

III. A DESIGNING WOMAN

Rachel's eyes became all big. She ran her hands through her curly locks.

"You don't know what it's like to miss a man's touch. Once he becomes part of you, it's just this automatic thing."

Helena wondered if she knew. She had known boys at the University of Virginia. But she had always held back part of herself. She liked it that way. Rachel seemed so confident and independent. Not the sort to lose herself for someone else. But she was talking about something real. This made Helena a little afraid. Maybe she was really missing something in her life.

"I don't think that I can trust a guy that much. There are always so many complications."

Shee thought about her tragedy with Lance. It seemed like a farce. The dust had settled on so much of her past. Even her Aunt Martha had taken her back. The former scandal in London was just a memory.

"I knew that it wasn't your fault, dear," Martha had seemed so understanding. Now Helena had her own place in London. She was studying at the Royal College of Design. And she even had her own place with Rachel. She was working part-time at the school gallery. Everything seemed so perfect.

Rachel couldn't let very long go by without missing her man's embrace. Even when she had broken up, she thought nothing of letting a new boy take his place.

"This time is going to be permanent."

Rachel had all the confidence that Claire seemed to lack. But Helena doubted its bravado.

"You need to understand what it's really like." Helena could only listen. She felt that she was being lectured by Rachel. She almost felt the need to take notes.

"They all can't be the love of your life."

"None of them are. But each one is the one for the moment. I hate to fall asleep alone."

Helena felt that she herself was never alone. Not in the way that Rachel meant it. But Rachel gave up so much of her identity to another person. This was too overwhelming. Even Claire had been a little more discriminating with what she shared with her lovers.

For Helena's part, she thought that she could never live completely in the physical world. She felt more like a wandering spirit. It was this feeling that she communicated in her work. The intersecting lines and parallel space implied a thriving dynamic. To look at the layout implied an energy that was felt but not seen. She had learned her lessons well, and now applied them with surety.

Rachel's work was always more transparent. Everything moved to a point. The center of attention exploded on the page. There was never any uncertainty. Never any room for love. Helena didn't want to ask what was missing. This would go the heart of her friend's insecurities. Helena preferred to think that she herself was the one who lacked conviction. She had tried to be self-reliant. With the boys at Virginia, she accepted only so much of their dominance. But that also made it easy. She always had an excuse to leave. When she left Charlottesville, she permanently closed the book on that part of her life. She still talked to Claire on the phone. She hoped that they'd hang around together in London. Or maybe a trip to Paris. But that was the only thing that mattered.

Back in London she was again discovering her identity. The school was right across the street from the Tate museum. Helena would wander the galleries on her lunch hour. Or she would take an afternoon to immerse herself in the Turners.

She also felt haunted by Millais's Ophelia. The girl drowned in the marsh was more than a symbol for her. She took on the girl's phantom, and made it her own. She didn't want to think of herself in such morbid terms. In fact, it gave her a special power. Millais seemed to tell her own story, and she welcomed it. In that tale, no Hamlet could penetrate the icy stillness of the young maiden. Even if men had tried to know Helena, she had still escaped intact. Even if she had to feign the stillness of death, she would accept her vocation.

As she looked at the painting, this incredible chill ran through her. She accepted it for what it was. It promised her a love beyond death. Helena knew. She understood something greater than Rachel or Claire could ever comprehend. Something about the self. Something about another person.

Until that man emerged, Helena would live in this world of her own making. Perhaps, there was no one else that could be in her midst. There once had been; Millais testified to this. The other pictures in the gallery told her the same thing. She let herself be taken by these whirling tides. In the movements of the waters, there was a language. She learned it as part of her body. She accepted her solitude. She embraced her mission.

Rachel was proud of her new boy: "He's so everything."

More than ever it sounded like the same old nothing.

"He just got a new sports car. He just let that thing go. I was afraid. But he didn't flinch. I loved it. The sex with him was just the same. He know things about a woman's body that even surprised me."

Rachel surrendered her soul in the hope of attaining that explosive union. This was more than her art. This was her promise for life. She wanted an audience. Helena felt like a voyeur. But Rachel was an exhibitionist. Now it all made sense. Her sexuality was a performance. She pretended that it was something private with this boy.

"Harold is a kick."

But Harry could be anyone. Rachel needed the audience not the partner. Harry was incidental. Helena was essential.

"I think that I've told you things that I've never told anyone else in my life."

Helena was a little skeptical about the privilege.

"I wouldn't be with him if I didn't really love him."

"Did you say that you did it in his sports car?"

"You haven't been listening to anything that I've been saying."

Helena wanted to laugh. But she wondered if Rachel could take her levity. This was a far cry from Claire. It was one thing to take a lover. But Rachel had accepted a new master. She needed a corrective.

"I think that I need a drink."

"Rachel, it's a little early for me. But I'll come along. I could use some coffee."

They hadn't known each other for very long. Rachel was already so open with Helena.

"I'm not trying to live vicariously through you or anything."

Rachel touched her on the knee.

“I haven’t regretted telling you anything. In fact, I haven’t regretted anything that I’ve done.”

It only made matters worse when Harry seemed to direct his attention towards Helena. One afternoon Harry had come by their flat. He hadn’t realized that Rachel was visiting her folks in Brighton.

“I’m sorry that I missed her.” Harry didn’t want to leave.

“Maybe we could have a little fun.”

“You are going out with my best friend.”

“Didn’t she tell you about my appetite? One girl isn’t enough to hold me.”

“So I’m going to be your new acquisition. Like your sports car.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing until you take a spin with me.”

“I think that you’ve been doing enough spinning for a lifetime.”

“Rachel won’t mind. Why do you think that she’s been so open with you.”

“I will mind.”

All the tales of Harry the lover were having an effect. She wondered what his kiss was like. But she wasn’t about to betray a friend.

“She doesn’t have to know.”

“I would know.”

Would she know? This was what it meant to live like Ophelia. She could take love, but she could not give it. Why not? She was possessed. She was no longer responsible for what she did. She thought that Harry was fine. She always had. Rachel had shared intimate secrets about him.

“He’s just a terror!”

Rachel wanted to get more graphic. “He doesn’t stop there.”

Maybe Rachel was too good a story-teller.

“One little kiss won’t matter. I’ll close my eyes and pretend that you Rachel. And you can pretend that I’m your knight in shining armor.”

“Dear boy, your armor is starting to rust all over this floor.”

“Helena, you have all the answers for others. But what about yourself. What do have to say for yourself?”

“Who are you to ask me such questions? You’re trying to cheat on Rachel behind her back.”

“At least, I’m honest. You’ve wanted to sleep with me from the moment that you met me.”

“You’re such a cocky lad. Only thing the only thing that you’re pricking is yourself.”

“Helena, you’ve been moving closer to me every second that I’ve been in the room.”

“That’ll make it easier to push you out when the time comes.”

He gave her that incredible smile. Even without touching her she could feel it touch the core of her spirit. All her time in art galleries was making her stuffy. She didn’t want to end up like her Aunt Martha.

“You just try and put a hand on me.”

“You’re nothing to me! I could eat you for breakfast.”

She took this as her cue. She pushed her against the wall and kissed her. She surrendered

without a thought. Helena could feel their bodies flow together. She felt no guilt. It was almost as if she was teaching Rachel a lesson.

Then reality hit in. What the hell was she doing? She slapped Harry.

“What was that for?”

“You deserved it. Rachel’s my friend.”

“I like foreplay. Do you have some more of that for me?”

“The only thing that you’re foreplaying is your exit.”

He indeed ushered him out physically. She slammed the door behind him.

Helena started to look around the apartment for a drink. She needed to forget this as soon as possible. She found a bottle of wine. What made matters worse was that she wanted it more than he did. He knew this. He hadn’t forced himself on her. She set him up. She even got a secret charge out of the slap. She felt like the naughtiest of girl.

She thought that she had ended in then and there. But she questioned herself. He was there in the flesh. Not one of her ghost lovers. She already knew some other boys at school. But that was nothing that she wanted.

How could a thing with Harry be anything more than physical? That was what she hated about Rachel. That she would always believe that there was more to these fleeting affairs. She couldn’t tell Rachel about any of this. It would be admitting her own guilt. Could Harry risk the silence. He found a unique pleasure in the embarrassment. But could he share the conquest with Rachel and still keep her around. He loved the proximity to Helena. He could derive a secret pleasure from it.

Rachel left them alone together while they were at the restaurant.

“I’ve got to go the women’s room.”

“Rachel, I’ll go too.”

“Keep Harry company. I’ll only be a few minutes.”

Harry immediately took advantage of the situation: “I’ve thought about being with you. Ever since the kiss. I’m lying naked next to Rachel. All that I can think about is your body.”

“Harry, I already told you what I think about your little scheme.”

“Don’t tell me that you haven’t thought about it?”

“I’ve thought about it all too much. I think that’s my inspiration to have nothing to do with you.”

“I told you that she wouldn’t have to know.”

“Even if I went along with you, you’d feel he need to tell. It’s part of your power thing.”

“So you have thought about it. Have you touched yourself when you think about me?”

“You are a pig.”

“But you think about it all the time?”

At that point Rachel returned to the table. She questioned them, “What have you been talking about?”

Harry was immediate to offer her a reply, “Only bad things, my dear.”

“I’ll have to punish you for that when we get back home.”

Harry looked over to Helena, “She will. You haven’t seen her whip.”

Rachel’s comeback was immediate, “I’m not into that kinky stuff. Although Harry likes to torture me emotionally.”

Helena detected a little tension with the couple. What was the source?

“I’m not getting in the way of the two of you.”

“Helena, I asked you to come along. You’re my friend. I’m sorry if Harry isn’t being the charming host.”

“Harry has been every inch the gentleman.”

“I really should correct our Helena. Rachel, I don’t think that Helena understands our code of nobility. Maybe you could tell her about gentleman.”

“What is there to tell?”

“How the lord of the manor gets to have his way with all the ladies of his realm?”

“I think that you’ve had quite a lot of way with me.” Rachel was embarrassed.

“Sometimes one woman isn’t enough for a man.”

“Harry, quit being a dick!”

“I’m just speaking hypothetically.”

“Real people have real feelings.”

“Don’t you think that I know that.”

Helena tried to get up. “Maybe I should go freshen up.”

“Helena, stay here. I need your support. Harry’s being a real shit.”

“I’m not being a shit. I’m just speaking my mind.”

“Have you been seeing someone?”

“What a silly question to ask.”

“Silly maybe. But it’s my question, and I need to ask it.”

“I only have eyes for you, my dear Rachel.”

Rachel was in tears. She thought about leaving. But a couple of after dinner drinks settled her down.

“Men are all the same. They just love to humiliate women. I think that they get off on it more than sex. Sex is just part of the humiliation trick.”

After such a realization, Helena thought that Rachel might swear off men for good. Or that she might give Harry his walking papers. The next day she was beaming.

“I thought that I’d seen everything. You need a guy like Harry. Before breakfast, he went out to get me flowers.”

Rachel didn’t realize how close Helena had been to having her Harry.

“How can you get any work done with all this upset?”

“Thanks for reminding me. I need to get on the computer to work out a project for tomorrow.”

Rachel was enthralled by the passion. But Harry was only dulling her creative impulses.

“I wish that I could turn my emotions on and off like a faucet.”

“I thought that’s how things were.”

“I spoke ahead of myself. I’m a real wreck.”

“We’re going to have vacation soon.”

“Soon isn’t soon enough. I’m going to have to go home and spend more time with my folks.”

“Rachel, I thought that you were going to come to Corfu with us.”

“That was a dream. Harry’s supposed to take me to Ibiza in a month. Until then, I’ll

muddle through.”

“You could use some time without him. It would help you clear your head.”

“I keep thinking like that, but every time that I’m with him, he just takes me back to the same thing. I need sex.”

“You need to learn to be yourself.”

Helena needed a weekend off from the lovers. Phil was in design class with her. He had admired her work. It all seemed so serious. He asked her out for dinner on Friday night.

“I hardly know you.”

“The only way to get to know someone is to spend time with them. You know what all the guys say about you.”

“I have heard.”

“I’m not being rude or anything. You really are so lovely. But I had the hardest time even saying anything to you.”

They continued the same subject at dinner.

“Helena, you really look like you stepped from one of those paintings that you love. You look like a model.”

“No, I don’t. Quit your silly flattery. It doesn’t work with me.

“No, really. You have to know.”

“Know nothing. I hate my body. One day I look like a stick girl. Other days I feel like I’m blowing up. It’s never me. Not who I really am.”

“I love your hair.”

“Phil, we really need to change the subject if you don’t want me to get up from here and walk away.”

He wasn’t catching on to her irony.

“You’re not going to leave, are you?”

“Not until after dessert.”

He took her dancing. The place was too loud for them to talk.

“Let’s go outside.”

“Can we leave?”

“I hope so. I didn’t see the bars on the window.”

“I meant can we leave and come back in”

“Helena, let’s just go somewhere quieter.”

Phil seemed like a great guy. Helena could tell where this was leading. She didn’t want any part of it.

“Let’s go!”

They went to a quiet place for another drink.

“You want to come back to my place.”

“Phil, I’ve got a lot of work to do tomorrow.”

“They really are right.”

“What do you mean?”

“You really are a hard nut to crack. What are you saving it for?”

“Saving it. It? I thought that you were a nice guy.”

“I didn’t mean to sound so abrupt. It’s just that you always keep to yourself.”

“That’s who I am. I’m not just going to change all of a sudden.”

“Maybe, we could do this another time.”

Helena didn’t want to hold out a false hope.

“Phil, I think it would be better if this was all that happened between us.”

His pride felt hurt. But he wanted to blame her. It was nothing that he had said.

Back in her room, she started to think about Harry. He was so rude. But he left no doubt about what he wanted. Phil was another story. He was one of those nice guys who end up blaming the girl for his own weakness. If she had only taken Harry’s hint. She could have kept the secret.

Things were getting a little out of hand. Harry’s propositions were an insult to her integrity. Maybe she was being too particular.

“I’d probably have some fun with Phil if I wasn’t with Harry.”

“Phil is anything but fun.”

Rachel had called it an early night with Harry. She was thinking about breaking up with him.

“Well, you can have Harry as far as I’m concerned.”

Rachel broke up with Harry at the beginning of the week. By week’s end she had already found another dreamy creature.

“I don’t know why I stayed with Harry as long as I did. It was all about the sex.”

Harry showed up at the door on Friday night.

“Rachel’s out with her new boy.”

“I’m not here for Rachel.”

“Nothing’s changed between us. I still don’t want to hurt her feelings.”

“We’ve broken up.”

“If I did anything with you, she’s think that we were doing things all along.”

“We haven’t.”

“Exactly. And I want to keep it that way.”

“You’ve had designs on me since the beginning”

“I’m not the conniving bitch that you make me out to be.”

“But you do like a little fun.”

“And I’ve not been getting much of it.”

“I could fix that!”

“You’re part of the problem.”

“You have been thinking about me.”

“You wish.”

“I know how to satisfy a woman.”

“Did your mother say that you had a dirty mouth?”

“I learned well from my mother.”

“I can tell. But maybe she should have punished you a little more for that vile tongue.”

“I took my punishments like a man. That’s why I’m the way that I am.”

“And that’s why you can be the gentleman and leave when you’re asked to leave.”

“When is Rachel coming back?” He was slurring his words.

“I don’t think you’ll be seeing her tonight.”

“The better for me to work my magic.”

It would have been so easy for Helena to pull him next to her. She didn't want to sleep alone. And he was the closest warm body. Even standing next to her, she was warmed by his presence. She let him rub himself against her. She felt his breath against her.

“Now you can leave.”

“Didn't that get you worked up in the least?”

She was now facing him from the opposite end of the room. He was himself becoming aroused by his own seduction. Helena only felt more the scoundrel. At least, she wasn't acting meek before him.

Her raw physical desires were getting the best of her. This was why she needed to live apart as a phantom. She realized that Harry had been even more the prize when he was with Rachel. She really felt like a cad. She was a designing woman.

She turned her back to him in the hope that he might disappear. He snuck up besides her and put his arms around her.

She was acquiescing, “I just want you to hold me like this.”

The two of them embraced.

“Don't let me go.”

She was now looking in his eyes ready to kiss him. Where was Rachel when she was needed? What was in Helena's way?

It surprised her how easily she was giving in. She had contained her passion up to this point. All her protestations now seemed for naught. She was simply useless.

She put her hands up to push him away.

“It's getting late.”

He tried to grab at her.

“I don't want to do this.”

“But you could be coaxed.”

“I don't think so.”

“You could be forced.”

“Don't even think about that.”

She had a rolling pin in her hand.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“I'm going to use it on you.”

“Is this some rude kind of sex game?”

“Harry, when are you going to get the point. Nothing is going to happen between us. Not here. Not now. Not ever!”

“OK, I get it. I'm leaving. But you're not making sense. One minute you're trying to kiss me, the next you want to send me to an early grave.”

“Harry, I'm becoming a lonely woman. And if I sleep with you that means that I'm desperate as well.”

“No one ever went to hell for being desperate.”

“I'm telling you that I'm not going to have sex with you. So you can go.”

“You're telling me that. But your body is just ready to burst.”

He pulled her close. It again felt so natural. Nothing stood in their way. He held her

body close, and they moved together. It was just too real. It was all wrong.

She slapped him.

“What was that for?”

“For being such a turd. I told you to leave. You just kept pushing me.”

“Because that’s what you want.”

“There’s nothing wrong with feeling the way that we do. It just becomes messed up when we act on those feelings.”

She made sure that he left this time. As she fell asleep, she could sense him with her. She imagine him inside of her. It gave her a sense of satisfaction. She had already worked herself up.

The next morning, she had completely buried the incident in her mind. She wanted to make sure that Rachel would hear nothing about it. They were friends. Helena lived off her counsel. Now she was feeding off of her passion. It had been completely messed up.

When she saw Rachel, she realized that she was being extra polite.

“Helena, what’s got into you.”

Rachel romped around the kitchen preparing herself some tea.

“I know what it is. You think that I’m some kind of tramp because of all that stuff with Harry. That I’m seeing another guy right away. A girl’s got needs.”

Helena looked guilty. But Rachel made no sense of it. She just thought her own behavior had prompted the weird looks.

After her disaster with Harry, Helena had sex on the brain. She had trouble concentrating on her work. She was glad that vacation was coming up.

She had tried to coax Rachel to come along. But she had to go see her folks in Coventry. It meant that Helena would have to work it out with some other girls from the school. She only hoped that they wouldn’t make it hard for her.