think she threw herself off the boat or something. Or maybe they stoned her on the beach. I can't remember. Anyway, she's dead.

HELEN. I'm...that's terrible. Queen Hecuba. I've been thinking about her all these years, imagining her. It's like I knew her, though I never...I loved her, I think.

ATHENA. Well, she was never exactly over the moon about you, I can tell you that.

HELEN. No, I suppose she wouldn't have been.

ATHENA. She called you "the gift that keeps taking."

HELEN. I see.

ATHENA. Tough old bitch. I liked her.

HELEN. What about the Greeks? Did many die?

ATHENA. Oh, yes. Thousands. The best of them. (*Yawns.*) It was a nightmare, really.

HELEN. You sound like you're bearing up pretty well.

ATHENA. Well, it's not like it wasn't very *sad* and *tragic* and *momentous* and everything, it's just that it *took so long*. *Ten years*. I mean, really, who can stay interested?

Of course the first few weeks were just plain thrilling. We could see waves of soldiers skidding across the landscape—it was delirious, like watching a sheet being flapped in the wind, lines of men curving and snapping. And, oh, the horses, glorious. None of the gods could get anything done. We just dropped everything. We'd be down on the mountains, cheering them on, or leaning on the clouds, propped up for the show. Marvelous stuff. What a disappointment when everything bogged down and all the boys went underground. For months all you could hear was the sound of spades, the rasp of miles of barbed wire being uncoiled. There was really nothing much of interest after that. You'd catch yourself nodding off, head lolling on the clouds, even during the long bombardments. Very little entertainment value in a siege. Pretty soon, we were stifling yawns and slinking back to our hobbies: archery, jewelry-making, trying to train birds. And still the war went on, unnoticed. For nothing and no one.

HELEN. For me.

ATHENA. Not even for you. For some *idea* of you. Whole populations, whole cities wiped out, and all for a *concept*. Not even a *good* concept. Some chick. A *rumor* of a chick. A rumor of a chick pretty much everyone despised, including the husband who was trying to get her back, including the guy who took her in the first place. All that mayhem in the name of *what?* I mean, look at you. You're just some blonde. And the big joke of course is that *you* weren't even there.

HELEN. What was the point?

ATHENA. Oh, it seemed like a good idea at the time. Something about glory. You know we've been around for awhile, watching you people. The interest was beginning to wear thin. After awhile we just wanted something truly epic. All those piddling little sacrifices, a bull here, a deer there. No, no, we wanted *you*. The human race itself on the altar, twisting like worms on pavement after a rainstorm.

HELEN. You *wanted* that?

ATHENA. We thought we did. But I began to have my doubts. I remember looking down at the pocked mud—the burnt daggers that once were trees, the dun colored creatures struggling about, tanks tipped and lodged in mud, horses screaming—you could almost hear them—I remember thinking: Perhaps there was little in the way of glory to be gleaned from this.

(They lapse into silence, staring out.)

I notice you haven't asked.

HELEN. About what?

ATHENA. Your hubby.

HELEN. Ah, yes. Him. Is he all right?

ATHENA. Just fabulous. Got through the whole thing without a scratch.

HELEN. *(Without enthusiasm:)* Great. *(Pause.)* So where is he?

ATHENA. Oh, he's wandering in circles around the Aegean. Honestly, that guy, he couldn't find his prick if you gave him a map.

HELEN. You know, for a goddess who is supposedly staunchly pro Greek—

ATHENA. —Well, of course I am. I was. But they pissed me off at the end of the war. Poseidon and I decided to make their journey home *really* interesting. We blew them all *over* the fucking place. Menelaus has spent seven years tacking against the wind and puking over the

side of his boat only to be blown back to the wrong coast time after time. It's been fun, what can I say?

HELEN. Does he know he's looking for me?

ATHENA. Are you kidding? The *Hummer*? We could have put a dress on a dog's squeaky chew toy and he would have bought it. Really.

HELEN. What's she like?

ATHENA. Who? You?

HELEN. Yeah. Her.

ATHENA. Sweet, really. If you like that sort of thing. All melting looks and breathless giggles. Good tempered but not saintly. Knowing but innocent.

HELEN. Sounds familiar. So she did her perfectly.

ATHENA. (*A concession.*) There was a kind of perfection involved.

HELEN. I remember. Once I stood at the center of history. It roared around me, whipping at my clothes, howling and breathing its terrible breath on me. But I would turn a face like marble to the world. A face unmarred by thought, serene and closed up tight as a vault. A face that could hold itself still and unblinking as it was battered by the gazes of the millions. Nothing animated it. It was a mask of perfection. Shining and reflective as a pond. So that when they peered into me, I showed them their own dream of themselves staring back at them, lips parted, inaccessible and spellbound. Beauty. It's a hell of a thing.

ATHENA. You couldn't have kept it up. That's why we had to replace you. You were losing your edge.

HELEN. (*Incensed.*) What are you talking about? I never slipped up for a second. I could walk through a crowd of screaming fans and hear nothing. They could claw at me, each one trying to get a fistful of me, and I would merely smile and keep moving. I was beyond good. They would look at me and, no, I wasn't there. I had retreated back from my eyes, curled my entire soul into the size of something unremarkable and tiny, like a walnut. I would lodge in my throat and stay there for days, safe in my own darkness, far from view.

ATHENA. I'm not saying you weren't good. I'm just saying you were losing it. Your eyes. There was something you started betraying. A distinctness of feeling. Your own. Nobody wanted that.

HELEN. OF COURSE THEY DID! They LOVED my feeling! They couldn't get enough of it! One time I got some grit under a contact

lens when I was sitting in the theater and I teared up a little. The paparazzi were on me like piranhas, blinding me with flashbulbs. The next day every supermarket tabloid was screaming HELEN WEEPS FOR HERAKLES! It was pathetic.

ATHENA. They wanted you *weeping*. They didn't want you *feeling*. Not you. Personally. Feeling. Not at all. Feeling your own feelings, thinking your own thoughts? Absolutely not. It's all supposed to be written on the body. Right out front where they can see it and own it. Otherwise you're no use to them. You're just another woman, full to the brim with tediously idiosyncratic and impenetrable secrets and needs. You think you were "loved"? Please. They just endowed you with whatever qualities they were hankering for at the moment and made up everything else. Nobody was ever particularly interested in *you*. Human love. What a joke.

HELEN. What do you want from us?

ATHENA. The gods? (HELEN *nods*.) What do the *gods* want from *you*? (She *laughs*.) You crack us up. I swear.

(Pause while she chuckles.)

HELEN. Well?

ATHENA. You're too much, kid. (She *pinches* HELEN's *cheek*.) You know what we love about you people? You die. And that means you've all got stories. That's why we came up with you. Even the dullest mortal life has a beginning, middle and an end. It's so fucking poignant. It could be that the whole Trojan War was just a big fat dramaturgical mistake on our parts. Way too tidy. Our desire to wrap everything up with a single enormous blowout just ended up diluting all the stories down to one unsatisfying truncated shrug of a narrative. I mean, it's not like it's your *fault*, but we lost respect for you guys. You just looked like so many panicked beetles scrambling around on that dung hill. Or maybe it was the monotony of the deaths that got to us. Not that there wasn't a lot of *variety*—we could watch people get blown to bits by bombs, cut down like wheat by machine gun fire slicing across rows of stumbling men; or of course there were those endless agonizing deaths, all the boys lined up in their cots, oozing through their swaddling in the tent hospitals—oh, there were *variations*... But really when all was said and done, it was just a whole heck of a lot of death. And it turns out that death makes human *life* interesting. But that death *itself* isn't particularly interesting. Because you all die the same way. Looking surprised. It's amazing. Here you are the only creature on earth who knows you're going to die—it colors your entire existence from your earliest moments of consciousness. You can even spend years on a

battlefield, watching *other* people die left and right of you, but when your *own* death comes, *as you always knew it would*, you're still, like, "What? ME? Surely you don't mean ME!" (*Amused:*) It kills us.

HELEN. You know, sometimes I think *we* came up with *you*.

ATHENA. (*Ominously calm:*) Is that right? And why would you do that?

HELEN. So that we could have someone to blame for everything that goes wrong, some way to explain everything we don't understand.

ATHENA. You watch yourself, missy. I think you've had a bit too much time on your hands. It just makes you brood. Why don't you take up weaving or something? It passes the time. While you wait.

HELEN. What exactly am I waiting *for* do you think?

ATHENA. (*Smiles.*) The end of the story, doll. If nothing else, there will be your death. And I, for one, am *really* looking forward to that.

HELEN. But I'm a story now. I'll never die.

ATHENA. Oh, don't kid yourself, honey. You'll die. Your *story* will go on and on. But it'll have precious little to do with you. Not that it ever did. I mean, you're *pretty* and everything, but let's face it, *nobody's that pretty*.

Gotta run. (*Starts to exit.*) Give my regards to that hubby of yours when you see him.

HELEN. Wait! (*ATHENA turns.*) Do you think he'll find me?

ATHENA. Stranger things have happened. You of all people should know.

(*ATHENA exits, with appropriate fanfare. Possible act break with intermission.*)

HELEN. (*Profoundly disoriented:*) It's over. It's been over all this time. I missed everything.

(*SERVANT enters, dragging a bouquet of racetrack magnitude.*)

SERVANT. More flowers.

HELEN. Who are they from?

SERVANT. Who are they ever from?

HELEN. No card? No telegram?

SERVANT. Just the flowers.

HELEN. It *reeks*. God, my allergies. Get it out of here.

SERVANT. And take it where?

HELEN. I don't know! Dump it in the nearest pyramid, I don't care!
My sinuses are going bonkers!

(The Servant drags the flowers out as HELEN reflexively and futilely lifts the receiver of the ornate little bedside phone for what must be umpteenth time.)

AND I STILL DON'T HAVE A DIAL TONE!

(She dumps the phone on the floor then grabs the remote and begins to channel surf agitatedly. We hear a ping from the elevator in the hall and the SERVANT reenters.)

SERVANT. I left them on the elevator. Going down.

HELEN. That's nice. *(They watch television.)* Maybe they'll get all the way down to the underworld. Make some dead person's day. I wouldn't be at all surprised if Egyptian elevators had a direct line to Hades. Your whole country just seems to be mad for dead people. *(Cruising from channel to channel:)* Arts 'N Crafts With Pampas Grass, the Sideways Sex Station, Painting Landscapes Without Looking At Landscapes, The Make Your Own Mummy Show... Why am I even watching this anymore? *(She turns off the television.)* Nothing I thought I was looking for was ever there for me to find. My war. I lost it.

(Poetic mode:)

"For ten years, 'twixt the black ships and the river of Xanthus, the watch fires of the armies glitter through the nights. As if the countless stars, burning above in fathomless space, were mirrored below in a sea gone glass-still, so many and so bright were the multitudes of those great armies."

That war is lost.

Tell me a story.

SERVANT. There's a girl who is imprisoned in a high tower, or a ring of fire, or she's chained to a rock above the thrashing sea, or she sleeps in a glass box, a coffin made of ice in the center of a forest of thorns. She is frozen. Stranded in the perpetual stillness of her most beautiful moment. There is no animation there where she waits because life cannot continue in the face of such perfection. It's a spell she casts, such a girl, such a beauty, and we skirt death when we look at her. She stops the breath. Nature shudders to a halt to gaze upon her and the world freezes slowly around her, like a lake around its coldest island.

HELEN. Is she dead?

SERVANT. Almost. The next best thing. She's perfect. Meaning symmetrical, as nothing in this rocking asymmetrical mess of a world is. She waits in a kind of impossible balance, straddling the two worlds, between life and death. Completely alone.

HELEN. It's awful. What is it about beauty that is so...killing?

SERVANT. It shames the world. This slovenly, pulsing world, limping toward its own ruin, charging around some hot star like a dog chasing its tail. Perfection is an affront in such a place.

HELEN. She's cold.

SERVANT. You think?

HELEN. No, worse. She's numb. She's fallen asleep in blankness and she'll never wake up.

SERVANT. We'll see.

HELEN. Does anyone know she's there?

SERVANT. Oh, there's someone looking for her. A man. There always is.

HELEN. Will he find her?

SERVANT. That's certainly the idea. Some day.

HELEN. What if he doesn't?

SERVANT. Then I guess it's up to her.

HELEN. But how can she do anything? She's practically dead.

SERVANT. Not quite.

HELEN. But she doesn't even know who she is!

SERVANT. Oh, really? But this was all her idea.

HELEN. It was not! It was done to her! She couldn't help what they did to her!

SERVANT. Nobody had a gun to her head.

HELEN. It was that old witch with an apple! I remember this. Some old lady poisoned her.

SERVANT. Far as I can tell she climbed into that coffin all by herself—

HELEN. —There was a witch!—

SERVANT. —without any help from anyone—

HELEN. —You're telling it wrong!—

SERVANT. —and she pulled the lid down after her.—

HELEN. —You know that’s not what happened!—

SERVANT. And that’s where she’s been for a long time now, pretending to sleep.

HELEN. You’re lying! I hate this story. This is a terrible story.

SERVANT. *(With calm, bitter finality:)* Yes it is.

(A nasty pause as they stare at each other. HELEN hears a fly and begins swatting about her ferociously yet unsuccessfully.)

SERVANT. Did it ever occur to you that you might have a choice where the flies are concerned?

HELEN. *(Distracted, still whacking away:)* What are you blathering about now?

SERVANT. Yes, you can kill them, of course. But they are in fact only creatures desperate to escape this place. (And who can blame them?) They’re not *trying* to irritate you. They’re screaming, that’s all. They’re begging you *(Does a fly voice:)* “Let me out! Let me out! Let me out!”

HELEN. *(Still flailing:)* SO? What are you proposing?

SERVANT. You could pity them.

(HELEN turns on the servant and glares at her.)

HELEN. I really loathe you at the moment.

SERVANT. Foot massage?

HELEN. *(Defeated:)* Oh...why not?

(The SERVANT sits on the bed. HELEN lies on the floor and puts her feet in the SERVANT’s lap. The SERVANT massages her feet.)

Seven years. Seven years since all the fires burned down to embers. Seven years since the first vultures circled the ruins of the city, wobbling in the smoky air, dizzy with the feast of death beneath them. Seven years it’s been over.

SERVANT. Oh, it’s far from over. They’re still sorting everything out on the banks of the river which courses through the basement of the world. The whole operation has been backed up for ever so long. One can hear the complaints of Charon, the harried ferryman of the dead. Even up here, at the top of the elevator shaft. The size of the slaughter was awesome. Men in every uniform imaginable line the bank as far as the eye can see. Waiting to cross. This is so

familiar, they think. Yet another riverbank, yet another maneuver gone wrong. Countless men to be shifted and not enough boats. It must be the usual idiocy: some git in the rear must have failed to fill out a form. And here they all are, crammed together on the muddy bank, waiting for a single boat, manned by a wheezing old coot, to carry every mother's son of them to the opposite shore. It will take forever. But happily, forever is exactly what they have now; their only remaining possession. They settle and wait, scratch themselves, write letters with blunt pencils or pop the white lice eggs which are strung like tiny pearls along the seams of their pants. Or they simply stare open-mouthed into a middle distance where the fog leans down to meet the iron silence of the river water.

Boat after boat he loads with them, each shipload packing itself with an admirable efficiency. Charon never has to say a word. They are so used to making themselves small, these men. They hug their knees to their tight chests and array themselves snugly as teeth in a jawbone along the long swag of the gunwale. The boat fills silently again and again. Charon turns it around and grunts as he stamps the pole once more on the silty river bottom and heaves his weight against it. The tin helmets chime against each other with every push. But other than that the boat is silent. Even Charon is unnerved by such quiet docility. He shivers in the stillness, lonely in the midst of countless men. He finds his only solace in watching each boy shed his brief history in the crossing. He sees the mist rise off the water and wreath itself around the faces of these ancient children. In the course of the slow journey across he can see the coils of each life story loosen and fall, leaving the creases smooth and the fists unclenched as forgetfulness washes over them like a summer rain. The blessing is so complete that by the time the boat nudges the opposite shore, they dazedly tumble out, often leaving their guns and jangling kits behind. No more organized than skittering sea birds, their heads lift as they wander up the dim shore. Lit by a vague curiosity, they patter aimlessly into the next world.

(HELEN lifts her feet off the SERVANT's lap and rolls on her side.)

HELEN. *(Staring out:)* I wonder where he is.

SERVANT. *(Gently:)* He's just lost.

HELEN. Just lost. The poor dope.

Are you sure there wasn't a telegram? A phone message? A letter?

SERVANT. I'll go down and check again.

(The SERVANT exits.)

HELEN. Perhaps I've been unkind. It's been so easy to be cruel about him in the abstract. It's just been such a long time. And he had the great misfortune of playing the fool. Someone had to. I never thought about what it must have cost him. It must have been awful. Coming into that empty room, the rumpled bed, the traces of hurried packing, a jumble of shoes strewn on the floor, a perfume bottle shattered in the bathroom sink. I see him standing in the wake of our flight, window open to the dark. He blinks, his head is heavy, his mind is blank. He is staring at the pattern of the bedroom rug. He's like a bull in the bullring as the afternoon closes in and his death approaches. He's trying—it's terrible, his head is buzzing—he's trying to make sense of it all. There are two wives, he thinks. The one he loved and the one who could do this. Or perhaps there never was the one he thought he loved, only the second one, or perhaps... But the more he tries to figure it out the less it makes sense. All he knows for certain is the hollow roar of shame at the center of his chest. And this is only the beginning. There are humiliations unimaginable in store. News cameras and microphones jammed in his face, the cool silence followed by the audible contempt as he passes a crowd, any crowd, he has never been more famous. Famous for this. A cuckold, a rube, a chump. He walks the empty house at night, muttering to himself, snapping with rage, but then, exhausted, he winds himself in my dressing gown, which is still hanging where I left it. He stands there, a blind cylinder, anchored to the closet door, smelling the wife who left him and weeping for the love of her. I think he did love me. And perhaps I loved him. I try to remember sometimes. But it was so long ago. What he must think of me now... I can only imagine.

(The door to the hallway slowly opens and MENELAUS, in the wet remnants of a World War I army uniform, slides unconscious to the floor. It is as if he had fallen asleep in the act of knocking.)

HELEN. Well, what do you know.

(She goes to where he lies and reaches out to touch him, but he scares her off by plunging suddenly into a nightmare.)

MENELAUS. *(Still unconscious:)* Heads down, boys! Heads down! She's coming in, she's... Oh, God... Where's my whistle? Where's my...?

(He braces, curling himself into a ball in anticipation of a bomb. It "hits" but he is unharmed and he relaxes a bit. HELEN touches his face gently.)

HELEN. (*Poetic mode:*)

“Ah, but the happy gods did not forget you after all, long suffering warrior. Even she, the iron goddess, pitied you, and waved the darting arrow from your heart as a mother waves a fly away from her dearly sleeping child.”

(*MENELAUS' eyes snap open and though he doesn't see HELEN yet, he sees the room. He is disturbed.*)

MENELAUS. This isn't my suite.

HELEN. Isn't it?

MENELAUS. I must be on the wrong floor. (*Pause.*) Literally.

(*As he begins to get up, he sees HELEN for the first time. He is deeply shocked and attempts to cover.*)

I'm so sorry.

(*He scrambles to get up and pull himself together, utterly disoriented.*)

HELEN. It's all right. It's confusing.

MENELAUS. I was shipwrecked. I haven't had much sleep.

HELEN. It's all right.

MENELAUS. Is it?

HELEN. Yes. You've had a bad time. I can tell.

MENELAUS. It's only the last in a long sequence of... You don't want to know.

HELEN. I do though.

MENELAUS. No, I don't think I could even begin to...It's too...I'd be...

(*Pause.*) Do you know my wife?

HELEN. Yes.

MENELAUS. It's funny. From the moment... And you speak Greek. I can't tell you what a... Huh.

HELEN. Where is she?

MENELAUS. Who?

HELEN. Your wife.

MENELAUS. She's already... You're... (*A monumental effort to understand this thing.*) Hang on, is this 28B?

HELEN. 29B.

MENELAUS. Ah. The difference of a story.

HELEN. Exactly. Where is your wife?

MENELAUS. (*Slight hesitation as he tries to remember:*) I killed her.

HELEN. Did you?

MENELAUS. Yyyes.

HELEN. Just now?

MENELAUS. No, no, years ago. The sack of Troy.

HELEN. You didn't though.

MENELAUS. Didn't I?

HELEN. It just felt like it.

MENELAUS. (*Slaps his forehead in a gesture of remembrance:*) No, of course, of course. You're right. Of course. She's...she's *here*, right *here*...

HELEN. Yes, she is.

MENELAUS. She went straight up. Something about a hot bath, she's...she's fine. She's always fine. She's quite...remarkable.

HELEN. So I've heard.

MENELAUS. (*Exhausted and disbelieving, he looks at her:*) She's... something else.

HELEN. You hate her.

(*He shrugs.*)

HELEN. You wanted to kill her.

(*He nods without much passion.*)

Why?

MENELAUS. I could take it, everything, everything she did to me, until the horse.

HELEN. The horse?

MENELAUS. The Trojan Horse. Odysseus's crazy idea. It was our last ditch to break the siege. We pretend to sail away, the whole army, like we just gave up, but we leave this enormous wooden horse on wheels outside the city, just looking at the gates, like a pet dog waiting to be let in. I was inside it with the others. We spent the whole day in there, wearing all our armor, trying to hold still so we don't clank, you know? We're in there from dawn to dusk listening to everybody trying to decide what to do with this thing. Somebody

wants to *burn* it, somebody wants to stab *javelins* into the belly, we're *worried*, O.K.? But lucky for us, it's a beautiful piece of work, this thing, and nobody wants to nick it up. Somebody, thank you God, has the bright idea to drag it into the city and after that, we're pretty much home free if we can just wait it out until everybody goes to sleep. But that's, like, *a long time*. First they *dance* around us, then they *sing* for awhile, then there's a substantial amount of like *drinking*, but it's finally dying down around two in the morning. We're actually beginning to relax. It really looks like we're going to manage to get *out* of the fucking thing, and I know I am not alone in saying that I personally would have risked death at that point just to take a whiz, fuck the sacking of the city. You know?

HELEN. Then what happened?

MENELAUS. She comes up. You can hear the little jingling of the bangles around her ankles. She's really quiet. But you just knew. There she was. And then she starts stroking the side of the horse and sort of, um, *chuckling*. I don't know how to describe it. But it was like she was making love to it, us, *all of us*. And she was *good*, you know? These guys, we hadn't seen our wives for ten years, and you can practically *feel* her hands stroking, just sooo... But that wasn't the worst of it. Then she starts calling our names, not *loud*, but like the way you call a lover back to bed, you know, each name of us. And this is the thing—she calls each man using his *wife's voice*—I don't know how she—but it's worse than that even, she's calling them by the pet names the wives used. Names they haven't heard in all this time. It was unbearable. These guys, they are, like, losing it, grown men weeping, trying not to make sound, but tears are just streaming down their faces and everybody's sort of shaking, clanking a little bit. And then she does this thing. She calls to Anticlus, this one kid, sweetest guy in the world, right? He'd left for Troy only a week after getting married. His wife is this skinny girl he's known since they were kids together and he's just like totally nuts about her, talks about her all the time, dreams about her every night. He's just so homesick for her he's going crazy. Then Helen, she puts her mouth right underneath where Anticlus is sitting and she says, "Darling Bear, why did you never come home to me?" How she knew that's what his wife called him, I have no idea, but he's just freaking out at this point. Odysseus is sitting behind him and he puts his fist in Anticlus' mouth to try to stifle the sound of his crying and he might have made it but she says, "If you don't tell me you love me now, I'll hang myself." Anticlus is making little animal sounds like a dog dying, he can't help it. "Do you love me? Tell me! Tell me!" And that's when he tries to throw off Odysseus and call to her. But Odysseus is too quick for that, he can see it coming. So he strangles the guy.

Right there. This sweetheart of a kid. We all listen to the air choking out of him and then watch as Odysseus rests the body against his chest, then tips the head back so he can close the eyes, which are popping out of his face. That's when you could hear the little jingle of her, her bare feet running away across the city square. But that's not all you could hear. You could also hear her laughing. Then dead quiet. So we came out of the horse like bees swarming out of a hollow oak. And we went to work. There was no mercy.

HELEN. So why didn't you kill her?

MENELAUS. Because it wouldn't work.

It'd be like slashing a movie screen to kill the film star.

From the first time I saw her, I knew I'd never be free of her.

If I killed her, it wouldn't make any difference at all.

And I never lost her to Troy. She's plastered all over the walls on the inside of my head. I close my eyes and I see her. I look up at the sky at night and her face knits the stars up.

I spent ten years trying to get a woman back I never lost and when I finally got her back I still didn't have her. Not really.

I can hold her naked body next to me all night long but she's still... it's not...

I've never really been with her. Not once since the beginning.

But I've never been without her. Not once since the beginning.

(He looks at her.)

It's a hell of a thing.

(Long pause.)

HELEN. Where is your wife?

MENELAUS. I don't know anymore.

HELEN. Who is your wife?

MENELAUS. I don't know anymore.

HELEN. Do you know who I am?

MENELAUS. Yes.

HELEN. Who am I?

MENELAUS. *(Trying not to answer, begging her:)* Please... Don't make me...

HELEN. Who am I?

MENELAUS. It doesn't make sense.

HELEN. No, it doesn't. But who am I?

MENELAUS. It can't be.

HELEN. But it is. I've been here all this time.

MENELAUS. See, I used to dream of this. Because I hated you so much but I couldn't stop loving you. Years went by. I would walk the beaches all night long. I would look up at the high walls and see the yellow lights coming from the windows of the palace and I'd torture myself. I'd try to pick out which one of those rooms might be yours, which one of them was where he was pawing you, where you were straddling him, riding his hips and laughing the way you did. I drove myself crazy. Until the only way I could put the pain to rest was to think the whole thing must be some sort of hoax. Just another cruel joke of the gods. That maybe you weren't even there at all. That there was some phantom in your place, some girl tricked up to look like you and all the while you were safe somewhere, waiting for me to come get you.

HELEN. But that's the truth!

MENELAUS. But don't you see, it's too late.

HELEN. Of course it's not! It's what you wanted! You just said—

MENELAUS. —It's too late.

HELEN. —But you just said!

MENELAUS. TOO MANY PEOPLE HAVE DIED.

HELEN. What does that have to do with me?

MENELAUS. They died in your name!

HELEN. BUT I WASN'T THERE.

MENELAUS. IT DOESN'T MATTER. THEY DIED FOR YOU.

(Long pause.)

HELEN. But you took her, you took me back. You didn't kill me. Her.

MENELAUS. I couldn't do it. We'd fought a war for her. You. I had to take her home. That was the whole point.

HELEN. Take me back.

MENELAUS. It's not you they want. They want her.

HELEN. I've been waiting seventeen years. I want to go home.

MENELAUS. I can't. It's not fair.

HELEN. What? To *her*?

MENELAUS. TO THEM! TO THEM! CAN'T YOU GET IT THROUGH YOUR HEAD WHAT'S HAPPENED? A generation of

men threw down their lives in that hellhole for the sake of you. My God, the dead. They rise up in terrible armies every night in my dreams. They stalk around my bed on their hacked limbs, moaning of homesickness, the families they never saw again. They carry their severed heads in their arms and the heads scream and scream. They died for you.

HELEN. They died for the *idea* of me. The gods did this. Not me. It's not my fault.

MENELAUS. IT DOESN'T MATTER WHETHER IT'S YOUR FAULT OR NOT.

HELEN. How can that not matter?

MENELAUS. IF YOU WEREN'T THERE, THEY DIED FOR NOTHING.

HELEN. BUT THEY DID!

MENELAUS. (*His hands to his ears:*) It's unbearable.

HELEN. THEY DIED FOR NOTHING. IT'S THE TRUTH.

MENELAUS. It's unbearable. All those boys. I must have written ten thousand letters. Ten thousand reorderings of the same tepid lies. "He left this world shining in the wake of his glory," not, "Your son died as he was trying to stuff his entrails back into his belly." Or, "He gave up his body with characteristic nobility of spirit," not, "His head was shattered like a pumpkin under his own wheels." All for some schmuck of a husband whose whore of a wife threw her dress up over her head for a houseguest.

HELEN. But that didn't happen.

MENELAUS. What does it matter when everything else did?

(*Pause.*)

HELEN. Take me home.

MENELAUS. I can't. You're not the woman all those people died for. You're not the woman a city fell for. She is.

HELEN. Let me be her then. Leave her here. I'll play her.

MENELAUS. But don't you see? You'd never be able to *stop* performing her. Not once for the rest of your life would you be able to retreat into the privacy of the truth. There would be no end to lying. You couldn't manage it. No one could.

HELEN. I'm good. Don't you remember how good I am?

**THIS PLAY IS
NOT OVER!**

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