

9. A MOTHER'S TOUCH

Helena had distinguished herself at the Royal Academy. What had been a one year program had the potential to turn into a complete course of study and a degree from a prestigious school. She didn't want to return to Virginia. But the prospects of being reminded of her time with Tony seemed to dissuade her from staying in London. She decided to return home in the hope that she might resolve her indecision. She didn't want to share her bad news with her grandmother. But maybe her mother might have more sympathy for her own daughter. It had been three years since she had seen Caroline.

"I'm really sorry if I hurt you. I've just never been ready for motherhood."

This wasn't the time for her to extend that much sympathy to her mother. How could Helena make Caroline admit to anything of real significance?

"When are you going to be ready? When I have children of my own?"

"Is that what you're considering?"

"I don't really know what I can tell you. I'm just going through a really terrible time. And I don't really have any heart for your bull shit."

"I'm not trying to be hard on you. This is just how it is."

"For you maybe. I just think that I've expected too much of people. Men especially."

"Are you blaming me? That's not what I'm here for."

"You just need to hear things as they are."

"I don't have the stomach for this."

"Stomach. What are you talking about? This is my life."

"What are you saying? That I ruined your life. I'm not going to take the blame. I've hardly seen you for years."

"That's no fault of my own. You always kept your distance. You wanted me to believe that I was your niece."

"That was just a joke."

"You told Nana to send me away."

"It was all for the best."

"I just don't see it that way now."

"What do you want to do about it now? The past is dead and gone."

"The past is part of me now. All the time. It flows through my blood. When I kiss a boy, it recalls all the things that have happened to me over the years."

"You're just too dramatic."

"It's not fiction. It's reality."

"Reality, my little button, is what you make it. You hang around with wolves, and you get eaten alive."

"I'm not looking for your stories, Mother."

"You can call me Caroline."

"Are you afraid of being called Mother?"

"I just don't want it to be so formal."

"It's not how you want it to be. It's how it is. I'm your daughter."

"Do you want some tea?"

“I don’t want to do tea. I want some coffee. Strong coffee.”

Caroline made some coffee while Helena waited nervously in the living room. She didn’t want to think about anything. She just counted down the minutes.

“Sorry I took so long.”

The coffee was very hot. Helena could barely sip it.

“Do you have some milk, Caroline?”

“I’ll get it.”

“I was just royally screwed over by a boy.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Helena related the full story of Tony.

“In the day, Nana’s family would have challenged the ne’er-do-well to a duel.”

“Don’t think that I haven’t thought of using the sword on him. But that would put him out of his misery,”

“Are you plotting revenge?”

“I don’t think that it’s about him. I just believed it more than I should have. It was just a few days. It was vacation time. People say silly things.”

“I guess they do.”

“I can’t let it get to me. I’ve been so doing well at school.”

“You have made us proud.”

She thought that her accomplishments only made her more distant from her mother. This was a world about which she knew nothing.

“He’s making me start to hate London. I wish the city would just swallow him up for good. But sometimes I feel that they were happy with what he did. Like I never belonged.”

“But he can’t take away what you’ve done.”

“It just feels so meaningless.”

She thought about the lonely spring nights. After her embarrassment at Bessborough Gardens, she had avoided men. She kept in the company of Claire. But Claire was on a tear, and this only made Helena feel worse. The end of the term was a welcome moment. It hadn’t come too soon.

When Helena looked at Caroline, she hardly saw her mother. Instead, it was someone who she had never known. Her double. And this messenger from the dead was revealing her secret lessons to her pupil. Caroline was so unlike Helena. For her pleasure had been a vocation. She lived this romantic dream. When Helena was twelve, her mother was on speedboats near Nice. At fifteen, Caroline was dancing the night away in Rio. She kept hoping that one man would make her eternal. And she always came so close. Helena hated her for that.

That was why Tony was so much of a shock for Helena. She didn’t want to believe a man that way. That was her mother’s way. And Nana had given Caroline that leeway. She was afraid to cross her daughter. As if Caroline knew some scandalous truth about her and was blackmailing her. So Nana made up for it with Helena. In some ways, Helena despised them both. They had both wanted to be rid of her so that Caroline could continue to play the princess in the stellar drama.

Helena stared at her mother in the hope that she could discover some weakness that she could use to break her down. Even her eyes resisted the effects of age. She seemed like a

vampire. She was not aging. Her cool white skin. Her vibrant blonde hair. Her lively smile and her bright eyes. She was not yielding to her nemesis time. Helena was the only reminder that time had passed and not been so kind. Caroline couldn't look in that mirror. Ultimately, she avoided her daughter's eyes. In every other looking glass, she was an impeccable beauty. But in her daughter's eyes the reflection was sickly and wan.

Caroline fixed herself a brandy. The tumultuous effects of alcohol gave the illusion of immortality. She knew better. But she wouldn't let on. She could have any man that her daughter wanted and more. Men pledged their fortunes to Caroline. She would get their promises in blood. The hastily rendered signatures showed how ruthless she was.

For Helena, there was still a mystery. If Caroline was so convincing, why was she still alone?

"She sucks off their fortunes."

"Nana, she's still living on your money."

"That's a minor detail."

Helena thought about Nana's net worth.

"You just ask a woman about her fortune, and it's like asking her how old she is. A woman of class has to live beyond her means. She has to aspire to greater heights."

This sounded all too familiar. Nana had taught her daughter well. Helena felt that the only thing that really mattered to her mother and her grandmother were wealth and privilege. How had this upbringing distorted her own view of life? Down deep, that may have been what attracted her to Tony. His careless nonchalance was a product of his upbringing. She was a victim for that. He made her feel that Corfu was his realm. She was ready to pay him tribute. He had even colonized her Bessborough Gardens.

They only cared if Helena became the perfect princess. This was so clearly the intent of her education. She was never allowed to give in to her actual feelings. She had to live for this ideal. That's why she was sent away. She couldn't be allowed to develop naturally. All natural impulse had to be weeded out of her. For Claire or Rachel, they had avoided the restrictive aspect of their education. They gave in to their desires. Helena was piecing together a puzzle. There couldn't be any gaps. All the part needed to come together in an ordered design. The weeds would be rooted out of the garden.

Someone needed to drop a tea cup on the floor. The decorum was insufferable. No wonder Nana had blamed her for all the trouble when she was younger. It was not her actual behavior that was so scandalous. It was simply that she had surrounded herself with sinners. If she felt hesitant about her associations, she would hardly dare imitate their wicked ways.

What she felt now was entirely the result of a refined education. She also feared that she had been tainted by an American puritanism. She recognized almost a two world view among her British counterparts. That was Tony's trick. He could be so charming when he was with her. Just let himself go. And now, he hardly knew her. For her part, she was always submitting to a higher law. Even lover had to go according to plan. The plan had been set into place. She was a victim of her own fairy tale.

So this had been the shelter that she had accepted all these years. She was not subject to a smothering mother's touch. Far from it. Instead, she had put herself in the middle of this romantic novel. The heroine had to follow her fate. Otherwise, she would be subject to

heartache. She was the consummate reader. She needed to stay faithful to the telling.

Back in that big house, she recognized her room as a prison. She wandered the corridors like a cool phantom seeking the warmth of real life. But the emptiness was oppressive. With Caroline and Nana, she felt among the undead. Her path was obvious. She would have to return to London. In Charlottesville, she would be only too close to this mausoleum.

The house had come to so closely match her psychological state. She was a museum piece among these other artefacts. Even her getaway was only part of the same story. It was a Sleeping Beauty waiting for the kiss from the prince.

She had already committed to being here for two more months. How was she going to survive until her return to London. She didn't want to dwell on her mishap with Tony. She had learned new things about herself. These things had nothing to do with him, nothing to do with any man. She didn't need a prince after all. He could be sent back to his castle. She needed to open the curtains and let in the light.

Helena knew that she had been temporarily deluded about sweet Caroline. She would hang around here for long. That would be admitting defeat. She needed a new prize on which to set her sights. Helena admired her mother's resilience. She never really fell off the horse. She just idled to another mount. In that pursuit she had offered sufficient counsel to her daughter. Any more and she would lose the very spirit that made her such a fierce rider.

"Where are you going to head off to now?"

"I've got a girlfriend that I'm going to meet in Cancun. I need to dry out in by the sea. And then I'm going to spend the rest of the summer in Canada. My friend Jean has a beautiful cottage on Lake Simcoe. I wish that I could invite you along, but it's really such a small place. Besides, Jean says that a few of her guy friends may visit. I just don't want to ruin it for her."

Helena was glad that Caroline was so caring for Jean.

"Nana will take care of me."

Even Juliette couldn't take the strain of having Helena around for the next two months. How could they work out some compromise to muddle through the arrangement?

"Mother, I'm glad that we had a chance to say the things that we said to each other."

"I feel just the same. I'm going to miss you, darling."

Had Caroline ever been of want for anything. Even Helena had sacrificed so that little Caroline could lead the untouched life. And it had been such a brilliant strategy. She would be for young. Caroline would be like the stubborn child. She would always do her utmost to avoid any attempt to reform her. She was already beyond reproach.

Her mother embraced her. Helena held on to her hand. She didn't want to let go. This was Helena passing off her own curse to her mother. Caroline had never been afraid of anything as much as this horrid grip. She tried to let go. But Helena's lock could not be released. On her face was this ghastly little smile. Caroline needed to slay this monster.

The short intercourse had seemed interminable for Caroline. Helena thought back to Caroline's days in the hospital. What had the birth been like for the precious thing? A chance to rid herself of a monstrous form that had inhabited her body for forty weeks. Helena wanted to draw some life from this skeleton of a human being. She didn't want to give up on her illusion about her dear mother.

She stepped back from their loving contact. Caroline was a sight to be seen, The

incredible Helena was overshadowed by an unequalled loveliness. Caroline had used every trick to still the marks of time. Her manners were impeccable. Her carriage was impregnable. Her appointments were unblemished. This bird in flight was perfectly preserved. Nothing would bring her down.

The next morning the packed bags were by the door. This time Mother would avoid the long good by.

“Darling, do keep in touch. The silence is so brutal.”

And she was gone just like that. Helena wished that she felt a sense of relief. What was there to celebrate in the morass? She needed to accept her mother’s retreat for what it was. This living symbol was retreating to other more severe challenges.

After breakfast, Helena sat on the patio with a book. If she was being offered the life of luxury, she needed to take advantage of it before the more grueling expectations of the school year. She could dream of romance and Europe even if she was not actually there. This had always been the consolation of the more worldly Americans. That pretentious had pervaded the Saturday Supper Set. She thought of calling Claire. After all, she wouldn’t mind a summer of ease and relaxation.

“I’d love to come down there. But I right in the midst of the hunt.”

Helena imagined a spear-wielding Claire tracking down a defenseless boy.

“If I fail, I may need some caring. And you will see me. I hate to sound so cold. But this one could be the one.”

Claire knew about the misfortunes with Tony. Maybe she thought of Helena as bad luck. She still held out hope for a visit.

“Helena, you don’t have to mope around here if you don’t want to. I’ll gladly cover a little excursion if that’s what you fancy.”

“Nana, I need some time away from the hustle and bustle. This will work just fine.”

In her lonelier moments, she thought about writing Tony. Her reading only made her more articulate. Her appeals could illuminate what had really happened.

She felt like a helpless mouse waiting for the cat to strike. What absurdity. He had thrown her over. There was nothing to say. She needed to file it away like all the other painful things. She didn’t want to remain a victim to this sort of manipulation.

Her grandmother was trying to make her time there more hospitable.

“I’ll be OK.”

“We’re all very proud of your award at school.”

“It’s really nothing.”

“Nothing. You’ve turned into a real artist.”

“Nana, I’m not really an artist. Almost a technician.”

“Nonsense, child. I’ve seen your drawings.”

“It’s just doodling.”

“Such doodling could grace museum walls.”

That was just how she felt. Like a painting hanging in an empty gallery.

“You’ve never had the chance to stay here for this length of time.”

“I’m just glad to have the chance to spend time with you.”

She felt like Nana was her real mother.

“I know about the disruption. And the resentment that you have for your mother. Now that you’re a little older, I feel that you might be able to understand her better.”

“I’m trying. Caroline is never going to change.”

“She’s not like us, you and I. She’s dominated by her emotions. It’s probably due to her father dying so young. She never got over that. She just became a rebel. All that I could do was sit back and watch. If I got in her way, it only made her worse. I thought when she had you that she would settle down. She just stayed in denial”

“Do her friend have children?”

“Some do. But they all live in this wonderland. I never wanted you to be like her. That’s why you were sent away for school. It was just for the best.”

“Did you know my father?”

“Hugh was a good man. And he tried to tame your mother’s wild streaks. I think that she only wanted to hurt him. You know that he’s still alive. But as part of the settlement, he agreed to never see you.”

“You bought him off.”

“Yeah, we did. I hate to admit it.”

“And he accepted it.”

“Hardly. He felt that Caroline would be a terrible mother. But he also loved her. And she had no place for him. She used him to try to correct her worse excesses. She had some other boy on the side. I’m surprised that it was even his child, the way that she carried on.”

Helena wanted to avoid such a spiral. That was why she needed to collect her thoughts this summer.

“You think that I could find my Dad.”

“No one really knows what happened to him. That was part of the resolution.”

“He never tried to see me.”

“I can’t say that he never tried. But we never heard anything about it.”

“What do you remember about him?”

“He was a gentle sort. Not the party boy like her other suitors. He actually reminded me of her father.”

“What did he do?”

“He was a student in those days. Chemical engineering. He probably became quite successful. The boy had a brain.”

“I’d really like to find him.”

“Would it be a good idea? It was probably the worst mistake of his life. You’d only remind him of that.”

“But what about me? Wouldn’t it be worth it for me?”

“Of course it would. But he was a good man. And he’s made a life for himself. Probably a secure and protected life. You only make him feel that it was all in vain. He’s done enough contrition. Even his silence is an exhibit of that.”

Helena indeed found a providence in this silence. It was strange how this denial had such an utter appeal for her. Indeed this was the patriarch that had guided her way. She had abandoned herself to the universe and its becoming.

Rather than unearth upset for her, the conversation with her grandmother offered her a

particular calm. It helped her define the character that she had been all along. This was what she saw in Tony. That he could feel the vibrations of nature, the pulse of the universe. She had been wrong about Tony, but not about the feeling. He had only used it for his own ends. If that was so, he had given up long ago. She could let him disrupt her own search. She was an artist even if he was not.

She now walked with her head held high. Her grandmother's lessons had been hard won. And even if Helena saw something more in her experience, she couldn't let bitterness taint her love for her Nana. She was a cold woman just like Caroline, but the steel surface had kept her whole over the years.

All the severity of Nana only reinforced this abstraction to which Helena had accustomed herself. No wonder Claire and Rachel were so different. They could live in their bodies. And a man's touch could awaken something deep inside them. For Helena, each experience was only a new test for her, like a school project. She lived in her body just long enough to get the right answer. Then she retreated back to her imagination. She found a world even without words. Floating colors. Forms. Images. Phantoms and other supernatural freaks.

She started to think that she was spending too much time by herself. Why had Claire avoided her invitation? She hoped that there wasn't any residual jealousy regarding Lance.

"I told you that he was never my sort. He always felt guilty about sex."

Helena always questioned the reasoning behind that offering. Maybe she got it all wrong. She thought that she'd try Claire again.

"I'd love to come. I must have sounded too much of a brat last time that I talked to you."

"You had your reasons."

"Chasing another stupid boy. As if it's going to make any difference."

Claire was going to see her by the end of the week. This would be the relief that she needed.

"It will be great to have your friend here. I only wish that there was more that we could offer her."

"She'll love it just being here, Nana."

For once, Helena thought that she had a chance to put her books away. Claire's company would be a needed remedy.

Claire came in Friday afternoon. When Helena saw her, she gave her a massive hug/

"I just had a few things to take care of this morning. Otherwise, I would have been here sooner."

She stepped back to look at her friend.

"You are stunning!"

"You look great. Your hair!"

"Just highlights."

"And some real man love!"

"Don't make fun of me. You're even more sophisticated since I first knew you. You make me feel like a country bumpkin."

"You grew up in DC."

"Yeah, but years in Charlottesville takes the city out of the girl."

Claire smiled.

“Give me a big hug.”

They had a lot to talk about. So many years. But Helena brought up the subject of her father again.

“I wouldn’t know what it was like not to know my Dad.”

“But it’s not like I ever knew him.”

“If you’re even thinking about it, it’s got to bother you.”

“Claire, do you want something to drink?”

“It’s too early for a drink. Just get me some tea.”

They sat in the back.

“It’s great out here. All that land. It’s yours.”

“My Nana’s, I mean my grandmother’s.”

“Back to this thing about your Dad. It’s got to be bothering you.”

“I really think it’s something else.”

She told her the story about Tony.

“He sent his sister to do the dirty work. What a total worm.”

“I know. I felt like calling him, but that was too much for me. What a piece of shit!”

“I would have got the satisfaction. Just to have him hear my voice.”

“I was just demoralized. There was nothing that I could say.”

“That’s not even like you.”

“I just accepted things. His family hated me.”

“But you had a cell phone.”

“I don’t know! It’s not like I had his number. It was just this romantic thing that we did. The Gardens. Like something old-fashioned”

“The only thing old-fashioned is tears. Get over it. Move on.!”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“You sound like a cancer patient. You have to live, live, live!”

“It’s just that I’ve been doing the wrong kind of living.”

“It’s time that we got started on some trouble.

“Or maybe just came out of the shadows for a little while.”

Coral brought them out a late lunch.

“I thought that you’d both would like some sandwiches.”

“That’s kind of you.”

After Nana left, Claire started plotting.

“So how is Richmond nightlife?”

“I’ve actually stayed in since I’ve been here. It’s all for the best. I don’t want to get messed up by something new.”

“You have to take my medicine. A new mess is the best medicine for an old one.”

“That doesn’t sound too promising.”

“Claire’s law. If you’ve screwed things up, you can always screw them up even worse.”

“That sounds like a good principle to live by.”

“Or die by. And I’m dying for a real drink.”

“Let’s just settle for lemonade for now.”

“Do you have any corn whisky to go with the lemonade.”

“Not really.”

“Oh well, I’ll just get off on being a sour puss.”

It was already a little muggy. Richmond humidity was setting in. But the heat felt nice. The girls giggled together as they told more silly stories to each other. This wasn’t the time for anything too involved.

“I’m glad that you came down.”

“I’m surprised that I took so long. I wish that I could have met your mother.”

“That was a trip in itself.”

“Funny!”

“We can’t look back.”

“You know that we can’t”

There wasn’t much going on that Friday. They headed to a bar that had drink specials. Helena was nursing a glass of wine. But Claire was taking full advantage of the deals.

“I was watching you two. You don’t look like you’re from around here.”

Helena acted very demure. Claire took it as an opportunity.

“I’m just visiting. But my friend doesn’t get out much.”

“Are you students here?”

“I’m at UVA.”

“I went there for a year.”

“Well, if you’ve come to party, this is the place.”

Helena gave Claire the strangest look.

“I sort of like him.”

“He’s OK if you’re looking to lasso a bronco.”

“He’s got all the parts.”

“You go, girl!”

Claire was just toying with him.

“You think that you might buy two sweet young things some drinks.”

“I’m OK with mine.”

“Well if she doesn’t want one, then you can get a double for me.”

“What will it be?”

“I’m taking a whisky sour.”

“A double whiskey sour.”

He went up to the bar to get the drink.

“Claire, guys are different here. You let them buy you a drink, and they think that they own you for life.”

“He needs to learn a lesson.”

“You’re the one who’s going to learn the lesson. He’ll send out a posse to get you once you try to get away.”

“This is Richmond, not the Wild West.”

“Where do you think that they started those manners? Right here!”

“Well, bring it on!”

“You are a little cocky, aren’t you?”

“I know who I am. I know what I want. Anything else is just extra.”

“I’m glad that you’re so confident.”

“Show and tell.”

They had fun leading around the cowboy. They were able to get out with their wits.

“That was crazy.”

“I was waiting for him to pull his gun.”

“He had quite a nice pistol.”

“Claire, you are a card. You wouldn’t really have had sex with him.”

“Summer sweat has a way of making you crazy.”

“Whatever you say.”

“I’m kidding.”

But who was she really kidding?

Claire stayed the weekend and then headed off to fry bigger fish. She promised to make it back before the summer was over. She loved coming alive again. Once Claire left, she returned to the crypt. It all seemed so natural. If she was standing still, she couldn’t get cited for any moving violations. It seemed best that way.

In a way, she missed her mother. But she never knew Caroline that way. She didn’t feel complete like other girls. At the same time she wondered. She had become her own compass. Claire was still locked in her youthful rebellion. Was that the result of a mother’s touch?