

SO LIKE HELEN

BY E W JAMIESON

IT'S NOT THAT I ROUTINELY SEE GHOSTS, but sometimes in the chance turn of a head or a flash of color or sound, I am brought face to face with a moment ... a memory, fleeting, of someone I once loved. And so it was with two hands extended over the arm-rests of a bistro chair at a small outdoor café on Doheny Boulevard just south of Beverly Hills. Impossible as it was, I saw my mother-in-law. I recognized her immediately by her neatly manicured fingers pointing down as if to dry without hindrance.

I refused as a young mother to place my first-born, my son, into my mother-in-law Helen's arms. He was so fresh, so perfect. Helen was old. She was as old to me as time, as old as wind blowing through the mountains. I saw only old when I saw Helen. Cycling between weak and dizzy, she stood, stubbornly, unbalanced. She might refuse to eat if it wasn't what and when she wanted. She carried on about this and that, as I expected from someone percolating well into their 80s and then 90s.

I was too naive to see the woman she had once been, the mother she still was, the bubble she could truly have become. I feared only that she could not steady herself enough for that robust baby boy, and so I didn't let her hold him.

Which isn't exactly true. At my son's bris, I sat Helen down in a Queen Anne chair, hovered over her, while for a moment she kept the baby on her lap, my hands constantly

readjusting, tucking the blanket back around him. Every time she looked up (she was beaming) to greet a cousin or nephew, I swear I saw her lose focus and the baby dip towards the floor. I wasn't being mean, just protective, when I finally took the baby from her arms.

When she visited, if she sat on the couch, with a pillow in her lap, with me (or someone young) directly next to her, well, then, yes, she could sit with the baby in her lap, but just until she tired, and to me, she was always tired.

She was not asked to babysit.

There, though, in whatever stolen wisps of moments Helen found when I turned my back or reached to answer the phone, I know she fell in love. She loved that baby, she loved that baby so.

With those hands extended over the arm-rests of a bistro chair at a small outdoor café on Doheny Boulevard just south of Beverly Hills ... I felt, suddenly, the beckoning of Helen's empty arms. I saw that small baby boy looking up, long ago, into the now-irrelevant face of a short-term nanny or a babysitter. His

soft water gurgles from lips so supple. Helen would have bent down, with baby in arms, to kiss those lips.

Old is as old does. When I was just past 30, old was so far away, over rivers filled with incapacity and half-forgotten names. But now I ... I am on the cusp of old so very old, older than the wind. I tell my children I made mistakes. Please, I beg to innocent eyes, let me hold the baby.

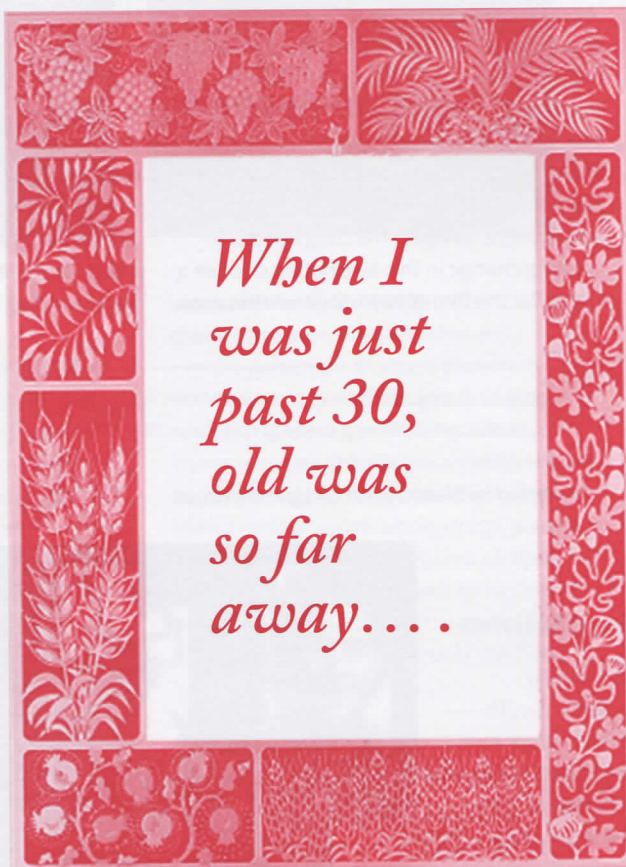


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