

# Absence

a play by  
Peter M. Floyd

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CAST OF CHARACTERS:

HELEN, mid-70's  
DAVID, mid-70's  
BARB, 40's  
SAMANTHA, 15  
DR. DELANE/MR. MOSS  
NURSE/ATTENDANT  
DR. BRIGHT

*At rise, all that is visible is a pool of light center stage. In the light is an easy chair, and in the chair sits HELEN BASTION, a woman in her seventies. She begins to speak almost immediately, as if she is in the middle of relating a story. She speaks softly, in a dreamlike tone, as if she is speaking to herself as much as anyone else.*

*Approximately halfway through her opening speech, lights begin to come up around her, revealing the living room of the Bastion family home in suburban Connecticut. The furniture (chairs, coffee table, bookshelves) is simple but solid, indicating that the owners have more taste than wealth.*

*DAVID, HELEN's husband, sits in a chair facing HELEN. BARB stands behind his chair, looking as if she is anxious to speak, but is determinedly holding herself back. Throughout her opening monologue, HELEN ignores their presence, as if oblivious to their existence.*

HELEN

I want to tell you about the first thing I remember. I don't mean the first thing that I recall happening to me, I mean the first memory that comes into my mind when I close my eyes and let the past waft into my mind. I was six or seven years old. Seven. I was seven. The war had just ended, and my mother was over the moon because my father was coming back home. "Over the moon" – is that something people say these days? At any rate, Mother was ecstatic, and so I was ecstatic, too, even though I had hardly known him before he'd gone. I had this dim image in my mind of a masculine figure who used to lift me up when I was two or three and say, "Who's my Helen? Is this my Helen?" but he

HELEN (cont)

was nothing more than a dark shape, faceless and colorless, more of a shadow than a real person. Sometimes, in the letters that came from overseas, there'd be a photograph of a man in uniform – a tall, sandy-haired man whose smile in each photo was slightly asymmetrical. Dressed in an immaculate uniform, and always holding a cigarette as if he was using it to make a point. He was not a handsome man, I realized that even then, but there was something about him, a kind of surety. This was a man who knew exactly who he was and what he was capable of. I couldn't connect him to the figure one who used to lift me up at all; this was a stranger, but a stranger I was utterly in love with. Every letter he sent to my mother ended with a post-script to me, and it was always the same: To my brave Helen, you're so very far away from me but I see you every time I dream. Love, Daddy. At night, before slipping into my own dreams, in order to distract myself from the sobbing that came from my mother's bedroom, I would picture my father fighting his way across Europe, facing a rain of bullets that could never hurt him, until Hitler finally surrendered to him personally. At any rate, as I was saying, the war *did* end, and my father came home at last. Mother went to New York City to meet him coming back on his troop ship. I had to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Delacourt from next door, who were very pleasant but also distant. They always called me "young miss" instead of Helen, and Mr. Delacourt wore a coat and tie every day of the week, even Saturday. On the day Mother and Father came back from New York, they had me put on the white ruffled dress I usually only wore on Easter Sunday. A cab pulled up, and out stepped my mother with the man from the photographs, now come to life in front of me, a giant of a man in an olive green uniform. Suddenly I was terrified. I had no right to be in the presence of this god. I wanted to run away and hide in the oak woods that lay behind our row of houses, but my legs had forgotten how to move. And this figure, this presence that was more than a man was now approaching, looming above me with that familiar crooked grin now aimed in my direction. "Is this my little girl?" he said. "Is this my Helen?" He pulled me up like he was picking a flower, and I knew, I understood for the first time that this was the same man as the shadow of my earliest days, and the man in those grainy black and white photos, too, and, more than that, this was my father. "Yes," I said. "Yes, I'm your Helen," and I laid my head against his uniformed chest.

DAVID

Helen.

HELEN

And that's it, that's the moment that will always exist for me. A medley of sensations: the feel of the cold brass buttons pressed against my face, the deep sound of his voice that seemed to come from his heart and echo inside my head, the faint smell of Mennen After Shave... I felt like I was being eaten up by a feeling of intense bliss, a happiness I somehow knew I would never feel again.

DAVID

Helen.

HELEN

That kind of joy, that total surrender to delight, you can only experience when you're young. It's an almost Pagan joy, you have to believe in magic to feel it. Once you're past the age of reason, it's gone, and you'll never have it again. All you can do is remember it. That is the real tragedy of life.

DAVID

Helen, have you listened to a word we've been saying?

*HELEN turns to DAVID, acknowledging him for the first time. Her mood shifts in an instant; her dreamy wistfulness is gone, and replaced with a brittle antagonism.*

HELEN

Yes, David, I've heard everything you've said, though not one syllable of it is of any value.

DAVID

Helen, please...

HELEN

Have you been listening to what I've been saying? These memories I've had are as true now as they were almost seventy years ago.

DAVID

Yes, your long-term memories are fine, but that's not--

HELEN

This entire conversation is insane. It's nonsensical. Barb, this was your idea, wasn't it? (*BARB purses her lips, as if willing herself not to speak.*)

DAVID

It's not just Barb, Helen. I've been seeing these things for a long time now. You must have noticed that you've been--

HELEN

What I've noticed is that you've been increasingly restless and irritable for quite some time. For at least a year. Pacing around the house like an old horse put out to pasture. You never should have retired, David. You're at a loss when you have nothing to do. You have to manufacture problems for you to solve.

DAVID

This has nothing to do with me, Helen.

HELEN

Well, it certainly has nothing to do with *me*.

BARB (*finally losing her battle with her mouth*)  
Mom, would you just... *shut up* for a minute, just *one* minute, and listen to what he has to say?

DAVID

Barb, please...

HELEN (*more amused than appalled*)  
Are you telling your mother to *shut up*?

BARB

Yes, I am.

HELEN

Am I still allowed to tell you to act your age? An adolescent, you expect her to be rude to her mother. That's the age for whittling your parents down to size. It's ugly, but it's a necessary part of growing up, I suppose. But when the girl is well into middle age... What are you now? Forty-four? Forty-five?

BARB

...How old *am* I, Mom?

HELEN

Emotionally? Twelve.

BARB

Oh, that's great, Mom. Point scored. You're trying to evade the issue.

HELEN

What issue? That my family thinks I'm losing my mind?

DAVID

No one's saying that.

BARB

God, Mom, why do you have to be so melodramatic?

HELEN

Melodramatic? Who's being melodramatic here? "Oh, we need to do something, Helen. We think you're cracking up, Helen. We think you're turning into a vegetable, but there's no reason to get excited about it, Helen. Let talk about this calmly and rationally while we decide where to put you away."

BARB

Jesus.

DAVID

Look, all we're saying... Do you remember last week?

HELEN

Do I remember last week? Of course...

DAVID

No, I mean... Do you remember when you got lost? This was Tuesday or Wednesday...

HELEN

Now who can't remember?

DAVID

You'd gone out for a walk. *(to BARB)* She goes for walks just about every day. *(Back to HELEN)* You'd gone out for a walk, and you were gone a little longer than usual. I was starting to wonder if I should get worried or not. Then you called me. Do you remember that?

HELEN

Why shouldn't I call you? You know, you were after me for years to get one of those damned mobile phones. Finally, *finally*, I say yes. And now you're upset that I actually *used* it? What else is it for?

DAVID

It's not about the phone. It's you. You were in a panic. You said you were lost. You didn't know where you were. You sounded like you were in a panic. *(to BARB)* I was terrified, too.

HELEN

I don't know why. I was fine.

DAVID

You were terrified. You didn't know where you were, or how you'd gotten there. You were almost hysterical.

HELEN

I was not.

DAVID

So, *(to BARB)* I get the Jetta, and go out to look for her. She was just four, five blocks up Doyle Street, near the Army-Navy store. She walks there every day, but she was acting as if she'd never been there before.

HELEN

Do you know why? It's because Alexander's closed down. *(to BARB)* Do you know what it is now? A Starbuck's, of course. Alexander's was there for thirty years, at least. Now that it's gone, the neighborhood looks completely different. It's all... corporate.

DAVID

Helen, Alexander's closed four years ago.

HELEN

I know, and I still expect to see it there, every time I go by.

DAVID

You were hysterical when I picked you up. *(to BARB)* She was hysterical. Sobbing, wailing...

HELEN

Now that's ridiculous. (to BARB) Have you ever known me to be hysterical?

BARB

No, I can't say that I have.

HELEN

Sobbing? Weeping? What was that you said, David? "Wailing?" I don't do that. I don't even cry at weddings.

BARB

You sure didn't cry at mine.

DAVID

I know, and that's why this was so upsetting. I'd never seen you like this.

BARB

Mom, what do you remember about this? Anything?

HELEN

Of course I remember it. Well, not the way he says. It was Tuesday. I'd gone for a walk, I found I was getting a little tired, so I called David to come pick me up. And he did. And that is the end of the story. Well, it would be if David hadn't decided to turn the whole event into a crisis.

DAVID

You didn't know where you were!

HELEN

All right, David, if it pleases you to think so.

BARB

Mom... It just seems like you've been having a few of these memory lapses lately.

HELEN

Have I? First I've heard of it.

BARB

Like, a couple weeks ago? You called me twice on the same day.

HELEN

And?



BARB

You said the same thing both times. I mean, you called me up, and we talked for a while about you coming to visit us after Christmas, and how Dad was doing and you asked how the kids were, blah blah blah. Fine. So we say goodbye, and I hang up. A half hour later, you call again, and you say the same things all over again.

HELEN

What? Am I not allowed to call my daughter twice in one day? Is that one of your rules? You can't blame me for not keeping track; they change so frequently.

BARB

You're not listening to me, Mom. You hadn't remembered calling before. You were rabbit the same conversation over again. I said, Don't you remember, we just talked about this? And you had no recollection of it at all.

HELEN

What? I don't remember that.

BARB

That's my point!

HELEN (*calmly, demonstrating great forbearance*)

Listen. Both of you. I appreciate you mean well with this little intervention of yours. But, really, you're letting yourselves get excited over a mountain of nothing. Barb, much as I love to see you, you really didn't to drive a hundred miles to come tell your mother she's getting old. Believe me, I know. Do I forget things? Of course. All the time. Your father forgets things, too. You forget things. You left a sweater behind when you were up here for Thanksgiving. That red sweater of yours; I don't know why you wear red when it isn't your color at all. Anyway, I've never left a sweater behind anywhere, not in my life. So, let's not say any more about this. You can stay for dinner tonight, of course, and go back home tomorrow. Please give my love to Philip and Samantha.

BARB

Mom, that story about your father. You told it twice in a row. Didn't you notice that?

HELEN (*incredulous*)

I did *what* now?

BARB

You went off about Granddad coming back from the war. And then five minutes later -- no, less -- you told the same story again.

HELEN

I certainly did not!

DAVID

I'm afraid you did, Helen.

HELEN

No. No, it's not something I talk about very often. I was bringing it up to make a point, and -- I certainly only said it once.

BARB

You told the story twice. Dad and I both heard. Just five minutes later, Mom!

HELEN

That simply isn't true.

BARB

Oh, it is. It simply is.

DAVID

Barb, please. Listen, honey, we'd like you to see a doctor.

HELEN

For what? I'm in perfect health. Do you know, when I ask for a senior discount, they have to check my id? I'm seventy-four, and I barely look sixty!

BARB

Mom, you're seventy-six.

HELEN

What? Do you think I don't know how old I am?

BARB

Of course, no one would rabbit such a thing.

DAVID

Look. We've set up an appointment for you to see Dr. DeLane next week. You remember Dr. DeLane, don't you?

HELEN

What a question! He's been my doctor for, what, twenty years? Why wouldn't I remember him?

DAVID

Now, don't get excited.

HELEN

I'm not-- Why are you treating me like a child?

BARB

Look, this may not be anything to worry about.

HELEN

I'm not worried at all. You're the two who are worrying.

BARB

You must have noticed that you've been having problems with day-to-day stuff.

HELEN

I've noticed nothing of the sort. What do you mean?

BARB

Well, do you find yourself losing things, like, I don't know, your keys or glasses?

HELEN

Yes, but I've always done that. Why are you giving me the third degree?

DAVID

Do you ever have problems remembering the correct word?

HELEN

No, I *always* know exactly what I want to to say.

*A light comes up on DR. DELANE, a man in his early sixties wearing a white doctor's jacket. He is holding a clipboard.*

BARB

Well, do you ever find yourself unsure of where you are, or what you're doing?

HELEN

Never.

DELANE

Have you noticed any decrease in your ability to smell or taste things?

HELEN (*still to BARB*)

No, not at all.

DELANE

Would you say that you've experienced any particular stress recently?

HELEN (*shifting her attention to DELANE*)

No.

*Over the course of the next few lines, the scene shifts from HELEN and DAVID's home to an examination room, where HELEN is answering a series of questions put to her by DELANE, with DAVID in attendance. Ideally, this can be done with little to no movement on HELEN's part. Lights can go down on the main part of the living room set (allowing BARB to disappear into the darkness), while rising up on DELANE, revealing the examination room around him.*

DELANE

Have you felt any anxiety or depression in the past few months?

HELEN

No.

DELANE

Have you ever experienced anxiety or depression?

HELEN

Well, we all do at some time, don't we? Sadness is part of life.

DELANE

That's true, Mrs. Bastion. Let me put it this way: have you ever had extended feelings of depression or sadness out of proportion for their apparent causes, or for no reason at all?

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