

An Issue of Blood

It all began when Helen Jacobson started to bleed. It was morning and the young woman awoke with a heavy sense of foreboding. The previous night had filled Helen's head with violently queer images that prevented the full veil of sleep to enclose her. The familiar dream of running freely through golden wheat fields below indigo skies did not come that night. Instead, images of cold black stillness darted in out of her shifting state of unconsciousness. The vision plagued Helen the whole night, causing her body to writhe in mental agony. It was the warm sticky sensation that liberated Helen from the night terror, only to trap her in a waking nightmare. In a panicked haste she jumped from the bed and grabbed for the kerosene lamp that sat cold on the bed side table. Even before her eyes could adjust to the shock of the hot glow that cut through the pre-dawn bleakness, Helen knew what she would find. She had been told it would happen to the other girls but it would never happen to her. They told her it was a sign of God's promise to her. But somehow she always knew it would happen.

The mattress, linens, and nightgown were all unclean; and she knew that unclean things needed to be destroyed, but Helen could only stand motionless by the side of her bed, clutching the paraffin lamp in her childlike grasp. The vivid crimson hue of the liquid transfixed the young woman so that the inclination to strip the bedclothes from the mattress and hide the shameful evidence, far from sight proved to be weaker than her fascination with the red blotches. Helen knew there were consequences for bleeding, but she could not deny the awkward serenity that the blood soaked sheets gave her. But as the revealing morning light dissipated the shadows of early dawn, the young woman was forced to conceal her shameful curiosity in folds of the soiled sheets.

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Despite the vigorous zeal of her morning ablution, Helen did not feel clean and so, she could only allow herself to stand in the doorway of the kitchen as her mother turned the blue gingham dress into rags. She could tell her mother was aware of her presence and she knew why her mother could not look at her. Still, she did not dare call attention to herself

for fear that the older woman might sense the poisonous transgression that had caused her affliction. Silently she waited for her mother's acknowledgement, as she watched the disheartened woman reduce Helen's childhood dress into uniform swatches of cloth.

"You were wearing this dress when you healed the Petrie boy," Mrs. Jacobson recalled. "You were 11 years old and didn't even know what hemophilia was." The woman did not lift her eye to her daughter for fear that she would cry. She continued her task in silence, cutting out the last rectangle of cloth and adding it to the stack. She placed the scissors in the wicker mending basket and crumpled the remnants of the dress into a tight ball and placed it on top of the shears. With long-worn fingers, she latched the metal clasp on the sewing kit and pushed the stack of cloths across the table toward her daughter.

"Are you mad at me, mama?" Helen asked in a small voice.

"You know I will always love you," her mother professed.

"But are you mad at me, mama?"

"If this is God's will then we---we must abide."

The older woman stood up from the cherry table, her weary face not once turning to look at the glum figure in the doorway.

"Maybe the prophecy was wrong," Helen suggested. "I might still be able to heal. I'm still as innocent as I was the day I healed Benjamin Petrie," she declared.

"The Lord came to me nineteen years ago, right after the first miracle." Mrs. Jacobson uttered in a scolding tone. Her eyes alighted on the girl for the only the second time that morning: "The Lord told me you would remain – you would remain. It was the Lord's promise to us...to this town." The tears that the older woman fought hard to keep from flowing were unleashed by her anger. "To say that prophecy is wrong is an offense to me and the Lord our God."

Helen stepped forward and flung her arms around her mother's slender shoulders.

"I didn't mean it, Mama. I just don't want you to be mad at me," the daughter sobbed.

"God's wrath is the only anger you should fear, child," Mrs. Jacobson chided.

With doleful contrition, Helen bowed her head. She knew that it would never be so.

"I don't know what the Lord is trying to say to you; but as believers **we** know that in times of trials we are to seek his word," Helen's mother advised. "Before you begin your daily prayers and devotion, I suggest you seek counsel in Leviticus 15 and Luke 8."

An eerie shiver seized Helen as she took in her mother's words. She knew the scriptures well.

Like other lonely walks through the town of Bedford, Helen was unaware of the furtive glances that her neighbors cast her way. As a small girl, she had learned to avert her teary eyes from the probing stares of the curious townspeople; not out of self-preservation, but out of fear of her mother's severe irritation.

"There is nothing to cry about, you foolish child," her mother would scold at her through clenched teeth. Then, invariably Mrs. Jacobson would quote the Psalm "They reward me evil for good to the spoiling of my soul..."

Young Helen taught herself to rebuke the spirit of anguish that fought hard to stir her little soul to tears, so the adult Helen instinctively took no notice of the penetrating stares of the men, who passed her without even a perfunctory tip of their hats or the frightened gawks of the children (many of whom she had laid her healing hand upon to rescue them from feverish deaths) or the fretful glances of their mothers, who not long ago had been the adolescent girls that shunned her in Sunday school.

Helen walked, clutching her worn Bible in her petite hands as she passed rapidly over the paved streets. Though she knew she was in no jeopardy of being detained by a friendly greeting, she worried that some unseen force would impede her search for absolute solitude. Quickly she moved, over the cobblestone street that was lined with quietly busy merchants, passed the silent church yard, through the hushed graveyard and to the middle of the sun-kissed field of ruby colored poppies, where the great gnarled walnut tree stood. Grateful for the pleasing sight of the tree, Helen made her way across the vast pasture, bruising the heads of the delicate poppies beneath her light step until she reached the ring shaped patch of grass where the blossoms dared not grow for fear that tree's overpowering shade would smother them. It was underneath the lush boughs of the mighty tree where she found sanctuary, like she had done many times before. This was her secret place, her place of reprieve, the place where no prophecies existed, the place where no one needed to be healed, and the place where she could just be. Reverently, the young woman removed her straw hat and placed her well-worn Bible inside; she hid the bundle beneath the north side of the tree's massive trunk before lying down on the opposite side. It was then and only then that she allowed herself to think of blood.

Her mind yearningly drifted back to the hot summer night, a year before. Memories of white sheets soaked with thick red fluid filled her mind. She recalled the color and she thought the redness of the poppies were pale compared to the vibrant intensity of the blood. She remembered the enticing guilt, the mortifying pleasure that excited her tiny womb as she gaped at the bloody sheets. But it was not the blood itself that gripped her, making her heart quiver with furious envy: it was the humanity of the scene. The new mother lay listless on the bed, her life force draining swiftly from her body. From the other room, the needy cry of a starving infant could be heard. The beautifully somber memory was etched into Helen's

mind, appearing only when she dared to indulge her sinful nature. But despite the aspiration to remain the pure and innocent barer of God's work, that her mother believed her to be, Helen sincerely coveted the existence of the dying woman. She would have forsaken a score of restored lives to create just one...

Guilty tears streamed down Helen's face as she recognized her wickedness.

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The burns on nine-year-old Ethan Sherwood covered his face, hands and chest. The boy's screams echoed across the field of alfalfa. His mother tried desperately to comfort the boy but she knew her soothing words were futile. The fire that was still consuming the barn one hundred yards away had charred the young child all the way down to the bone. The smoldering wounds were so horrid that even the brave man that rescued him from the fire vomited when he saw the injuries.

"Get Helen," was the only thing Mother could say, between loving attempts to calm her son.

The courageous man managed to collect himself enough to jump on his horse and direct the galloping mustang to the Jacobson farm.

"We need Helen. It's Ethan Jr." the man told Mrs. Jacobson when she opened the door. "He's bad off. We have to hurry."

The worry that had plagued the woman for the past few weeks had not prepared her for this moment. She knew that it would not be long before some towns person would come to the door, in need of a miracle, like they had done for the past 19 years. The woman tried to think of an explanation for why Helen could not help the poor Sherwood boy but the weeks of apprehension about this very moment had not prepared her for the surreal situation.

"I am ready, Mr. Severt." Helen wrapped her white shawl around her narrow shoulders, gave her bewildered mother a hopeful smile and followed the man out of the door.

Helen had healed burns before. At the age of thirteen, young Helen had been ushered one night, in the twilight hours, to the town's clinic. Helen could remember the bitter smell of antiseptic and ether that wafted through the air of the dim halls that led to the lonely hospital bed. As Helen clung tightly to man's coat as the horse swiftly carried the rider and the passenger to the boy she recalled that somber night and the wonder that followed. The ordinarily vigorous Farmer Harris lay prone, in a morphine-induced listlessness on bleached white hospital sheets. Helen's mother had held her tiny hand as they made their way across the large room. The nurse that sat vigil by the dying man's bed attempted to explain the

extent of the injuries that blistered the farmer's back.

"She doesn't need to know," Mrs. Jacobson informed the nurse. "Her hands belong to the Lord; He knows all."

The mother released her daughter's hand. She nodded her head and backed away so that the child could perform the Lord's work. Helen felt the unwelcome tingle charge through her extremities as her innocent eyes beheld the gruesome mosaic of yellow, purple and blackened flesh. Tears formed in her hazel eyes as she reached her hand out to touch the man. Helen closed her eyes tight and placed her small fingertips on the necrotic skin. She could hear her mother's faint praises to God as her hands felt the crusty sensation of decay. Even through her closed eyelids, Helen could sense the blinding incandescent aura that emanated from her hands.

"Glory to the Most High" the nurse cried as she fell to her knees. Helen tried to ignore the woman's deafening sobs of wonder for fear that noise would break her concentration. But despite the clamor, the warmth that radiated from her hands only intensified.

Young Helen opened her eyes and gazed at amazement at the man's back. Where moments before there nothing more than charred infected skin, there was now fresh unmarred flesh.

"Glory be," Mrs. Jacobson exclaimed.

"Glory be," Helen whispered.

The Sherwood boy had been moved a bedroom in the family's home. Helen made her way through the tiny room, weaving her way through the group of somber faces that has assembled in the room. Dr. Mitchum stood by the head of boy's bed opposite Mrs. Sherwood.

Mrs. Sherwood cried with relief at the sight of Helen. The despair that was palpable in the room quickly alleviated.

"He is under sedation," Dr. Mitchum told her.

Helen took a seat in on the empty wooden chair that sat by the bed. Her very breath caught in her chest as she realized that everyone in the room had shifted their attention from Ethan to her. She was the answer to their prayers. She was their miracle.

Helen winced as she took in image of the boy's bare flesh. Like she had done years before, Helen closed her eyes and placed her hands on the child's wounds. She waited for the warmth and the healing light, but it never came.

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The town's citizens were in grief. That Sunday the Sherwood boy was buried. Every seat in the church was filled. Family and friends mourned the loss of the young boy as the preacher delivered the funeral sermon.

"Do not let your heart be troubled," Reverend Addleson recited from the book of John. The pastor's voice quivered as he continued the verse: "You believe in God; believe in me also" Then without any explanation the dejected man added: "Our anger should not be directed at God".

Helen and her mother were not present to hear the sermon.

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The women of Bedford gossiped that there must be outward signs that Helen has lost her gift. The women made a point to witness the manifestation for themselves. After the women paid their respectful condolences at the Sherwood home, the women called on the Jacobson house. For three days, the women of the town streamed through the Jacobson home; they brought with them cakes, fruit cordials, and puddings. Inside the tiny parlor the women would offer their heartfelt pity.

"The prophecy must have been false," the women would say, shaking their heads.

"We must abide," the mother and daughter would reply.

The women would eye Helen with quiet suspicion, wondering what the young woman must have done to break her covenant with God. The inquisitive visitors examined the young woman hoping to alight on the answer. Helen still possessed the same flawless porcelain skin and the luscious auburn curls that she always had. But subtle features of maturity had begun to become apparent in both her visage and silhouette.

On the third day Mrs. Addleson, the reverend's wife made a visit to the Jacobson home; she brought with her neither cherry cordial, nor cakes, nor pudding. She declared that she brought with her a message from God. Helen ushered the imposing woman inside the parlor where she took a seat on the rose colored couch, opposite her mother.

"Mrs. Jacobson, I have a word from the Lord for you," the Reverend's wife began. "Rebecca, I had a dream."

Helen felt a ghostly pall of discomfort settle over her as she realized that conversation was about her, but not directed at her. The awkwardness of the situation made her hostess tasks of pouring the afternoon tea and slicing the cake difficult. The young woman fought to steady her hand as she handed the revered woman the steaming cup and saucer. Despite the unsettling, she managed to serve the visitor without spilling. Relieved of her task, she gratefully sat down on the couch next to the woman with her own cup of tea and a dainty sliver of cake. The presence of Mrs. Addleson brought a nervousness so taxing that Helen

subconsciously calmed her disquiet by nibbling on the sweet desert.

“Do you no longer say your prayers before a meal, Helen?” the woman scolded. For the first time since the woman had arrived her harsh gaze fixed on Helen.

The once moist morsels of crumb cake suddenly felt like a thousand granules of sand on her tongue.

“I did not mean any offense. I---,”

“Hush, child,” the woman said. Then, in a booming timber Mrs. Addleson recited a blessing over the afternoon repast. The woman took one sip of the tea and turned her focus to the elder Jacobson woman.

“Rebecca, I dreamed that the bleeding stopped. It was the Lord speaking through me. And he told me what you have to do in order to make things right,” the cold woman’s tone of righteous assurance swelled as she began to reprimand the mother. “For nineteen years you have been selfish. You have hidden a *precious* gift from the world. It is not right, Rebecca. The town has abided by your request to retain the secret out of a concern that Helen might be exploited, but we were wrong. And now God has punished us for your and Helen’s spirit of selfishness.

“What do we do, Mae?” Mrs. Jacobson pleaded. “I have dedicated my sleeping hours to intercessory prayer for her soul. I have beseeched the Lord to tell me what I have done to fail her. But he would not speak to me. Now, I realize it is because he knew I would not listen. What do I do, Mae?”

“Just as the Lord came to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the Almighty came to me. In my dream I saw Helen cloaked in white and the Holy Spirit was heavy upon her. The child stood in the calm midst of glory and the multitudes came to her; they came from the north, the south, the east, and the west. They came to be healed.”

Helen watched as her mother leapt from her seat and fell to her knees before the seated prophetess. The feeling of discomfort that had settled over the young woman had been replaced with confused nausea. Although she felt relief to see her mother’s weary face being refreshed with tears of hope, the sadness of doubting the prophecy’s truth brought bitter tears to her eyes. But she could only remain silent.

Mrs. Addleson once again returned her gaze to Helen but she spoke on to the mother.

“Helen must have a surgery.”

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Dr. Mitchum told Helen of the night that she was born. Nearly two decades later, his eyes still gazed over with the wonder of that snowy night. He told Helen about how she was

the only child he had delivered in his 30 years as a physician that had been born with a caul. The superstitious nurse that assisted him told him that the scarlet mask was a good omen. The man of science doubted the wives tale but he could not deny the palpable energy that was upon the newborn.

The old man tried to smile as he spoke of that night but he matter at hand grieved his soul so much that he could not muster the strength.

“Do you realize what having the surgery will mean?” the doctor asked.

The woman nodded her head in acknowledgement.

“Have you asked God if this is his will?”

Perplexed, Helen stared at the aging man. Seeking the Lord’s counsel on a word that had already been promised was tantamount to blasphemy. No matter how dreadful that prophecy was that had been spoke over her life, no matter how adverse her weak soul was at accepting the horrific portents, no matter how sure she was that they were false... She had never prayed against the words.

The perceptive doctor sensed the young woman’s troubled heart.

“I was your first miracle. My arthritic hands were becoming useless. Each passing day brought me nothing but agonizing pain and misery. But you--- your power restored my hands even before you hand completely entered this world. Oh, my dear Helen, what an amazing aura that surrounded you.”

Tears streaked the doctor’s wrinkled cheeks.

“The women speak things of naught over you, Helen,” Dr. Mitchum declared. “I know because the aura has never left you.”

The old man’s sincerity inspired Helen to confess her sin to the physician.

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Mrs. Jacobson sat at the kitchen table silently peeling the meager pile of potatoes for the evening meal. Helen seated herself the chair across from the older woman.

“I’m not going to have the surgery,” Helen told her mother.

Mrs. Jacobson’s brown eyes flashed with anger.

“Wicked child, how dare you defy his word?”

“Not God’s word, Mama; your word.”

The older woman stared in astonishment at her daughter. Helen’s rebellious word had cut her patience to the quick.

“What have you done, Helen, to fall so far from faith? There are rumors—rumors that you turned your back on the Lord. If you refuse to follow his instruction, you will confirm their suspicions and you will be outcast.”

“They can only will impugn my purity, uncover my weakness and be forced to see me as human,” Helen stated with a calm voice.

The seriousness of her daughter exited the mother to anger. But the red hotness of her ire quickly drained from the woman’s face, her hardened cheeks became pale and damp. The words of harsh reprimand that she fought hard to utter transformed into fretful gasps for breath.

Helen rushed to the stricken woman’s side. Her small hand caressed the woman’s clammy skin.

A familiar warmth surged through Helen’s hands. Astonished by the unforeseen return of the power Helen stumbled backwards, away from the ailing woman.

Mrs. Jacobson’s eyes widened as she witnessed the peculiar glow radiating from the small hands.

“Heal me,” the woman struggled to mouth.

But Helen could not move. Her body could only lie frozen with confusion on the hard wooden floor. She could hear her mother’s sobs for help, but she could not bring herself to touch the woman; her inherent need to heal had been sorrowfully misplaced. Helen’s heart ached as she realized her mother knew that she would not touch her.

“I’m sorry,” Helen cried. But her mother only stared at her with blank eyes.

Mrs. Jacobson reached her hand out to touch her daughter, but her feeble hand could only reach as far as the hem of the Helen’s dress.