

Swallows.

That day she was called Helen. Other days she had other names. Once before she had been June and before that Mona. He got used quickly to the different names, telling himself that she was always the same woman. Whether she came as Helen, June or Mona, she remained dark, distant and mysterious as the first day he met her, her origins unknown, her relationship to the world undefined, her relationship to him terse and cruel as the exchange of money. With all that, she was to him, as unforgoable as the day, with its dreams, or the night, with its stars.

From his second storey Bay - window, where he sat watching for her, he saw grey - black clouds massing above the roofs of the borough. Gusts of wind shook the autumn trees and scattered leaves, like small, dark birds, into the sky. When she came at last, it was as if driven by the wind, emerging from under the branches of the copper - leaved beech that sheltered the entrance to the house. He turned his chair in the broad arc of the window, following her determined march to the front of the house. Under a jacket of a deep, violet colour, the wind hung on the hem of her long, black skirt, tugging at it as if trying to hold her back. When she reached the front door the wind let go of her, sweeping back from the dark edge of her skirt into the branches of the copper beech, shaking them violently.

In his room, the intercom crackled noisily.

" I'm here," he heard her say in a matter of fact voice

broken and tortured by the accompaniment of static.

" So am I," he answered quietly to himself as he wheeled the chair over to where the door control was and pressed the button to let her in.

He had just enough time then to unlatch the door, leaving it slightly ajar, and reverse himself back into the centre of the room before he heard her footfalls on the carpeted hallway. She pushed the door open and before he saw he could taste her presence, like a cold, moist, autumn wind, with its savour of decay, invading the room.

" Would you like me to turn the lamp on?" he asked.

" No," she said curtly, " this will do."

She closed the door behind her and advanced into the shadowy interior towards him. The room was sparsely furnished. There was just a table and a chest of drawers. There was no chair for her to sit on. Briefly, as she passed him, she let her hand rest on the tubular steel side guard of the wheelchair, touching it as if it were part of him, before drifting away into the wide, encircling arm of the bay - window.

" I don't have much time," she said, with her back turned to him, looking out at the wind - shaken trees and the leaves tumbling through the shadowed air.

" You never do," he told her, with a resigned air, " not for me."

He wheeled the chair close behind her. She turned and leaned against the wooden frame of the window. She seemed so tall, looking down from a great height at his legless body confined in his chair.

" You look terrible, Reilly," she said. " What have you been doing? "

" Waiting for you! "

His voice was harsh and dry like sand. His face was pale and worn, with deep, dark lines carved in it. His mouth was thin and wasted. His bottom lip had a constant tremor in it like an electrical charge passing through it. His eyes, under a grey - torn, untidy tumble of black hair, provided his most remarkable feature. They were dark and penetrating eyes, with a harried and relentless searching in them, that seized and held her in a forceful grip.

" You could have changed your shirt while you were waiting," she told him with a touch of impatience in her voice and turning her head away.

His shirt was a red and black checked one, very dirty, with food and drink stains liberally spread on it. It was ripped in places with a sickly green vest showing through. Where there were buttons missing, great, metallic safety pins held the shirt closed. The legs of his brown coloured trousers were folded back and pinned against the stumps of his legs. He had the appearance of a man torn apart and pinned back together again.

" Would you undo my shirt for me?" he asked in a soft, gravelly voice.

" I don't have time," she said coldly.

" No? "

" No, Reilly, don't ask! "

She had other names that he could not call her. Names he kept closed up angrily inside. Names he would roll off

the tip of his tongue for any other woman, but not her. If he called her those names, the angry ones, he knew she would go and not come back. She would be pitiless with him. She would leave without any remorse. He pulled a packet of cigarettes out of the breast pocket of his shirt and shook one loose.

" You stink of cigarettes," she said sharply. " You stink of whisky too, Reilly."

Reilly sprung a long, blue flame from a gold - plated lighter and lit the cigarette with studied nonchalance. His grey face with eyes shut loomed above the flickering light. As he smoked his breath rasped in his throat. He quenched the flame and stroked the lighter calmly with bony, arthritic fingers. The cigarette fell in a bright arc from his mouth to the edge of the chair and balanced there. He watched her closely with narrowed eyes.

" You're not wearing any perfume today," he said finally.

She turned to look out the window. The day was darker now with black clouds massed heavily in the sky. Distantly, a purple fork of brilliant light flashed through them. She shuddered with contained excitement at it. Seconds later there was the low rumble of a faraway explosion. Thunder.

" It's scenting your husband's bed perhaps," Reilly went on.

She turned sharply round to him.

" Don't take risks with what you say," she warned him, " you might regret it! "

" Please! Leave me some small freedom to speak my mind!

"

" Not at my expense! "

" At mine then! "

She turned away again.

" I'm the one who pays after all," he reminded her.

She gave no response but stayed looking away from him, her eyes fixed on the lightning streaked darkness. His eyes fixed on the shining gold of the lighter between his fingers as he spoke.

" I don't want to hurt you, Helen. Believe me, I just want to appreciate you...."

A long, deep silence settled between them. Reilly smoked his cigarette and stroked the lighter nervously. He looked furtively at her. Looked at the exotic head that turned away from him, with its black, close - cropped hair and heavy - browed eyes slanting in odalisque curves over full cheekbones. Her eyes had an intense, remarkable, violet glow. Her nose swooped hawkishly from the bridge of her forehead down towards her full, sensual mouth, so unlike his. Her lips were charnel, savage, avaricious. Her face was oval and full but not too heavy, her chin was round and firm, dimpled in the middle, her neck was straight and strong. Beneath her jacket, black chiffon covered her shoulders and enclosed her neck in a pleated circle. She was stunning to look at. To the shining points of her black, laced boots she was so stunning and Reilly felt the same astonished sadness before her now as he had the first time he saw her. When she moved her clothes made the sound of birds feathers brushed by the wind.

He broke the silence.

" Speaking of your husband, Henry, what a name....."

His tone was deliberately provocative. It pulled her round to look at him.

" I thought it died out with the fucking plague!
"

Her eyes flashed with anger.

" Don't you dare use that word! "

Reilly flicked the butt of his cigarette away.

" Ah, c'mon Helen, it's a man's word! "

" You're not a man then. Not a whole one."

It hurt.

" I was a man once," he said, his head bowed.

He was furious. He wanted to shout at her, to call her those other names he had for her, those pent - up, obscene names, he was afraid even to think when she was present. His hands tore restlessly at each other. He thought he was going to cry.

" I've been around," he said, collecting himself. " I've used that word. And I've done it too! Lots of times! With lots of different women! Better than you! "

" Weren't you the lucky boy then! Born with a silver spoon!" He was no match for her. He pleaded with her, his hands outstretched.

" Why are you such a..... so bloody - minded today? What's wrong? Why do you hate me so much? "

There was pain in his voice but she said nothing. He shook his head.

" Henry not taking care of you," he suggested quietly.

He turned the chair around and pushed it into the centre of the room to a round, bare table with a lamp on it. He reached out and pulled a short, knotted cord that switched the light on. It shone through a tasselled shade of a delicate, peach colour, its glow soft and blurred. He left the packet of cigarettes down on the edge of the table and shook one out. He lit it and spiralling, pungent smoke curled into the heart of the light, wrapping blackly round it.

" Artists," he said contemptuously, " artists don't know how to take care of women."

He wheeled himself across the room to a chest of drawers. He opened the top drawer and pulled a small, tied, black leather purse out. He shoved the purse roughly down inside his trousers. From the bottom of the drawer he pulled out a bottle of whisky and two glasses.

" You'll have a glass? "

" No."

" C'mon, just one...."

He poured the whisky. Holding both glasses in one hand he wheeled himself back to her. She took one from him. She spun the whisky in the bottom of the glass and watched it turning. She seemed to be softening.

" When's Henry going to get a proper job then? "

" He paints."

" Painting's not a job," Reilly laughed, " painting's a pastime. A hobby."

" You can't understand, " she said with frustration. " I'm tired of trying to explain things to you."

" No, no, I understand! Really. Henry's an artist. Work, real work, would kill him. It'd kill his soul. We mustn't let any harm come to his soul."

It was almost night out. They heard the wind rushing in the branches of the trees. In the distance they saw purple lightning flashes tearing the darkness.

" Lucky boy, Henry, he has body and soul."

He drew on his cigarette and sipped his whisky. It burned in his mouth and throat. He liked that sensation of burning. It took his pain away.

" And he has you. Lucky boy, Henry, to have you. I'd give my soul to have you."

" Henry is pure," she said indifferently, tossing the remark away, without any element of taunting him, " you're not. I mean, do you have a soul? You're just a crippled body maybe? "

" I have no illusions about myself," he said. " I'm just a poor cripple. You're right, I was only talking, I have no soul. I've nothing but dreams, wild, bad, dreams...."

" You're so full of self - pity! "

" Why are you so full of contempt for me? Why? "

" You want to use me! You dream of using me! That's the only dream you have! "

" Helen," he pleaded with her again, " I only want....."

" to appreciate me! I know. I get a lot of appreciation from men! "

" It's more than that. It's much more than that. You

have no idea, Helen. You can't even begin to imagine what I feel for you."

If he could he would have screamed his insults at her. He could hardly speak. His words choked him. Angrily he stubbed his cigarette out near her on the window ledge. She pulled the edge of her skirt away from the stabbing, burning, stub.

" Why can't you be nice to me?" he said. " Why can't you say nice things to me? Why don't you tell me nice things about yourself? "

His voice regained, he caressed her with it.

" Like the time you told me what it felt like making love. Like doves you said. Like white - winged doves taking flight inside you. Their wings making a hot, summer, wind in you, like licking flames. Grace, you said. That wonderful word, the only one you could find. Sweet fire and grace. Do you remember? "

" Please, Reilly."

" Henry on top of you smells your perfume, is licked by your sweet flames, he knows all your grace...."

" Stop it, Reilly! "

" Why can't I? With my voice only.... I was a man once. I need your grace! "

" You exhaust me! I'll have to go. I need some money though!"

She stepped away from the window pulling her jacket tight about her as if to leave.

" No, don't go! Please don't go! I'm sorry! "

Like a trap, her voice snapped shut on him.

" It'll cost you more than! "

He pulled the purse up from his trousers and brandished it at her.

" I've all you want."

She smiled for the first time, her lips twisting in wry, subdued laughter.

" Don't be ridiculous. There's no need to surrender your dignity too."

He shoved the purse back inside his pants.

" No fear," he said bitterly. " I left that behind me in the world of two - legged men."

She moved away from him, walking slowly around the room, still laughing quietly to herself.

" The world of two - legged men? "

" Yeah, Henry's world. Your world! "

" What do you know of my world."

He followed in her orbit about the room pushing the wheels of the chair slowly.

" Your world smells of sweet perfume."

" I'll be reeking of cigarette by the time I get out of here."

" You're not wearing perfume today. Is that to hurt me?"

"

" No, silly! What an idea! I wouldn't do anything to hurt you, Reilly. I forgot.... that's all. I forgot to put some on."

" You know how much I look forward to it. Then, when you leave, the perfume lingers after you, like a kiss."

" Like a kiss? "

" Like the taste of a woman's mouth. Lipstick."

" Is that all? Like lipstick on your face? "

" No, like sex! It's like an atmosphere of sex in the room afterwards! "

" Oh, Reilly," she laughed, " you almost succeed in moving me! "

He stopped the chair dead, hoping. Her hand entered the circle of light above the table. She rubbed dust off the bare wood with her fingers. She looked grimly at it.

" I find this place so depressing, Reilly. Look, dust everywhere. And no chairs. I can do without chairs and you can have the pleasure of watching me stand but why not hang some paintings up? Some of Henry's stuff would look good here. I'm thinking particularly of one of his called: " Broken Dreams. " It's a woman lying on a bed. She's just had an orgasm. "

Helen sighed.

" But then Henry's stuff is so expensive. I don't think you could afford anything of his. "

" I have something. I'll show you," Reilly said eagerly.

He wheeled himself over to the chest of drawers and pulled a large square of thick paper out. He held it up in front of his face for her to see. It was a dark, tattered print. A black hawk fallen from the air held a torn and bloodied hair in its talons. She took it from him and put it under the lamp to look closely at. In the lamplight her eyes shone with vague amusement.

" It's quite bleak really, isn't it," she said. " It's

not Henry's style. There's too much of that old, Victorian, disgust for living in it! I don't like it! "

" But you can appreciate it, can't you? The horror of it. The hawk is the unseen predator coming out of nowhere. The hare has no chance. No matter how fast he runs he will be caught. He can only hope to die quickly. It's pure terror! "

" It's morbid," she said with revulsion. " It makes me feel sick."

With sudden, sweeping bravado, as if congratulating himself for some success, Reilly announced loudly.

" From now on I shall call it: " Broken Dreams ". For you and Henry! For all three of us! "

He filled the whisky glass, lit another cigarette. He wheeled himself into the bay of the window, looking out at the night. Helen stood at the table, transfixed by the ugliness of the print, the expression on her face, a mixture of fascination and awe.

" Reilly, is this you? "

" I'm no hare, for fuck sake..."

" Tell me! "

He turned abruptly on her, the chair swinging round.

" I don't want your compassion. The past is past. Forget it! I live for now! "

He spun himself close to her, inside the compass of light.

" To see you! That's what I live for! "

Without a word she left the print down on the table and edged out of the circle of peach light that, for a moment,

had enclosed them together. With his voice he reached out to hold her, to stop her moving away from him.

" You know it all, Helen. The moment I set eyes on you I began to live again. Not in the world or in the way of two - legged men. No. Never again in that world. I began to live again in my own world, my legless, broken world, in my legless, broken way! "

His voice strained towards her impelled by a tremendous force building up inside him. He went on.

" Do you know what I thought when I saw you for the first time? I thought this woman has the beauty of the devil! That you would steal my soul away. And you did! I'm nothing now without you! I was crippled before but you broke me utterly. You smashed me into tiny bits and pieces that could never be put back together again. The beauty of it was that then you resurrected me. You raised me up. You held me in your hands and you let me fly out of them like a little bird from the hands of a magician. But I flew straight into the desert of your love... Your terrible... entrancing beauty, I paid in full for this long before I met you. I bought you with my legs. I'd do it again! "

His voice was savage. It ripped through the circle of light to get at her and clawed her. She was almost afraid of him. His eyes followed her with a febrile, intense light as she moved further away from him, her eyes averted. His body was shaking with the storm surging inside him, his hands gripped tightly on the sides of the chair.

" I've paid in full for this torture," he cried out. " What are you waiting for? Why are you holding back? Destroy

me, kill me, murder me! C'mon! What's wrong? Are you afraid? I'm not! Do your damnest! C'mon! Be merciless! No pity! Hurt me! Hurt me! C'mon!"

" I need one hundred pounds," she said.

The storm in him abated with sudden, imploding force. He seemed to collapse in on himself as if his explosion of words had created a vacuum into which he was now being sucked. He fumbled blindly for the purse inside the waist of his trousers. His fingers struggled with the leather string that closed it. He pulled out a tight wad of notes and held it up for her. She swept into the circle of light and grabbed the money from his hand. She counted it. There was more than two hundred pounds. She folded it up tightly again and put it into her jacket pocket.

" Tell Henry to keep the change," Reilly said wryly. " Lucky Henry."

She collected herself as if to leave.

" No, don't go yet! Five more minutes. That's all. Please."

She sighed with impatience.

" Just five minutes then. You know, Reilly, I'm getting very tired of listening to you."

She walked back to the window and leaned, in seeming fatigue, against the wooden frame. It was night out, but calm, the storm had moved away and the lightning had exhausted itself. In the silence they could hear the wind whispering through the darkness. It made a haunting sound. Reilly wheeled the chair over to her, positioning it like a barrier beside her, hemming her in. He held his glass of

whisky up to her in silent interrogation. She shook her head.

" No, no more whisky," she told him, her voice tired.

Reilly emptied the glass, throwing the whisky back into his mouth. He put the empty glass down on the window ledge beside the stubbed out cigarette butt. They remained for one or two moments in complete silence. Reilly listened to the wind. Finally, she said,

" I have to go now."

Reilly nodded.

" Henry will be waiting."

" Yes, he will."

" Go then."

He reversed the chair away from her. He put on a mask of indifference as she moved around him to leave the room, brushing against his chair as she went. Her movements had all the haste and furtiveness of an escape. There were no goodbyes. He turned in time to see the door shutting behind her.

" What has made you what you are?" he asked, as her absence gripped like a hand on his throat.

He pushed the chair over to the window. All he could see outside was a movement of darkness like a shadow amongst shadows floating away from him. He saw his own reflection, sitting wheelchair bound in the darkened window, more clearly. The sight disgusted him.

It was always like this every time she left. He felt as if he couldn't go on. He wanted to end it all, to finish himself off, to put paid to everything. He spun the chair

around the room in sharp stops and starts, his body lurching and jolting with the shocks. He drove himself painfully against the edge of the table, knocking the lamp over, sending it spinning. Its light rolled backwards and forwards around the room. Inside the focused light from the narrow opening in the shade, under Reilly's eyes, the hawk savaged the hare in an unending moment of pain. Blood streamed abundantly from the torn body across grasses and stones that also seemed twisted in pain. Reilly began to cry. He did not know why. He did not know if it was for himself or for the torn and bleeding hare caught in the hawk's claws. It did not matter. In a way, his way, he felt curiously detached, as if his tears were those of another man. Tears, he would say, belong to the world of two - legged men.

From the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers he pulled out two plastic legs and flung them away. He pulled out a thick scrapbook he opened flatly on the stumps of his legs. He turned the chair about the room in a restless, incessant movement, building up speed all the time. He leafed feverishly through a flurry of newspaper cuttings and photographs that fell from the open pages of the scrapbook.

" That's the boy, Johnny," he repeated excitedly to himself as the chair spun round faster and faster. " That's the boy! "

He would never forget it. That's the boy, Johnny! The supporters' voices ringing in his ears as he ran the fastest mile. Or a woman's voice as she pulled him closer to her. There was a photograph of him in swimming trunks, with a lean, muscular, tanned body, whole, standing with his arms

around the shoulders of two, lightly dressed, laughing blonde women, whose names he could not remember. A newspaper heading underneath read in bold capitals, registering the shock, the force of the blast,

CHAMPION RUNNER LOSES LEGS IN BOMB BLAST AT BORDER.

His broken body punctuated at the end of that headline with a full stop.

He turned the chair round and round the room in and out of the lopsided peach coloured lamplight. He crashed into the chest of drawers and swung round hard against the table again. The edge of the table struck his ribs with brutal force. The pain was sharp as a blade slicing across his rib cage. He reached out desperately for the whisky bottle and poured the whisky down his throat. It burned him. It burned right into the heart of his pain. It made his heart pump and kick inside his chest. It made him dizzy. It took his breath away, his lungs straining through the whisky's fire. It was like the last lap of a fast race, his heart pounding, his mind a blur, his lungs on fire, his feet running to the endline. He was almost there, he told himself, he was almost there. He took the stumps of his legs in his hands and rocked them.

And his legs carried him back there again, as they had so many times before, running faster than they ever had when they were whole. Running back, in spite of him, to the world

of two - legged men.

The car was rolling along. It was summer, with a warm breeze flowing through the open window. Swallows dipped and darted in front of the windscreen. The trees on either side waved with the wind and the passage of the car. Suddenly the summer wind was wild as storm. The trees on either side of him twisted and splintered like matchsticks. There was a sudden, engulfing blackness shot through with a purple lightning flash and he could feel the wind pick him up, spin him round and then swallow him whole. He flew away in the darkness, twisting through the noise of crashing metal that thundered in his ears. His arms reached out in a futile attempt to hold the air and he swung helplessly about in the abandon of space.

Dead, not dead. Near him, its tiny body crushed to a mush of black and white feathers and streaming blood, the swallow's small head twitched frantically. Reilly, flat on his back on the blood streaked road, stretched out his hand and picked it up. He held the warm, palpitating mess cradled in his palm. With a weak flick of his wrist he threw the bird inches into the air. It hovered for a second then fell back down heavily into the embrace of his fingers. He grasped it, held it tightly, pressed his force into it and threw it again inches high. The bird fell back again.

" Go on, little bird. Fly."

It lay there lifeless, its head not striving, searching for flight, its blood rippling through wind - kissed, broken

feathers. That was all. Reilly closed his hand on the bird and raised it up high this time. With all the strength he had left he flung his arm forwards releasing the bird from his fist. Its body wheeled away from him through the air.

" Fly," he said. " Fly! "

THE END.