

Helena

A Short Story

by

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A cold wind blew over Helena's face. She pulled her scarf up to her nose, being sure to cover her ears, and trudged forward. She kept her head down, only looking up when she needed to cross the road. The bitter cold stung her face, turning it red and making her grit her teeth from the pain. She waited at the corner for the crosswalk to change.

She watched a great deal of customers come and go to the drug store across the street. Some were wrapped tight like her but others looked as if they had been in a street fight. Men with torn pants and no shirt, women with ripped sleeves and blood caked on their faces.

In a moment she would be one of those customers, running in for some children's cough syrup then running back home to administer it to her baby boy. It was unusually busy for this time of day but she had come this far already. She could feel her fight or flight reflex creeping up but she forced it back down. She hated crowds and she almost never ventured out during the day. But her son needed that medicine.

The traffic light turned and Helena made her way with the crowd around her to the drug store. A nice young man greeted her as she entered the pharmacy.

"Good morning," the young man said.

Helena pulled her scarf back down below her chin and smiled at the man. "Morning." She began taking off her gloves as she asked him about the cough syrup. "Where do you keep the cough syrup for infants?" Helena glanced down at the man's name tag and saw that it said 'Phil'. This made her smile. Her father's name had been Phil. Her smile quickly faded.

"Yes," Phil was all smiles and seemed genuinely happy to her, "Go all the way down this first aisle, turn left, and it'll be right there at the corner." She was nervous and a bit jumpy being out this early and around so many people. Phil's happiness helped her feel at ease. Just then a loud scream came from the direction he was pointing, followed by a large crash.

Helena watched several bottles of medicine roll across the aisle down where she was supposed to be going. Phil ran to the end of the aisle and disappeared around the corner. Unsure of what just happened, she decided to stay up around the register until the young man came back. As she waited, several more customers entered.

A few of them looked as if they could use some medication. Helena could feel that fight or flight reflex working its way back up. She noted that some of the sicker looking ones were covered in gashes and bleeding from open wounds. One of them came barreling towards her and nearly ran her over.

"Move!" a very sick looking man, she thought he appeared to be dying, nearly ran her over. He was clutching a bottle of something in each hand as he ran past her. She heard more yelling and crashing from the direction that Phil had gone. Helena decided that the cough syrup could wait.

She hastily put her gloves back on and headed back out into the cold. This time, rather than keeping her head down against the cold and keeping to herself as she did on the way here, Helena surveyed the streets and looked at the people coming and going around her. Everyone she saw seemed to have one thing in common. They were sick, almost corpse-like, and they all looked angry.

All the sick looking people around her made her uneasy so she hurried back to the lodge where she had been staying. The cold wind was whipping faster now but still she walked as fast as she could. Some of them yelled at her, others moaned as they walked by. Helena paid no attention to any of them. Her only thought was getting home where it was warm, home where

her son was waiting.

As she finally came upon Arnett's Lodge, she let out a sigh of relief. Helena approached the second room and found the door standing open. She paused, saw the key still in the doorknob, and hurried to the door.

Fear crawled into Helena's mind like a spider scurrying into a dark crevice. Quick and deliberate it took hold and began eating its way through her. Her boyfriend Tommy was supposed to be inside with her infant son. Her mind flashed to a moment when she was a child. The night her father left. Shaking the bad memory away, she considered going to get the manager but then remembered her morning so far and thought better of it.

She told herself that he must be sleeping and forgot to close the door. She knew it was crap. She turned her thoughts to her son. Helena quietly let herself in and turned to the bedroom. There she saw her son, Arnold, curled up on the bed asleep.

On her way to the bed she looked in the bathroom but it was empty. The whole place was empty except for her son. She pulled a blanket over his small frame and sat on the bed beside him. She couldn't believe that Tommy would just leave him.

The crawling fear was beginning to be replaced by shards of worry. Why had he left her? Why had he left Arnold? Was he a part of this? She always thought that Tommy was different. That he wasn't like the other guys who left or cheated. It was then that she realized Tommy wasn't different. She lied to herself so that she didn't have to be alone.

Her mind drifted back to her father's leaving. A tear formed in the corner of her eye. She rubbed Arnold's back while using her free hand to remove her cell phone from the nightstand drawer. She thought maybe Tommy had tried to call but since she had forgotten her phone he couldn't get ahold of her. The missed calls list did nothing to wash away her fears.

She had always known that Arnold scared Tommy. He wasn't up for being a dad. Especially to a son that wasn't his. The past few weeks, things had seem good and Tommy was happy. At least she thought he was. She cursed him for being a coward then cursed herself for being a fool. She was better off on her own, just her and Arnold. Men just chewed you up and spit you back out like old beef jerky.

There was a loud hum, like an air conditioner sound outside. The sound was growing louder by the minute and this odd sound tore her away from her cell. She went to the large window that faced the main road and threw open the curtain. The sound continued to grow louder so she continued to watch. A few minutes went by before she saw something coming over the hill. It took her a moment but soon realized that it wasn't a something coming over the hill but someone. Filling up the street from one side to the other and going as far back as she could see was a crowd of people.

Helena ran over and shut the front door and shoved the keys in her pocket. She locked all three locks and went back to the window. That was where she saw Mr. Vargas, from room one, walk out to meet the crowd. She couldn't make out what he was saying but the crowd didn't seem to be listening. One of the men grabbed Mr. Vargas by the hair and head butted him. Vargas went down and several others in the crowd went down after him.

Frantically she tried to dial 911 but her cell but was getting no signal. The crowd was now pushing against her window. The people in front were banging their arms against the glass. She noticed that they all appeared pale and sickly. Fresh blood ran from one woman's nose, another was missing part of her cheek.

The young man in front of her looked her in the eyes and let out a loud moan. She saw that he was wearing an apron and a name tag. His name tag said Phil. Her hand went to her mouth in shock. Her thoughts went back to her father; only this time instead of leaving he was banging on the window. She began to cry.

Helena grabbed the comforter off of the bed and went to the bathroom, locking herself inside. She took Arnold into the tub and wrapped them both in the blanket. She didn't know what else to do. Tears fell from her eyes as she hugged Arnold. A face pressed against the bathroom window and banged on the glass. Helena's eyes met the eyes at the window just for a second. Long enough to see sorrow in those eyes. As what used to be Tommy continued to bang on the glass above her the tears fell more freely. She looked down at her son and kissed his forehead. Arnold continued to sleep.

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