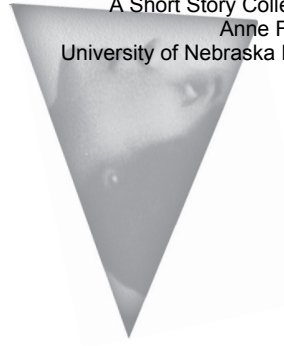


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## Helen and Frida

I'm lying on the couch downstairs in the TV room in the house where I grew up, a farmhouse with sloping floors in upstate New York. I'm nine years old. I've had surgery, and I'm home, my leg in a plaster cast. Everyone else is off at work or school. My mother re-covered this couch by hemming a piece of fabric that she bought from a bin at the Woolworth's in Utica ("Bargains! Bargains! Bargains! Remnants Priced as Marked") and laying it over the torn upholstery. Autumn leaves—carrot, jaundice, brick—drift sluggishly across a liver-brown background. I'm watching the *Million Dollar Movie* on our black-and-white television: today it's *Singin' in the Rain*. These movies always make me think of the world that my mother lived in before I was born, a world where women wore hats and gloves and had cinched-waist suits with padded shoulders as if they were in the army. My mother told me that in *The Little Colonel* Shirley Temple had pointed her finger and said, "As red as those roses over

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there,” and then the roses had turned red and everything in the movie was in color after that. I thought that was how it had been when I was born, everything in the world becoming both more vivid and more ordinary, and the black-and-white world, the world of magic and shadows, disappearing forever in my wake.

Now it’s the scene where the men in blue jean coveralls are wheeling props and sweeping the stage, carpenters shoulder-boarding, moving behind Gene Kelley as Don Lockwood and Donald O’Connor as Cosmo. Cosmo is about to pull his hat down over his forehead and sing, “Make ’em laugh!” and hoof across the stage, pulling open a door only to be met by a brick wall, careening up what appears to be a lengthy marble-floored corridor but is in fact a painted backdrop.

Suddenly all the color drains from the room: not just from the mottled sofa I’m lying on but also from the orange wallpaper that looked so good on the shelf at Streeter’s (and was only \$1.29 a roll), the chipped blue willow plate: everything’s black and silver now. I’m on a movie set, sitting in the director’s chair. I’m grown up suddenly, eighteen or thirty-five.

Places, please!

Quiet on the set!

Speed! the soundman calls, and I point my index finger at the camera, the clapper claps the board, and I see that the movie we are making is called *Helen and Frida*. I slice my finger quickly through the air and the camera rolls slowly forward toward Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo, who are standing on a veranda with balustrades that appear to be made of carved stone but are in fact made of plaster.

The part of Helen Keller isn’t played by Patty Duke this time; there’s no *Miracle Worker* wild child to spunkily rebel in

under one hundred minutes, no grainy film stock, none of that Alabama sun that bleaches out every soft shadow, leaving only harshness, glare. This time Helen is played by Jean Harlow.

Don't laugh: set pictures of the two of them side by side and you'll see that it's all there, the fair hair lying in looping curls against both faces, the same broad-cheeked bone structure. Imagine that Helen's eyebrows are plucked into a thin arch and penciled, lashes mascared top and bottom, lips cloisonné vermilion. Put Helen in pale peach mousseline de soie, hand her a white gardenia; bleach her hair from its original honey blond to platinum, like Harlow's was; recline her on a *Bombshell* chaise with a white swan gliding in front, a palm fan being waved overhead, while an ardent lover presses sweet nothings into her hand.

I play the part of Frida Kahlo.

It isn't so hard to imagine that the two of them might meet. They moved, after all, in not so different circles, fashionable and radical: Helen Keller meeting Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford, joining the Wobblies, writing in the *New York Times*, "I love the red flag . . . and if I could I should gladly march it past the offices of the *Times* and let all the reporters and photographers make the most of the spectacle"; Frida, friend of Henry Ford and Sergei Eisenstein, painting a hammer and sickle on her body cast, leaving her bed in 1954, a few weeks before her death, to march in her wheelchair with a babushka tied under her chin, protesting the overthrow of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala.

Of course, the years are all wrong, but that's the thing about the *Million Dollar Movie*: during Frank Sinatra Week, on Monday Frank would be young and handsome in *It*

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*Happened in Brooklyn*, on Tuesday he'd have gray temples and crow's-feet, be older than my father, on Wednesday be even younger than he had been on Monday. You could pour the different decades in a bowl together and give them a single quick fold with the smooth edge of a spatula, the way my mother did when she made black-and-white marble cake from two Betty Crocker mixes. It would be 1912, and Big Bill Haywood would be waving the check Helen had sent over his head at a rally for the Little Falls strikers, and you, Frida, would be in the crowd, not as a five-year-old child, before the polio, before the bus accident, but as a grown woman, cheering along with the strikers. Half an inch away it would be August 31, 1932, and both of you would be standing on the roof of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, along with Diego, Frida looking up through smoked glass at the eclipse of the sun, Helen's face turned upward to feel the chill of night descending.

Let's get one thing straight right away. This isn't going to be one of those movies where they put their words into our mouths. This isn't *Magnificent Obsession*: blind Jane Wyman isn't going to blink back a tear when the doctors tell her they can't cure her after all, saying, "And I thought I was going to be able to get rid of these," gesturing with her ridiculous rhinestone-studded, cat's-eye dark glasses (and we think, "Really, Jane"); she's not going to tell Rock Hudson she can't marry him—"I won't have you pitied because of me. I love you too much," and "I could only be a burden"—and then disappear until the last scene when, as she lingers on the border between death and cure (the only two acceptable states), Rock saves her life and her sight and they live happily ever after. It's not going to be *A Patch of Blue*: when the sterling

young Negro hands us the dark glasses and, in answer to our question, “But what are they for?” says, “Never mind, put them on,” we’re not going to grab them, hide our stone Medusa gaze, grateful for the magic that’s made us a pretty girl. This isn’t *Johnny Belinda*: we’re not sweetly mute, surrounded by an aura of silence. No, in this movie the blind women have milky eyes that make the sighted uncomfortable. The deaf women drag metal against metal, oblivious to the jarring sound, make odd cries of delight at the sight of the ocean, squawk when we are angry.

So now the two female icons of disability have met: Helen, who is nothing but, who swells to fill up the category, sweet Helen with her drooping dresses covering drooping bosom, who is Blind and Deaf, her vocation; and Frida, who lifts her skirt to reveal the gaping, cunt-like wound on her leg, who rips her body open to reveal her back, a broken column, her back corset with its white canvas straps framing her beautiful breasts, her body stuck with nails; but she can’t be Disabled, she’s Sexual.

Here stands Frida, who this afternoon in the midst of a row with Diego cropped off her jet black hair (“Now see what you’ve made me do!”), and has schlepped herself to the ball in one of his suits. Nothing Dietrichish and coy about this drag: Diego won’t get to parade his beautiful wife. Now she’s snatched up Helen and walked with her out here onto the veranda.

In the other room drunken Diego lurches, his body rolling forward before his feet manage to shuffle themselves ahead on the marble floor, giving himself more than ever the appearance of being one of those children’s toys, bottom-

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weighted with sand, that when punched roll back and then forward, an eternal red grin painted on its rubber face. His huge belly shakes with laughter, his laughter a gale that blows above the smoke curling up toward the distant gilded ceiling, gusting above the knots of men in tuxedos and women with marcelled hair, the black of their satin dresses setting off the glitter of their diamonds.

But the noises of the party, Diego's drunken roar, will be added later by the foley artists.

Helen's thirty-six. She's just come back from Montgomery. Her mother had dragged her down there after she and Peter Fagan took out a marriage license and the Boston papers got hold of the story. For so many years men had been telling her that she was beautiful, that they worshipped her, that when Peter declared himself in the parlor at Wrentham she had at first thought this was just more palaver about his pure love for her soul. But no, this was the real thing: carnal and thrilling and forbidden. How could you? her mother said. How people will laugh at you! The shame, the shame. Her mother whisked her off to Montgomery, Peter trailing after them. There her brother-in-law chased Peter off the porch with a good old southern shotgun. Helen's written her poem:

*What earthly consolation is there for one like me  
Whom fate has denied a husband and the joy of  
motherhood? . . .  
I shall have confidence as always,  
That my unfilled longings will be gloriously satisfied  
In a world where eyes never grow dim, nor ears dull.*

Poor Helen, waiting, waiting to get fucked in heaven.

Not Frida. She's so narcissistic. What a relief to Helen! None of those interrogations passing for conversation she usually has to endure (after the standard pile of praise is heaped upon her—I've read your book five, ten, twenty times, I've admired you ever since—come the questions: Do you mind if I ask you, Is everything black? Is Annie Sullivan *always* with you?): no, Frida launches right into the tale of Diego's betrayal. "Of course, I have my fun, too, but one doesn't want to have one's nose rubbed in the shit," she signs into Helen's hand.

Helen is delighted and shocked. In her circles Free Love is believed in, spoken of solemnly, dutifully. Her ardent young circle of socialists wants to do away with the sordid marketplace of prostitution—bourgeois marriage—where women barter their hymens and throw in their souls to sweeten the deal; Helen has read Emma, she has read Isadora; she believes in a holy, golden monogamy, an unfettered eternal meeting of two souls-in-flesh. And here Frida speaks of the act so casually that Helen, like a timid schoolgirl, stutters, "You really? I mean, the both of you, you . . .?"

Frida throws her magnificent head back and laughs. "Yes, really," Frida strokes gently into her hand. "He fucks other women and I fuck other men—and other women."

"F-U-C-K?" Helen asks. "What is this word?"

Frida explains it to her. "Now I've shocked you," Frida says.

"Yes, you have . . . I suppose it's your Latin nature . . ."

I'm not in the director's chair anymore. I'm sitting in the audience of the Castro Theater in San Francisco watching this unfold. I'm twenty-seven. When I was a kid I thought

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being grown up would be like living in the movies, that I'd be Rosalind Russell in *Sister Kenny*, riding a horse through the Australian outback, or that I'd dance every night in a sleek satin gown under paper palms at the Coconut Grove. Now I go out to the movies two, three, four times a week.

The film cuts from the two figures on the balcony to the night sky. It's Technicolor: pale gold stars against midnight blue. We're close to the equator now: there's the Southern Cross and the Clouds of Magellan, and you feel the press of the stars, the mocking closeness of the heavens as you can only feel it in the tropics. The veranda on which we are now standing is part of a colonial Spanish palace built in a clearing in a jungle that daily spreads its roots and tendrils closer, closer. A macaw perches atop a broken Mayan statue and calls, "I am queen / I am queen / I am queen." A few yards into the jungle a spider monkey shits on the face of a dead god.

Wait a minute. What's going on? Is that someone out in the lobby talking? But it's so loud—

Dolores del Rio strides into the film, shouting, "Latin nature! Who wrote this shit?" She's wearing black silk pants and a white linen blouse. She plants her fists on her hips and demands: "Huh? Who wrote this shit?"

I look to my left, my right, shrug, stand up in the audience, and say, "I guess I did."

"Latin nature! And a white woman? Playing Frida? I should be playing Frida."

"You?"

"Listen, honey." She's striding down the aisle toward me now. "I know I filmed that Hollywood crap. Six movies in

one year: crook reformation romance, romantic Klondike melodrama, California romance, costume bedroom farce, passion in a jungle camp among chicle workers, romantic drama of the Russian revolution. I know David Selznick said, 'I don't care what story you use so long as we call it *Bird of Paradise* and Del Rio jumps into a flaming volcano at the finish.' They couldn't tell a Hawaiian from a Mexican from a lesbian. But I loved Frida and she loved me. She painted *What the Water Gave Me* for me. At the end of her life we were fighting, and she threatened to send me her amputated leg on a silver tray. If that's not love, I don't know what is—"

I'm still twenty-seven but now it's the year 2015. The Castro's still there, the organ still rises up out of the floor with the organist playing "San Francisco, open your Golden Gate." In the lobby, alongside the photos of the original opening of the Castro in 1927, are photos in black and white of lounging hustlers and leather queens, circa 1979, a photographic reproduction of the door of the women's room a few years later: "If they can send men to the moon, why don't they?" Underneath, in Braille, Spanish, and English: "In the 1960s, the development of the felt-tip pen, combined with a growing philosophy of personal expression, caused an explosion of graffiti . . . sadly unappreciated in its day, this portion of a bathroom stall, believed by many experts to have originated in the women's room right here at the Castro Theater, sold recently at Sotheby's for \$5 million."

Of course, the Castro's now totally accessible, not just integrated wheelchair seating but every film captioned, an infrared listening device that interprets the action for blind

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people, over which now come the words: “As Dolores del Rio argues with the actress playing Frida, Helen Keller waits patiently—”

A woman in the audience stands up and shouts, “Patiently! What the fuck are you talking about, ‘patiently’? You can’t tell the difference between patience and powerlessness. She’s being ignored.” The stage is stormed by angry women, one of whom leaps into the screen and begins signing to Helen, “Dolores del Rio’s just come out and—”

“Enough already!” someone in the audience shouts. “Can’t we please just get on with the story!”

Now that Frida is played by Dolores, she’s long haired again, wearing one of her white Tehuana skirts with a deep red shawl. She takes Helen’s hand in hers, that hand that has been cradled by so many great men and great women.

“Latin nature?” Frida says and laughs. “I think perhaps it is rather your cold Yankee nature that causes your reaction.” And before Helen can object to being called a Yankee, Frida says, “But enough about Diego . . .”

It’s the hand that fascinates Frida, in its infinite, unpassive receptivity: she prattles on. When she makes the letters “z” and “j” in sign, she gets to stroke the shape of the letter into Helen’s palm. She so likes the sensation that she keeps trying to work words with those letters in them into the conversation. The camera moves in close to Helen’s hand as Frida says, “Here on the edge of the Yucatan jungle, one sometimes see jaguars, although never jackals. I understand jackals are sometimes seen in Zanzibar. I have never been there, nor have I been to Zagreb nor Japan nor the Zermatt, nor Java. I have seen the Oaxacan mountain Zempoaltepec. Once in a