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Helen of Sparta

Laney Beck came to stay with us the autumn that my older brother, Darren, turned sixteen and insufferable. It had been a torrid summer—the second hottest on record along Florida’s Gulf Coast—so dry that the freshwater pond behind our motel withered into caked, cracking earth. Carcasses of alligators and armadillos lined the parched drainage ditches along the roadbeds. Sea grapes shriveled in black clusters. But Darren’s fixation that August was the shape of his ears, how one curved up gently like the sheath of a fig shell, while the other rose to an elfin point. He studied his reflection at every opportunity: in shop windows, swimming pools, the Plexiglas faces of vending machines. He tried to “cure” the deviant ear with a convex brace fashioned from pipe cleaners. My brother’s other obsession was driving, and he was all too willing to chauffeur me to junior tango practice and oboe lessons as a pretext to borrow Mama’s Taurus. Or, if it meant extra time behind the wheel, to pick up Laney Beck from the airport in Fort Myers.

So that’s how it happened. Darren volunteered and I went with him. Not by choice, of course. But the day after Columbus Day was Superintendent’s Conference Day in the Lee County schools, which meant that big brothers all over Cormorant Island were saddled babysitting their twelve-year-old sisters. Mama had wanted to drive out to the airport herself—Laney Beck was her oldest friend, after all, her only *real* friend—yet with Papa still up in St. Petersburg, tending to Aunt Pricilla, she didn’t trust my brother to man the motel office solo. Especially not on a Tuesday, when the linens went out.

Darren drove for speed, not accuracy. At the traffic lights, he flipped down the ceiling mirror and scoured his face for blemishes. At the longer lights on Nautilus Boulevard, he filed his fingernails. I’ve always felt a twinge of terror crossing bridges, and cruising over the causeway to the mainland at twice the posted limit, I dug my fingernails deep into the vinyl upholstery. But I knew not to beg Darren to be careful. That was a guaranteed way to make him hit the gas.

As we approached the airport, following the complex sequence of lane shifts that wound past the permanently shuttered Air Force Museum and the dusty civil aviation field, heavier traffic forced my brother to slow down. "I've got a million-dollar proposition for you, Wunderkind," he said.

"Give me the million dollars first," I answered.

"Cute, real cute. Seriously, parking is going to be hell. How would you feel about running inside and finding her?"

"Didn't Mom give you money for the lot?"

Darren made a nasty face at me. "C'mon, Wunderkind. We're past the turnoff for the garage. I'll have to drive all the way through the loop again."

He swerved around a stand of orange construction barrels, honked at a Hertz shuttle bus, and came to a screeching halt inches from the curb. We were in front of the arrivals terminal, a steel and concrete structure whose dramatic curves might have seemed futuristic in the sixties—but, by the Reagan era, had acquired the gloom of unrealized ambitions. Ailanthus shoots poked through the cracks in the asphalt. Darren and I hadn't yet reached an agreement. I folded my arms across my flat chest and stared out the passenger-side window.

A crowd had gathered around the terminal's automatic doors, between the smokers' benches and the curbside check-in. Music streamed from an overhead speaker: Billie Holiday crooning "Summertime." On the sidewalk below, a strawberry blonde in sandals was slow-dancing with a skycap. She appeared to be leading. Only when a second skycap grabbed the woman's waist and attempted to pry her from the first did I recognize the woman from the photographs: it was Laney Beck! And she wasn't exactly dancing. More like staggering. My mother's girlhood friend clung onto her "dance partner" like a woman afraid of toppling from a steep precipice.

The skycap's cap fell off and rolled under a taxicab. The automatic doors swung open and shut, open and shut, in an apocalyptic rhythm. "Jesus Christ. Somebody get security," shouted the second skycap.

And then my brother was out of the Taurus and pressing his way through the crowd. "It's okay," he called out. "She's with us." He said something to Laney Beck and she released her hold on the sky-

cap. The bag agent turned out to be a lanky black man in his sixties with a gray brush mustache. Darren took the parking money—it must have been twenty dollars—and stuffed it into the man’s hand. The next thing I knew, I was in the backseat between Laney Beck’s golf clubs and her hatbox, and the three of us were racing toward the airport exit at top speed.

“Such excitement!” exclaimed Laney Beck. “And I haven’t even been on the ground for half an hour.”

Laney Beck spoke as though she were accustomed to this sort of excitement, as if, whenever she traveled, it was her habit to jump airport personnel. She reached for her sunglasses, perched atop her frenzied hair, but one of the mirrored lenses had chipped. “I do believe that man broke my glasses,” she said—more surprised than upset. “Luckily for me, I have a spare set somewhere. Take that as a word of wisdom from your Cousin Laney: always carry a second pair of glasses. And dentures, too. Though I don’t suppose any of us need to worry about that just yet.” Laney Beck, who was *not* our biological cousin, rummaged through her oversized handbag, which jingled with coins, and drew out an identical pair of glasses. She placed them over her enormous eyes, and laughed—an innocent, girlish laugh. Then she lowered her voice, like a young child about to reveal a secret. “I have a horrible confession to make,” she said. “I’m so terrified of flying, I drank those little bottles of Scotch until they cut me off.”

“Not a big deal,” said Darren. “We’ll have you home in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?” Laney responded. “Oh, I can’t let your mother see me like this. It’s already bad enough that I’m imposing on such short notice.”

It *had* been rather sudden. Laney Beck’s second marriage had collapsed and she’d phoned Mama—out of the blue—to see if she could “borrow a room” at the Jolly Roger for a couple of weeks. Just to “sort through her thoughts.” Before that, they’d spoken on the phone every few months, and they’d exchanged holiday gifts religiously, but they hadn’t actually *seen* each other since many years earlier, when Laney starred as Ophelia at the Performing Arts Center in Tampa. Now, Mama’s friend was old enough to play

Hamlet's mother. But from what I understood, nobody in New York was asking her to play much of anything.

Darren kept driving. We pulled onto the state highway, where a brush fire had charred out several hundred acres of pine scrub. The wind had picked up—a cold front blowing in off the Gulf—and angry clouds cloaked the horizon.

"Everything looks so different," said Laney. "All these shopping plazas. When your mother and I were girls, this entire area was just swamp and avocado farms. Nobody in their right mind traveled south of Sarasota—unless it was to fool around on the beach. Or—did your mother ever tell you about the time this guy Chuck Grambly took us to a cockfight? A real live cockfight *with roosters*."

"No, she didn't," said Darren.

"Well, he did. With friends of his from the tackle shop—straight out of *Deliverance*.... He had a crush on me, Chuck Grambly," said Laney, smiling. "Meanwhile, I can't get over how big you two have gotten. I hardly recognized you. How old were you last time I saw you, Amanda, dear? Four? Five? You probably don't even remember."

I wasn't sure how to answer. I was certain—*mathematically* certain—that I'd *never* before met Laney Beck.

"You look just like your mother, dear," she said. "Spitting image. I could pick Melanie Shunt's girl out of a crowd with my eyes closed."

It took me a moment to register that Melanie Shunt was my mother. Melanie *Rothmeyer*. I don't think I'd ever heard anyone use her maiden name before. Or say that I looked like her, though we shared the same broad forehead.

"*Everything* has changed. That's what happens when you're past thirty," said Laney. "Do you two go to high school at Thomas Edison?"

"I go to Francis Scott Key," answered Darren. "I'm almost done. She goes to the middle school on Cormorant Island."

"Well, I went to Thomas Edison. Up in Sarasota. I studied dramatic writing with Mrs. Gonchette. I wonder if she's still teaching," said Laney Beck. "She'd be passed retirement age, of course—but lots of teachers stay on into their seventies."

"I'm thinking of becoming a doctor," said Darren. "Maybe a plastic surgeon."

“Wherever life takes you, darling,” Laney Beck answered noncommittally. “Your Cousin Laney couldn’t write a play for beans. But when Mrs. Gonchette had me read the other students’ work aloud, I knew I’d found my calling. I’ve been meaning to come back and thank her all these years, but—well, it just didn’t happen.” Laney jumped forward in her seat and snapped up a ball of air with her fist. “I have an idea. Let’s go there. To Thomas Edison. It’s not *that* far.”

I could not have been more shocked if Laney Beck had proposed a road trip to California—or Continental Europe. In our family, this was the sort of outing planned weeks in advance.

“What do you say, Wunderkind?” asked Darren.

“You told Mama we’d come straight home,” I said. “She’ll want the car.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand, Amanda. We’ve always been share and share alike, your mother and I,” answered Laney Beck. She turned to my brother. “Please, Darren. For me.... It’ll give me a chance to dry out. And I promise we’ll have fun.”

Darren didn’t say another word. But he pulled off the state highway at the next exit and followed the signs for I-75 North to Sarasota.

Thomas Edison Consolidated High School was a low-slung, red-brick building surrounded by a high mesh fence. Two wings—one cinderblock, the other stucco—marked successive expansions in the fifties and seventies. There was also a phalanx of white box trailers on a nearby field that housed either makeshift offices or overflow classrooms. The complex reminded me of an internment camp. But since we’d crossed the county line, school was in session. Two bare-chested guys were tossing around a fluorescent pink Frisbee on the traffic island out front. More kids were sitting at nearby picnic tables, eating bag lunches. I felt suddenly important, being a visitor and not a student. I suspect Darren experienced something similar, because he drove straight past the elderly parking officer and pulled into the lot marked “STAFF ONLY.” At his own school, Francis Scott Key, that got you suspended. But the last laugh was on us, because the remaining empty spaces were at the far end of the macadam—nearly a football field’s length away. As we hiked back toward the school, a cold, lashing rain started falling. It peppered the adjacent

man-made lake like an artillery barrage. When we finally entered the building's main entrance, our clothing was thoroughly soaked.

Two trophy cases lined the vestibule. A large black and gold banner, hanging directly in front of us, read: "Edison Panthers, State Champions, 1977." It didn't say what they had won. Group photographs of long-forgotten athletic teams formed a wainscoting along the corridor. Varsity Baseball, 1957. Women's Track and Field, 1958. One end of the short hall led to a staircase, the other into a modern office suite. A teenage couple leaned against a nearby stand of lockers, kissing. The guy was hot.

"It all looks so different," said Laney Beck. "It even *smells* different."

I took a deep sniff of air. It smelled faintly of cigarette smoke and chlorine.

"Where to?" asked Darren.

"It's a little bit overwhelming," answered Laney Beck. "This area used to be the Student Commons. I don't remember all these offices." To my amazement, she walked directly up to the kissing couple and asked: "Do you know where Mrs. Gonchette's classroom is?" I could have died from shame.

The hot guy looked up. Surprised, maybe. But too suave to be embarrassed. "Does she teach chemistry?"

"Dramatic writing," said Laney Beck.

"Hmmm. Maybe in the annex," he answered. The girl shifted her weight from one slender leg to the other and said nothing.

"Thank you, darling," said Laney Beck. She walked back to us, and the teenage couple disappeared up the stairs. "I remember now," she said decisively, pointing like a marshal on a battlefield. "It's that way."

Laney Beck started down a nearby passageway, and we followed. We'd hardly gotten twenty yards when an authoritative voice called after us. It belonged to a hulking, red-faced security officer. He rested one hand atop the flashlight on his belt, as though, in an emergency, he could draw it as a gun.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" he asked.

"Oh, no," answered Laney. "We're just visiting." She paused for a moment, maybe deciding whether more explanation was called for. "I went to school here," she added. "I've come to see an old teacher."

Laney Beck and the guard faced off like gunslingers at high noon.

Suddenly, the guard sneezed. He removed a cloth handkerchief from his rear trouser pocket to shield his face, and he sneezed again. Maybe the man was allergic to Laney Beck's confidence. The two of them *both* made me anxious.

"Okay," said the guard. "But all visitors have to check in at the main office."

"Oh, we've done that. All taken care of," lied Laney.

Then she smiled—the same benign, wholly disarming smile that had convinced Darren to drive her to Sarasota—and she strode off down the passageway.

"Ma'am, I need to see your passes," the guard called after her. Laney ignored him. She kept walking—more determined now. I looked at Darren for guidance, and he shrugged. So we scrambled to catch up with Laney and let her lead us down another short staircase and between two science laboratories, chock-full of bottled specimens, to a concourse of older classrooms.

It was so hard to believe that this zany, fearless woman who danced with skycaps and lied to security guards was Mama's best friend. I loved my mother dearly, but she was about as far from zany or fearless as they came. She'd studied accounting for two years at the state university, then married a business student twelve years her senior. They'd purchased a beachfront motel with Papa's savings from his work as a bank manager and the bulk of her own father's life insurance. Nothing glamorous about it. My parents had also considered a restaurant, and even a bed-and-breakfast, but Papa thought a motel less risky. So sometimes when Mama spoke of Laney Beck—her popularity at Pembroke, her Peace Corps stint in Cameroon, her theatrical triumphs in Boston and then New York City—I couldn't help holding it against Mama that she hadn't had similar victories. That she'd never even *tried*. Of course, if Mama had gone off to New England and married a professional ice skater, I would never have existed.

"That's her classroom," said Laney. "On the right."

The door to the classroom on the right stood wide open. Rows of students sat perpendicular to the entryway, listening to a lesson in Greek mythology. Beyond them, the driving rain pounded against the floor-to-ceiling windows. We approached the door and several

of the students glanced in our direction. The teacher continued speaking in a high-pitched, nasal voice. She was sharing a story from her own youth—about how she'd sobbed the first time she read the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The woman was small, waifish, in her twenties. She was clearly not the celebrated Mrs. Gonchette.

A coffee mug on the cluttered desk was labeled Carol's Brew. One of the students asked a question about Hades; he addressed the teacher as Miss McBride.

"Maybe Mrs. Gonchette switched classrooms," I whispered.

Laney Beck waved her fingers at a long-haired boy who was watching us, and the kid looked away quickly. "Let's go listen in," Laney suggested. And without any further warning, our guide stepped into the classroom and took up a position along the rear wall. Darren and I followed, as though entranced. I stared at the carpet, afraid to make eye contact with the young teacher. Eventually, I let my gaze wander sideways: over the legs of the students in the back row and onto the stainless steel sink in the corner. I could not have been more nervous if we'd climbed through Miss McBride's bedroom window.

But the woman kept on teaching. She'd advanced through Persephone and Demeter to Daphne and Apollo. Her lesson drifted from history to legend to personal anecdote, including a digression about how she'd once had a crush on a laurel sapling. When I dared to look up, my face red and scorching, she was reading from Bulfinch's *The Age of Fable*. "Since you cannot be my wife," she declaimed, role-playing Apollo, "you shall assuredly be my tree. I will wear you for my crown; I will decorate with you my harp and my quiver. And, as eternal youth is mine, you also shall be always green, and your leaf shall know no decay...." Every few passages, the tiny woman peeked up and offered us a puzzled glance. She appeared fresh to her job and somewhat uncertain of herself.

I looked over at Darren. He was focused on the tanned skin of the girl in front of him, whose cut-off T-shirt was riding up her back.

"Louise Gonchette had a wondrous reading voice," Laney Beck said under her breath. "Like melted sugar to the ears."

Carol McBride closed her battered copy of Bulfinch and wrapped a rubber band around it. She took two steps toward us—and then, apparently, thought the better of it. Instead, she ventured into a

new anecdote. "I'll tell you all a secret," she said to her class. "When I was your age, I used to fantasize that *I* was Helen of Troy. So tell me—those of you who have done the homework reading—who was Helen of Troy?"

A round-faced Asian girl in a faded lavender sweater raised her hand. "The most beautiful woman in the world."

Several students snickered. Either at the Asian girl or at the prospect of Carol McBride being attractive.

"That's correct," Miss McBride said didactically. "Helen of Troy was the most beautiful woman in the world. She had a face to launch a thousand ships."

A bearded guy up front made a remark that I couldn't hear. Laughter rippled back toward us. Carol McBride blushed—and I felt genuinely bad for her. I sensed that our presence was adding to the restlessness of her students.

"Many teenage girls dream about being Helen of Troy," she said, matter-of-factly. "It's a rather common fantasy."

"Don't you mean Helen of Sparta?" interjected Laney Beck.

The room went silent. Carol McBride looked like she'd seen Medusa.

Laney stepped forward as though the classroom were her own.

"Her name was Helen of *Sparta*. The wife of King Menelaus. It's bad enough that she was carried off to Troy *against her will*. Changing her name in the historical record compounds her victimization." Laney Beck laughed—not her playful laugh, but more bitterly. "All of you should think about the implications of name changing. Especially you girls. I've been married twice, but I've always held on to my name."

The students looked at Laney Beck. Then they looked at Carol McBride.

"Who are you?" asked Miss McBride. "This is my classroom."

"Sorry I interrupted," said Laney. "Please don't mind us." She turned toward me and added, loudly, "I guess your Cousin Laney's become too political for her own good."

"Are you supposed to be here?" asked Miss McBride.

Laney braced her arm against the back of a chair. "We're just visiting. I came to see Louise Gonchette, but I guess she's no longer teaching."

This last statement had an unexpected effect on Carol McBride. She bit her thin lip and tapped her left hand nervously against her boyish hip. "You should check at the main office about Louise Gonchette," she said.

I peered up at Laney Beck and I could tell from her expression that she'd heard something in Carol McBride's mousy voice that I wasn't yet trained to hear. But I understood Laney's face: Louise Gonchette was dead.

At that moment, three uniformed men appeared in the entryway. One was the hulking, red-faced guard. The other two were full-fledged Sarasota police officers. They had real guns and billy clubs, not flashlights, hanging from their belts. The bearded slacker in the front row exclaimed: "Shit. It's the cops!"

"That's her," said the red-faced guard.

"Please hold your hands where I can see them and step out of the classroom, ma'am," said the taller cop. This was the pre-Columbine era, and Laney Beck truly looked as harmless as a dove, but I guess these guys weren't taking any chances.

"I think we're in trouble," said Laney Beck. She did not raise her hands or walk toward the classroom door. In fact, she giggled. "I'm sorry you had to come all the way down here, officers. We were just on our way out."

The second cop stepped into the classroom, guarding us from the side. Or preparing to shield Miss McBride from gunshots.

The first cop said, "I'm not going to repeat myself again, ma'am. Place your hands where I can see them and step out of the classroom."

Darren raised his hands. I did the same, leaning flat against the chalkboard to avoid potential cross-fire.

"This is all a misunderstanding," said Laney Beck. "It's not like I'm some kind of criminal."

The second cop approached Laney. He held a pair of handcuffs. The fluorescent lights made his bald pate look purple.

"Jack Finn!"

The bald cop stopped abruptly. He made an instinctive move for his gun.

"Jack Finn. It's me, Laney Beck. From school."

That pierced the second cop like a bullet. He clutched the handcuffs, as though afraid he might drop them, and rested his other hand on his holster.

"I don't know how I caused all this fuss," continued Laney, sounding remarkably innocent. "I'm visiting from New York...and I just came to see if Mrs. Gonchette was still teaching.... I suppose I must have gone the wrong way or something...."

"Jeez," said the cop. "You *are* Laney Beck."

"That's what they keep telling me."

Jack Finn's eyes raked Laney from head to toe, practically absorbing her, like Humphrey Bogart might do with an old flame in a detective movie. He waved off the taller cop. "It's fine, Pete. She's all right."

"You sure?" asked the red-faced guard.

Jack Finn ignored this. He took Laney by the arm and steered her gently from the classroom. "I'm married now," he said. "Four boys."

"That's wonderful," said Laney—but she looked disappointed. "Boys are easier."

"I don't know about that," said Jack Finn. "But I love them."

Laney Beck winked at him. "So good to run into you," she said.

"Yeah. Good to see you, Laney." He still held onto her arm. "Say, you're not thinking of coming back here, are you?"

"Of course not," she said. "Don't be silly."

And that was that. We walked down the corridor and through the high quadruple doors of the school's main entrance, the red-faced guard following us to the edge of the drenched macadam lot.

Laney Beck was only marginally more subdued on the drive home to Cormorant Island. She flipped the car radio to an oldies station, and we caught the tail end of an hour-long tribute to Captain & Tennille. The rain had let up, and the wind was ebbing, but the temperature had dropped twenty degrees in a couple of hours. My clothes were still damp. I clenched my teeth together to keep them from chattering.

"Jack Finn used to write me love letters," said Laney Beck. "They were full of misspellings, but they were adorably sweet. He even tried to write me poems...."

"Did you go out with him?" asked Darren.

“Jack Finn. Lord, no,” said Laney. “He wasn’t my type. And way too earnest. Besides, I had my hands full in high school.... But I’m glad things have worked out so well for Jack.”

“Sometimes it takes a while to figure out if someone is your type,” said Darren. I sensed he was thinking wishfully about some popular girl who’d rejected him—not Laney Beck and Jack Finn. “Don’t you think?”

“Not me. I’ve always known in ten minutes,” answered Laney. “But for a long time, I thought Jack and your mother might have gotten on. I bet you don’t know that we all went on a double date once....”

So we crossed over the causeway and onto Cormorant Island with Laney Beck recalling a twenty-year-old expedition to a bowling alley in Clearwater. One of the few places around that had dancing *and* served kids under eighteen. She acted as though nothing remarkable had happened in Sarasota—as though her encounter with Jack Finn had been purely social. Darren drove more carefully now. Maybe the cops had scared him. But I did catch him steeling peeks at his reflection in the mirrors. We hit rush hour traffic heading out of Fort Myers. I cannot express how relieved I was to pull onto the caked shell driveway of the Jolly Roger.

We threaded our way between the tennis courts and the bougainvillea hedge. A large ring-billed gull hopped across the road in front of us.

“I do hope I look presentable. I’m nervous as a schoolgirl,” said Laney. “I trust you darlings won’t tell your mother about those little Scotch bottles....”

“Your secret is safe,” said Darren.

He circled through the dunes beyond the shellfish washing hut, and the motel came into view over the beach grass. The maid’s carts were all gone. It was after six o’clock. Mama waved to us from the upper landing. The car had hardly come to a stop when Laney charged up the wooden steps. Mama raced down to greet her. They met on the first floor balcony and embraced.

Darren and I watched from below. The breeze was still fierce down by the shoreline and the breakers crashed against the jetty. Skimmers circled overhead; a woodpecker drilled methodically in a nearby electric post. Whatever Laney Beck was explaining to Mama was lost to the roar of air and surf.

I leaned my elbows on the trunk of the Taurus.

"You were really great at the airport," I said. "I mean: really adult-like."

"I'm working on it," answered Darren—but I could tell he was pleased. And I was rather pleased too. Complimenting him made *me* feel like an adult.

My brother circled the car and patted my shoulder affectionately. We stood side by side in silence. Then Darren, in an intimate voice, asked, "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"Who's beautiful?"

"Who do you think, Wunderkind?" The bite returned suddenly to my brother's voice. "Laney Beck."

I thought he was joking at first—but he obviously wasn't.

"Pervert!" I snapped. "She's as old as Mama."

"Sure, but Mama isn't—"

He let the unfinished sentence hang in the damp air. But it was true. She wasn't. And for the first time in my life, I saw how something that small could explain everything, what had happened before and what would come after.