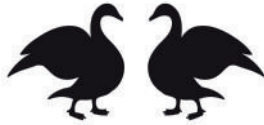


JANE ROSENBERG LAFORGE

## ACCOUNTING



Tokyo was a wooden city. When it burned, it burned without sense. Helen's father, Joe, talked about the firebombing of Tokyo often; if not for the firebombing, he maintained, he might have finished his military service in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. The problem with the firebombing, he said, was its undependability. No one could have predicted the depth of its success. It was supposed to tear the timbers out of buildings, attack the water mains, go for the industries on the east side of the Imperial Palace. It was supposed to be demoralizing, and that it was. But it also went for the children and the women and their one-of-a-kind silks and wartime, protective turbans. They ran from the fire to have their heads in flames, as though they were being punished for their thoughts.

Helen looked for these women when her family was moved to Japan after the war. She wondered how she might identify them. On the civilians she, met Helen searched for burn patterns, evidence of peeling; if she ran her hands over the scars, would they memorize a kind of map of the damage? It got so Helen's mother, Beatrice, had to remind her daughter it was not polite to stare. And she

should not make eye contact, Beatrice said.

"In school we had to hate them," Helen told her mother.

"Don't be impertinent," Beatrice would say back.

Beatrice loved Japan. She loved its sense of measurement, the perfectly timed intervals in its music and tea ceremonies. Helen was taken to lectures on Japanese culture on the base. She learned about geishas and watched color slides of Mount Fuji rip across the screen. At her mother's urging she placed a picture of Mount Fuji under her pillow; to dream of Mount Fuji boded well for spectacular happenings.

But Helen dreamed of nothing in Japan. To her it was an impertinent nation. The Japanese outside the base bowed to her when she bought their souvenirs, but they would not give her directions. She was always lost. Everywhere smelled of raw fish, but it never seemed to be prepared or sold; it was only to be seen on display. There were cherry blossoms but fruit was too expensive. At the base high school, Helen learned about Japan's propensity for earthquakes, its population of volcanoes. The Americans would rebuild this country only for it to be destroyed again.

Helen lived in Japan until her father was promoted. He was made a lieutenant colonel and sent to California. The family never had much of a say about where it would go—Helen's older brother, Richard, was in Switzerland, starting medical college. His admission had been secured when Joe thought he might be sent to Germany. Up from the ashes of Japan they had now come, to be thrown back into the flames. On her first night back in the States, Helen watched refinery flames dissipate in the air, like faces being lifted off flesh.

"What would you like to do here?" Beatrice asked her. They were on the highway, driving toward Terminal Island, where Joe was to be stationed, temporarily, until the Army found him a more suitable placement.

"Would you like to go to college?" Joe asked her.

"Sure," Helen said, although she had never really considered college. Not that it was discouraged for women of her generation; the high school at the base hadn't made plans

for any of its students. The boys were likely to follow their fathers into the military; the girls would follow their fathers to the next post.

"Dependents get into the University of California, no questions," Joe was saying.

"It doesn't matter how you get in, long as you stay in," Beatrice reminded her.

"Not a bad deal," Joe went on. "What do you say, Helen?"

The smell of the refineries would not be ignored. The government-issued car, with its windows rolled-up beyond their frames, offered no protection. In the back seat, Helen felt something approaching panic, of being trapped by the obscenely thick smell of skin disintegrating.

"OK," she agreed, "but not here."

"What about Berkeley, up north? We're likely to be stationed next door, in Oakland."

"Berkeley? What's that like?"

"Clean," Beatrice predicted. "It's supposed to be very clean in the Bay Area."

Any place cleaner than Japan would suit Helen. Any place where she could be sure not to leave an impression. Of her fingerprints, her shoe size, the outline of her body, in the ash. The ash fell not like rain or snow or even hail, irregularly with an unspectacular pace. It fell just as dew reveals itself in sand gardens or short grass, only after close inspection. Wherever Helen walked, whatever she touched, she was certain to leave evidence of her presence. There was no way to be in Japan and erase even the smallest traces of oneself. There was no way to escape the guilt.

The smell and taste of that charred country stayed with Helen in college. Her clothes, skin, and hair were subsumed by it, the residue and resentment of the houses that still simmered and their ceremonial events. It persisted through showers, the perpetual cleaning sessions of her dormitory rooms, the grades she kept polished to a never rounded, average of A. It refused to submit to history and political science classes she took, hours spent in lecture halls reliving treaties and broken armistices. She suspected the taste would

have continued when her father was handed his next transfer. But he was mercifully retired with a back injury, and an upgrade in his pension status.

They were all civilians by the time Helen graduated. She was twenty two years old. Her brother had finished medical college, an internship and a residency; and his required term of service in the Air Force. He wanted to return to the neutral country: Switzerland, a fortress of peace and hygiene. But Switzerland failed him. He died of hepatitis in a sterile Swiss hospital. Helen roamed through San Francisco. She was supposed to look for a job, but felt no need to. There was no need to do any of the things she once did: answer telephones, open mail, secure airplane reservations or board trains, because there was nowhere to travel, no one to visit, no one who would call.

Instead she drank coffee in North Beach as she wore a black turtleneck and a beret, and posed for tourists' pictures with a cigarette holder in her hand.

Joe was offered work with the Defense Department, buying and selling used munitions and aircraft. The family again evacuated, to Los Angeles. For the first time in their lives, Beatrice and Joe were able to purchase their own home. They built a pool in the backyard, and planted the purple-leaf plums and maples they had seen in Japan.

Beatrice played golf. She learned tennis. She found new partners for mah-jongg. From the pool Helen's parents telephoned relatives Back East and asked them to visit. Earthquakes were rare, they promised. They were doing their own gardening. When their pines failed to grow and their ivy turned orange, they tried digging a pond, and populating it with koi. But the orange, yellow and red fish refused to dart about and amuse. Instead they looked like flames in suspension, in the water. Helen's parents loved Los Angeles.

Helen found the air rude: smoky and petulant, but absent of flame. The sun droned on like the blades of a helicopter working surveillance. She felt as though she could still be on a base, with the civilian streets as wide as runways, evacuation routes, scenery for war games. She took a job on the Miracle

Mile at an advertising agency. Even the Los Angeles River was paved. The city contained so much asphalt that it bubbled up through the ground a few blocks from where she worked. It was accompanied by the scent of methane, rash and disturbing. According to the museum Helen visited built to explain this phenomena, this tar had consumed thousands of animals, tons of grass, and one human being.

Then there were brush fires in Los Angeles. Once she was married, to an insurance salesman named Bernard, she discarded her job in favor of sitting on the terrace of the apartment and watching the flames. The city burned at regular intervals, although unlike Japan, the storms were not so elegantly predicted. Homes were said to burn, as well as the roots of trees that kept the hills in place. Yet through Helen's binoculars, these brushfires seemed dainty in comparison. They sampled and chewed, but never spit out their victims.

In the hospital, she could have divulged all of this. But no one seemed interested. They wanted to hear about childbirth and bottle-feeding, child rearing and housework. She told them about her daughters, Janice and Margaret, and the big house her husband eventually bought, with a view of all the neighborhood's swimming pools and shingled roofs. In the evenings Bernard and Joe would sit on the patio together. They smoked cigars, threw the burning butts into the flowerbeds, but there were no consequences. Bernard had wanted to be a farmer, and so planted a jungle bordering the house's other side. When he watered the jungle—banana trees and ferns, ivy and Birds of Paradise—their leaves clung to the kitchen window, as if they had tentacles, and were trying to digest the people inside.

"You have a profound imagination," one doctor, a Cooperman or a Miller, told her during one session.

"I've traveled," she explained.

"Do you miss traveling?"

"I should, obviously."

"This is not about feelings, Mrs. Sanders," he said. "This is about actions."

"This," Helen said, "is about escape."

According to her husband, the next thing Helen said was, "Do you think there could be fire on the moon?" It was all that Dr. Milgram—or was it Miller?—needed to re-authorize her stay. Yet Helen went on with her interrogation of the universe, the official accounts state. Her voice supposedly sounded like a Teletype, with a determination and efficiency that spoke not of her own thoughts, but of dictation. "If it's a sterile atmosphere, wouldn't it just swallow fire? Could the moon be a fireproof planet?"

"There's something unspoken about all these brush fires here, don't you think? Who starts them? Are they planned? Is sitting on top of a million pounds of flammable fuel safe? Is it rational? What do you think of adding another million pounds of flammable oxygen? Is that why the astronauts need so much special training? Shouldn't they just get therapy, like everyone else here?"

"When exactly did the Enlightenment begin? Why did it stop? Shouldn't it have lasted longer, so the Russians could get in on it, so women and Mexicans could—wouldn't that have solved all the problems? Is it fair to go to the moon when we've destroyed every place else on Earth? Shouldn't other people get to go, like the rest of us?"

Had she been diagnosed as a paranoid, Helen might have looked for a tape recorder in the doctor's office. Or she might have noticed the doctor taking notes as she spoke. But paranoia was not among the symptoms identified on Helen's chart. So she had no way of knowing how this speech had managed to follow her everywhere—into the PTA meetings she attended, her children's classrooms, even into the Neighborhood Patrol meetings. Jake, Bernard's best friend, became one of its most ardent followers.

"You think you'll ever stage another moon mission?" Jake asked. It was Labor Day 1970, more than a year after Apollo 11 and Helen's subsequent hospitalization. It was also the summer Jake and Bernard had started a fireworks business, Red Angel Fireworks. Now Jake wanted to expand the operation, call it Red Angel Holidays.

They would sell pumpkins for Halloween and trees at Christmas. Bernard would probably go along with it, considering the mounting costs of Helen's mental illness, even after her strange matriculation.

"Why should I think about that?" Helen asked. She did not like talking to Jake; she never had. If Bernard agreed to this scheme of his—roses at Valentine's, shamrocks in March, and more fireworks, for Chinese New Year's and Noche Buena and any other secular tradition he could exploit—Jake would be in her kitchen, hustling year-round.

"Oh, you know, Helen," he said. After all, everyone else knew. She had not planned it that way, but when she went off, she went off in public. In the backyard to which she gathered most of the neighborhood children the previous summer, Helen tried to build a rocket ship. She thought she was going to the moon. She was going to rendezvous with the Apollo astronauts. From the attic she had stripped the house's insulation for its fiberglass. The girls' bicycles were savaged for gears and other moving parts. She was just a few thousand pounds short of gasoline from blast off when Bernard put a stop to it.

"You always get a thrill when I talk about going nuts, Jake."

"I'd be lying if I claimed disinterest, I confess."

"I wish you wouldn't confess it to me so often."

Jake did not exactly raise his eyebrows, because they always appeared as though they were peeling off. "Oh, I must have broached a delicate topic," he said. His chin and jaw sort of wandered as he talked, as if he didn't want to be held to his own statements. "I'll stop."

"How's Roberta?" Helen asked. She liked Jake's wife, even if Bernard didn't. Bernard called Roberta "Robert," an epithet Jake encouraged, because both men considered her too mannish. She kept the honest living she started before marriage—teaching business at a community college—because she didn't want any of Jake's earnings as an attorney to taint her children's expenses.

"I'm trying not to think about her, just now," Jake said.

Roberta was perhaps the only person who was not afraid of Helen. Two months earlier, Roberta and Jake held a Fourth of July party on their grass and patio. They were celebrating, with Bernard, the success of the new fireworks company. Roberta wore a silken pants suit so white it reminded Helen of static. The men shot off explosives. They used the ends of their cigars to light the fuses; Jake and Bernard, a couple of Roosevelts they thought they were, but with cigars in their mouths, instead of cigarettes. "Safe and sane," their own products were supposedly: fountains, bottle rockets and firecrackers. For the finale they launched something that spit out little comets, bleeding balls of light that scorched the night air with light and sulfur. "Roman candles," Jake boasted. He smuggled them in from Mexico.

There was only one casualty. It could not speak for itself but it left behind a scent—acid and tickling—that verged on the familiar to Helen. There had been a tree, perhaps a sapling, sagging over Jake and Roberta's yard from the neighbor's yard. Or perhaps it was a full-grown tree that had been neglected, or traumatized in a pruning session. Its spine drooped and curved and its high branches were bare. When breezes shuttered against the leaves, the leaves endured only through sheer will. In the instant Jake set off the Roman candle, its ammunition nested in the tree's center. Then it radiated down the trunk and over its branches like an avalanche of scavengers.

In Japan, at the base high school, Helen's biology class focused on Japanese wildlife. The worms and ants indigenous to the islands, and mammals, particularly moles and hares. They were the agents of re-generation, working underground, churning and burrowing through the burned soil. They moved and sorted, multiplied and enriched what was left; they turned wreckage back into earth, and eventually into bricks, lumber, even oil. As she watched the Fourth of July guests challenge the burning tree with buckets and hoses, Helen realized she too would have to rejuvenate. Like the moles, worms, and hares, her efforts would have to remain unseen. One day these efforts would seemingly spring

from the bedrock fully realized, as if a miracle had taken place, when in fact the natural processes had been underappreciated.

Fire had always meant chaos to Helen; it had come to represent her own madness, "the flight of ideas," the doctors had called it, a frenzy of inspiration that disregarded the consequences. But in the descent of flame from the top of the tree to its roots, Helen saw something she had never seen before: order, progression, a logic she could follow like 1, 2, 3, 4...2, 4, 6, 8. Helen saw numbers in that fire, and that numbers were the basis of everything. The Enlightenment began with mathematics, the revelation of gravity.

Gravity and mathematics—numbers in the arrangements of ratios, probabilities, percentages, and statistics—told the great U.S. military that firebombing Japan would be its most effective strategy. The military may not have predicted the firestorm, but even fifteen years later, the U.S. message to Japan was clear. Helen certainly had gotten it, and it lived on at the back of her throat like a set of swollen glands, burning when she swallowed. She had to swallow to breathe. Fire could not be avoided. Do not trust your life to language, the shifting of winds, to love or to architecture, to the whims of fashion or urban planning, she thought. The only things to trust were numbers: spare, precise, guaranteed.

In those sparks from the Roman candles; in the burning tree that scratched at the air for relief, Helen saw that trajectories and longevity might be unpredictable. They were subject to the whims of the atmosphere and storage conditions. But their intent was always clear. To horrify, to entertain. They depended on ratios to carry this out: dye to gunpowder; fuses to wicks. These ratios might spill, unsettle, implode regardless of the schedule. But their force and effect could not be doubted. Their numbers had been set with a particular mission, and it was accomplished. What Helen witnessed that Fourth of July was nothing less than her chance at her own career: a future in accounting, the compilation of numbers so they can be held true to their intentions, making them balance on the page.

"There's a fee, very slight," Roberta said, and when she quantified it, the decision was made for Helen. After Labor Day and the gantlet of conversation with Jake, Helen enrolled in beginning accounting at Roberta's community college. Her route to the college followed the path of the Los Angeles River. Both the freeway she took and the boulevards essentially ran parallel to its conduits, as if its water, like people in automobiles, could be mechanized. Occasionally the road shunted away from the concrete riverbed. Yet Helen continued imagining the columns of water, like numbers, dropping off into the proper channel. The river seemed to end just as Helen had reached the campus.

Technically, she had been driving upstream to get to the college. On the way home, she followed the river's natural, downstream path, how it disgorged beyond the hills where Bernard had planted his house, his trees, his flammable materials. She often tried to remember, on her way home, the professor's eyes as he returned the students' homework. They were black with an infinite quality, as if the irises intended to flood the whites out. Helen was not falling in love with the professor. She was too old for that nonsense. But in those eyes Helen understood the eternity of accounting, a knowledge she had always sought. She needed a system of thinking, documented and indisputable. It assigned responsibility through rational procedures. From pandemonium, it wrested tranquility.

She thought it would matter, if Bernard ever found out about the accounting class. But the night he confronted her with her textbooks and her spreadsheets, that seemed a trivial matter, like who signed a particular order, or dispensed a fatal dose. "I can't believe you're going to a community college," Bernard began, and as he spoke he tried to make his voice voluminous, as if it could spread, consume the entire house. But the girls had been put to bed; they had school tomorrow. Helen asked only that he take a deep breath, first, before he made the situation worse.

"Not make it worse? After everything that's happened, you think I'm going to make it worse?"

"There's no tuition, only parking and some student card I've had to buy. It's hardly cost a thing."

"In terms of what? Money? Time? Your health? The well being of the children? How about your sanity, long-term?"

"Don't say it."

"Why not?" Bernard demanded. "Why the hell not? Is there some tremendous secret I'm missing here? Did you wake up one morning, recovered? Did you forget to tell me? For Christ's sake, I'm your husband."

"If you're upset I didn't tell you—"

"Oh, it's more than that. It's more than that. Do you have any idea who you are? What you are?" and as if to prove his point, Bernard remunerated a list of the neighbors: Weisses and Jessups; Silvers and Richmans; Kurlands and Birdwells. These were examples neither of the most moral or efficient of American families. Everyone knew they had their own demons—adultery or adoption, children under the specter of detention at school, speculation about divorce and alcoholism—to battle. But the Sanders family—Helen and Bernard and their two daughters—had always been better than them, at least to Bernard's thinking. Helen's illness threatened to drive them all to the bottom.

"Christ, Helen, do you have any idea what kind of people go to community college?"

Gently, she answered, "You did."

"That was twenty years ago," he said. "And besides that, I finished. I finished community college. I transferred."

"I'm well aware of that," Helen said.

"Then are you aware of why people go to community college nowadays? Who these people are, your fellow classmates, your partners in higher learning? I'm talking miscreants. High school dropouts. Delinquents. Convicts. Worthless two-bit chisellers who could never keep a job, so they go back to college." Then it happened, for the first time, in all their post-illness arguments. He began to sound ridiculous to her, like the turmoil of fuel, accelerant, and too much oxygen. Except that Helen recognized this sound, this

cascade of nonsense. It was the sound of the Japanese in the aftermath.

Sometime after she and her parents had settled on the base, Helen's brother appeared, for a vacation. He had gained twenty pounds since Helen had last seen him, and his complexion, never perfect, was now seared and gaping with nervous ticks. He said there were three ways to get through medical school—drinking, narcotics, or eating. His eyes squinted and his cheek jumped when he swore he couldn't decide which habit was for him. Beatrice was mastering origami—or was it Bonsais—and Joe, of course, was working. It was left to Helen to take care of Richard. Together they explored what remained of Tokyo's districts.

What they discovered were pachinko parlors. Pachinko was kind of like pinball, except there were no flippers to control the outcome. There was only a lever behind the contraption that lifted hundreds of tiny balls into the mouth of the machine. Then, like pieces of shot, the balls made their descent to the bottom, to the well. The machine stood perfectly upright during the ensuing commotion, like a soldier determined not to blink. Bells buzzed and lights rippled. They made Helen think of electrical storms, then the fire bombs visited by her country, and finally the exhausted colors that must have populated the Japanese streets, alleys and mountains. The players stood helpless before these machines as if they had were in some kind of shock, and their attention had been compelled.

"What are they doing?" she remembered asking her brother.

"Surviving," Richard said.

Combined, the pachinko machines sounded like an emergency without end. Helen found herself shouting: "I don't understand."

"You will," he promised, "when you're in med school."

"But what are you supposed to do?"

"Nothing," Richard said. He found an unused machine and asked her how many balls she thought there might be. Helen picked a random number. Together, they watched the balls

run down like beads of water through unnecessary obstacles.

"You wouldn't want your daughters to wind up at a community college," Bernard was saying. Like the pachinko balls his voice expelled with a slack kind of force, and settled into puddles. "I mean, we're talking draft dodgers. That's it!" he declared. "You finish the semester, then it's over." He slapped the countertop as he left the room. This was his final word, the final understanding.

Helen listened to the echo from her husband's palm. There was no literal boomerang of the slap yet there was her memory of it, how stunning it had been. It was a cold, smashing, affront to the tile and grout. It must have hurt his palm to pummel it with such force. Bernard's skin was susceptible to rashes and hives. The back of his legs, his chest and his torso were like charts of his childhood allergies, the outbreaks medicines seemed to hasten rather than stop. For the most part he would not let her touch the scars unless he was having another outbreak. Before her illness, they had been predictable. Now they perpetually rested on his skin, a silence between the two of them, a violence he refused to talk about. But now Helen realized more about violence than her husband ever could. She had been to Tokyo and back. In the desiccated temples, in the frames of smoldering houses, within her very own kitchen, she had heard something in the silence. A kind of breathing, a slight pant—an attempt at perseverance, rising against the odds, a protest at all mankind was capable of.