

*(Io exits.)*

*(To the heavens)* OK. What was *that* about? *(To the audience)* 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 hosts 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 very 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.

*(The 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 . . . *(The Servant shakes her head, then gestures toward the rack à la 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.

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 coiffure.)*

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 knockoff 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 trod 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 we 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? (*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. (*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

OK, 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)* Ummmmm, 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 blond. 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 a while, watching you people. The interest was beginning to wear thin. After a while 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

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