

Helen's Day

by Mary J. Breen

En prenant soin de son mari qui se remet d'une crise cardiaque à l'hôpital, une femme se remémore sa vie passée à prendre soin des autres au détriment de ses propres besoins et désirs.

Helen woke up with the alarm at seven o'clock, as always. Its white enamel clattered against the wooden night table; and she hunched up her shoulders and waited for Alex to turn it off. And then she remembered; Alex was up on the hill in Mercy Hospital, likely still sound asleep.

She reached about clumsily in the cold black air until she could find it and turn it off. Then she replaced it on her side of the bed

whisky bottle to fall onto the living room floor. She had never told Alex.

Before she went downstairs, Helen, as always, made the bed, checked underneath for socks and things, and tidied up the bathroom, leaving the toilet seat up for Alex. Then she stopped in her parents' old bedroom to say a prayer for their souls and to dust the blurry snapshot of them both standing looking at somebody's feet in front of the church on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. She was down in the kitchen filling up the coffee pot before she remembered again that Alex wasn't there and that she didn't need to make coffee. In fact, with Alex in the hospital, she

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beside her prayer book, her rosary and her water glass. The only light in the room was an edge of cold grey above the windowsill.

The storm, which had rattled the windows and made the curtains gasp and pull against the blinds, had finally ended. The only sound Helen could hear was the rapid and uncertain drumming of her heart, beating as if it were behind her eardrums. She used to think its sudden pounding was the beginning of a heart attack, and she would stop and say a quick Act of Contrition, and make sure nothing was cooking on the stove. But now that Alex had had a real heart attack, she felt sure that her problem was something less important, probably bad nerves, like her mother's.

She couldn't even remember when they had started, her little attacks. They happened at odd times: sometimes when Alex was driving them to Bingo and some woman driver would make him curse and pound on the steering wheel; and sometimes when he was trying to get the attention of "his lovely lassies" next door; and always in bed, when they were younger.

Lately, they happened nearly every Friday after she carried the groceries home from the A&P and up the steep stairs from the street. Before she could unpack them, she had to sit at the kitchen table with her head resting on the cool green plastic table cloth, waiting to catch her breath, waiting for the noise in her ears to stop, and saying the same jumble of prayers she and her mother had said at the same table while they waited for her father's empty

didn't need to do anything—except sweep the kitchen and bake his shortbread.

They had told him he'd have to change his diet; she'd been there when the smooth young doctor had said, "No more rich foods for you, young fellah!" And Alex had smiled and nodded, and the doctor had smiled and nodded. But after the smiling doctor had gone, Alex had grabbed her arm and whispered that the food wasn't fit for dogs, and that he was expecting cookies or cake or something every day.

Visiting hours began at noon; by ten the shortbread was cooling on the table, so Helen went upstairs to put on her good dress. It was pale blue wool, with little pearl buttons down the front—a gift years ago from her sister.

Alex had never found out that the dress had come from Marion. He'd have said they didn't take charity. But Marion had had to get rid of it because her second husband wouldn't let her keep anything from her dead, American, rich, first husband—not even the dishes, not even her stockings. So, every day for over a week, while Alex was working days, Marion had come to the back door with her big black suitcase full of clothes to look through. And every day they had whispered over a cup of tea and sweet biscuits before carrying the big suitcase up to the bedroom to try on the clothes.

Reverently, as if it belonged to the dead, Marion would lift each beautiful skirt or blouse or sweater or dress from the suitcase.

Then, holding it up in front of her, she would glance quickly over her shoulder at her image in the mirror over the dresser, her eyes squinting so as only to relive an old memory and not to replace it with this new and barren one. Then she would close her eyes and silently hand the piece to Helen who stood waiting at the edge of the cupboard in her best slip and stockings.

In the end, so Alex wouldn't notice—and to avoid any sins of vanity—Helen only picked out a few plain blouses and woolen skirts and a plaid housecoat almost the same as her old one, and the blue dress. And, now that Marion's Gerald had been laid up for over a year with a bad leg and a bad temper, Helen had saved

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bits of grocery money and bought Marion panty-hose and slips and even nylon blouses when they were on sale. Neither of the men ever noticed.

It was only a fifteen minute walk to the hospital, but Helen always left before eleven-thirty; Alex hated to be kept waiting. She was glad she had left early that day because many of the sidewalks weren't shovelled. She had to pick her way down the side of the road, following the hard brown ruts left by the snow-plow. As she made her way up the hill, the wind pressed her mother's old muskrat coat heavily against her. All the way to the hospital, she saw no one except the mailman and another old woman in an old fur coat carrying a limp plastic A&P bag like hers.

The hospital doors opened automatically as she reached them. Hot sweet air rushed at her, fogging her glasses and leaving her lost in the middle of the bright foyer. She made her way over to the wall by the heat vent and carefully stamped off the snow, trying to catch her breath and trying not to notice the sweet smell which reminded her of all those months of visiting her grandfather, and then her older sister, and then her mother as each had waited and withered and died. When her glasses cleared, the new digital clock over the information desk showed 11:46.

The Waiting Room down the hall was empty except for three older women sitting together silently at the back, each in her coat, and each with a dark purse and a shopping bag collapsed against her overshoes. The walls which were once a solid icing green, were now pale and yellowed, and chunks of plaster and paint were missing near the doorway. Two planters of dusty plastic flowers sat on one of the window sills, and the tiled floor showed

years of footsteps. The orange molded chairs were arranged in rows facing an empty pedestal where a statue of Our Lady of Mercy had always stood. Helen sat down in the second row, opened her coat, and put the bag containing the box of shortbread and a Reader's Digest beside her on the floor.

Soon after she sat down, two workmen arrived, carrying what Helen realized was a newly painted Our Lady of Mercy. This Our Lady, however, was no longer the pastel, ethereal Mary of Helen's youth. This Mary was flushed and eager. Her eyes were now dark and vigilant, and her mouth was no longer as much compassionate as resolute. And her hand, which used to be raised in a limp gesture of blessing, now looked like it was intent on grasping something or someone. Her electric blue gown fell at her feet among vibrant red and yellow flowers sprouting from pink and white clouds. A plaster ribbon wove through the clouds and flowers and read: "Our Lady of Mercy, Shield me from my enemies and receive me at the hour of my death."

Helen looked away in dismay. She could not trust a Mary like this, a dazzling heroine defending armies of floundering Catholics against protestants or other unknown infidels. The Mary Helen knew was not brave and strong; she was meek and suffering and dutiful; she was a good, Catholic wife.

Helen had tried to be a good wife, like the Blessed Mother. She had cooked Alex's dinners, and ironed his shirts, and made novenas, and made curtains, and said her rosary, and baked for the church bazaars, and put in gardens, and put down preserves, and clipped coupons, and offered up her pain, and tried never to argue, and knitted socks, and looked after her parents, and sent money to the foreign missions, and had Masses said for the dead, and watched hockey with Alex every Saturday night, and cleaned the floors on Fridays, and...I wonder, she thought, if a whole Blue Army of Marys waits on Jesus and Joseph up there, endless rows of prayerful blue-gowned old women, carrying tea and dishcloths and....

Helen clapped her hand over her mouth and looked around to see if anyone could have heard her terrible thoughts. But there was no one there at all. The old women at the back had left, and a voice was announcing that visiting hours had begun. Stumbling to her feet, she gathered up her things, checked her watch, and rushed down the hall to the elevator.

She hurried into his room, patting her hair into place under the edges of her knitted hat. But Alex wasn't there. His bed was empty, and there was nothing on his nightstand but a pitcher. The only sound in the room was the deep, rough breathing of the young man in the other bed. She slowly walked over to Alex's bed, and looked down at the smooth, quiet pillow.

Helen was still standing there when a nurse came in carrying a tray of little paper cups full of coloured pills and capsules. The nurse looked first at the sleeping young man; and then, seeing Helen, she said, "Oh, Mr. McLean is down having some tests. He shouldn't be much longer."

Of course. It was only tests. Helen felt light-headed and her heart pounded as she let herself down into the chair at the foot of the bed. Horrified by her mistake and by the hope that was now planted in the edges of her mind, she started fumbling in her purse for her prayer book. She thumbed back and forth, looking for something to take her mind off Alex's empty bed. The get-well card she had brought for the man in the next bed fell out onto her lap.

She took it from its envelope and read it again. It was large and busy with bluebirds like Cinderella's seamstresses carrying ribbons and flowers in their beaks and encircling a message which read: "Sincerely hope that before you know, you'll be up and on the go." She took out her fountain pen and wrote "Alex and" above her name, and then she got up and placed the card on the nightstand of the sleeping young man.

He was, as every other day, deeply asleep. His skin above his skimpy beard was very white and smooth and dead, like an old egg shell. His hair was blond and matted, and thick clumpy curls seemed to be molded to his forehead, making him into a tired Christmas card angel. His sleep seemed to be bringing him little rest, however, as his eyebrows were drawn, and his breathing was loud and heavy. As she watched him she started to breathe in unison with him, mesmerized by his effort and his solitude. Slowly, her hand reached out to smooth back the tangled curls. When she saw her old spotted hand against his white forehead, she gasped and quickly turned back to her chair, wiping her hand on her coat. Just then Alex arrived in a wheelchair, pushed by a nurse and followed by a doctor she had never seen before.

"Where the hell have you been, lass?" he started. "I've been waiting! And why is your face all red, for chrissake?"

"Oh...ah!" she stammered. Above Alex's head, the doctor was signalling her to follow him into the hall. "Wait, Alex. I'll...I'll be right back."

"You'll have to realize," the doctor said, looking down at the chart in his hands, "Mrs. um...McLean, that your husband is still a sick man. He won't be able to do much for himself yet. Even after you get him home—likely this Friday, by the way—he won't be quite himself, at least for a while. We believe he has some residual heart damage—the tests will tell us more—however, it's nothing that can't be controlled with appropriate diet, exercise, and medication. You'll receive full instructions. I'm sure with time he'll be his old self. You'll just have to be patient and take very good care of him."

And then he nodded, turned abruptly and walked away down the hall. When Helen returned to the room, Alex was back in bed, his eyes closed. The nurse said she had given him a sedative, and he would soon be asleep.

Helen sat down to wait again. Methodically, she crossed her ankles and pulled her dress down over her knees, tucking it in under her legs. She placed her hands in her lap, her right hand comforting her left. Her back was straight and her eyes partly closed. Sitting like this was a knowledge her body had had so long that it had its own breathing rhythm, its own angle of the head, its own set of the jaw. It was just as her mother used to sit and wait—and maybe *her* mother too, when she had the time.

Waiting doesn't come easy for Alex, Helen thought, but it comes to some people, like the women in her family. Helen thought about how often she had waited: for news from overseas...for babies...for her parents to die...for the bruises to fade...for that trip to the Falls...for Alex to turn Catholic...for Alex to come home from the pool hall...for Alex to come home for dinner...for Alex to finish....

By three the north sky was dark purple and the street lights were already on. The wind had begun to whine around the windows. She took out her rosary and began to pray, all the while careful not to look at the young man who never seemed to wake up. Then an

old nun in white arrived.

"Excuse me, dear, but there's a big storm—a blizzard in fact on its way, and you really should get on your way home."

"But..." Helen said, gesturing towards Alex's bed.

"Now, dear, there have been warnings on the radio for the last hour, and you should be at home, especially at our age. And take a taxi; I'm sure your dear husband will understand."

Helen smiled weakly and nodded, and the nun smiled and left. At four o'clock Alex was still asleep, so Helen put the shortbread and the magazine on the nightstand, and left without looking at either of the men.

Sitting like this was a knowledge her body had had so long that it had its own breathing rhythm, its own angle of the head, its own set of the jaw. It was just as her mother used to sit and wait—and maybe her mother too, when she had the time.

As she stepped out of the heat of the hospital, the wind pushed against her, blowing open her coat. As she struggled to do up her buttons she remembered how she used to love the wind as a child, how she used to run down this very hill holding her coat open and making the wind carry her just like the angels would carry her soul to heaven when she died. But today the wind only carried icy snow which bounced off the driveway in whorls, like the pictures in her school books of the North Wind with his lashing white tail. Overhead, the old maples groaned and ground their branches together. All she could hear was the clamouring wind and the old trees and an ambulance far away across the river. There was nothing left but to set off home.

As she struggled down the hill, the raw memory of the young man in the next bed returned. The memory of how she had almost touched him made her redden again with shame and bewilderment. Even though she had only seen him awake once, she remembered the green of his eyes, and the kind of cigarettes he smoked...and then she remembered.

She was just a young woman. It was a hot afternoon and she had been visiting her grandfather in the old hospital. As she was waiting beside his bed as he slept, the man in the next bed had called to her in an odd, urgent voice, "Miss, would you come here, please?"

She had never really noticed him before; he had been so still and quiet, and her grandfather had been so deaf and loud. He was fair and young, only a few years older than she. If he had been well, he would have been beautiful, but his skin was drawn and tight, and lines of pain cut deeply into both sides of mouth. His face was so still; only his pale green eyes seemed to be still alive.

He looked up at her for over a full minute, and slowly his tongue began to move back and forth over his bottom lip. Then he said hoarsely, "Would you light a cigarette for me? I can't reach them. My arms, they don't really...."

He trailed off, lifting his rigid bony arms which were tanned from just above the elbow, trying to point towards his Buckinghams and the ashtray on the nightstand. His eyes didn't leave hers. She stood caught and unmoving, looking into his eyes and knowing only that this man needed her.

Without moving his eyes from hers, he asked her again, quieter this time, "Please...please light a cigarette for me." She turned quickly to find the package and took one out. Carefully putting it in his mouth, she struck a match, and held it to the end of the cigarette, leaving it burning until he began to wince and cough. Then she put the match in the ashtray and held it out towards him with both hands.

As he smoked, he stared at her, his eyes burning. Standing there waiting, feeling him watching, she began to feel warm and weak, as if her blood had left her head and had found new and secret places. When he began to talk about his arthritis, awkwardly moving his arm towards her, she was so relieved that she let him take one hand in his. His voice was thick and rough as he told her about the pains in his arms and legs and shoulders and back. He told her about his father and their life all alone on the farm out on the sixth line. He told her about their big house, with its new, shiny linoleum in the downstairs hall and their empty kitchen. He told her about the hill near their farm which they called "The Mountain," and that someday—if she helped him—he would show her the view from the hill and let her feel the cool, sweet breeze on the top of that hill, even in the middle of the summer. All the while he held her hand tightly in his, and cigarette smoke filled the air between them.

As soon as he had finished the cigarette, Helen butted it out and hurried back to her grandfather's bed. He was still asleep, so she gathered her things and left without looking back. Outside the hospital her legs were shaking and the ground felt soft under her feet. She knew she would come back the next day to the young man, and she knew exactly what she would do if he asked her.

The next afternoon, Helen returned in her best blue gabardine dress with two get well cards and a box of sugar cookies in a Laura Secord box.

"Lena, my girl! I'm all alone!" her grandfather started. "The young lad over there has gone home! His wife finally came and got him this morning. Poor lad, and him not able to be doing a thing for himself, and them with two little ones. Did you bring them candies for me?"

The other bed was empty; on the nightstand was an ashtray full of butts, the top ones smudged with red lipstick.

A few months later, Helen got a job at the Royal Café. Every night a man from the mill with bright red hair and large red hands came in for supper. On Fridays, he brought Helen and the other waitress little paper bags of horehound candies for his "lovely lassies"—and they gave him extra cups of coffee in return.

One night he asked Helen to go to a movie with him, and she agreed—without even asking her mother. After that, every Saturday night through the summer, she let Alex take her on long walks down by the fair grounds to feed the ducks, and sometimes to see another movie. And then war broke out. Alex signed up,

asked her to wait for him, and was gone. After five and a half years, Alex returned, bringing with him a new dark silence. Three months later, Helen Mary Doyle and Charles Alexander McLean were married.

As she turned onto Albert Street Helen stopped to try to clean the snow off her glasses and catch her breath. She could see little ahead except the dim shapes of giant white cars, and the snow whirling like insects around the pale street lights. When she reached the house, she walked straight into the kitchen and sat down at the table to rest her head on the cool plastic, still wearing her coat and overshoes. Then she said a short prayer for the dead, got up and put on the kettle, and stood quietly beside the stove, waiting for it to boil.

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