

# Shades of Troy

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

I re-read the card on the pin board. In large clear block letters, it said: “No politics, philosophy or religion before midnight.”

Sound advice, I thought, based on the principle that, *after* midnight, everyone is likely to be too tired, or too drunk, to really care about the outcome of any discussion, and therefore there was no risk of genuine offence being given or taken. Certainly, this room had seen more than its fair share of energetic late-night discussions, and we had all managed to stay friends afterwards.

The topic on this particular evening was re-incarnation, and the usual gang was just settling in for the regular debate with, it has to be said, the usual relish.

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We were all living at the same student hall of residence on the outskirts of the University campus. This was one of those dormitories with individual rooms for everyone, but with shared bathrooms placed at intervals along the corridor. Most meals were taken in the Great Hall – a large refectory for communal eating of breakfast and dinner, and there were little communal kitchens, again placed at intervals along the corridors, for the preparation of hot drinks and midnight snacks.

The hall of residence had separate blocks for boys and girls, but – very sensibly, I have always considered – no real enforcement of the division between the sexes. The corridors ran together from one block to another, with only fire-doors standing between visitors and their destination at any time of day or night.

This little group of friends tended to gather in Tom’s room. Why this was habitually so I never really understood, although it was conveniently opposite one of the little kitchenettes that dotted the blocks. Perhaps us gathering there was just an accident; more likely it was the host’s amiability.

For all his size and bulk, Tom himself was perhaps the most gentle and unthreatening individual one could hope to meet. A naturally tall

and big-boned individual, although with a lot of softness in his form, he exuded bonhomie and was always willing to put himself out for the benefit of others.

Whatever the reason, the corridor party would tend to congregate just outside and later inside Tom's door. The regular core of the party was a group of six friends who were, for very different reasons, not really romantically entangled – or at least, not with each other.

One of the girls, a tall and bony young woman named Jan with a serious demeanour, had a steady boyfriend back at home. He was an older man who was determined to marry her as soon as she had finished her studies and had at one time been, I think, her school music teacher.

Suzanne was determined, for quaintly old-fashioned religious reasons, to remain a virgin until she was married and perhaps found the unthreatening nature of the group reassuring. Despite her oft-stated position, she was a compassionate and rather physical girl, always ready with a peck on the cheek or a friendly hug for those in need.

The last of the girls was Steph – a student in the Computer Science Department and a really pretty girl who, perhaps in protest at always being regarded as a dumb blonde, had cut her hair aggressively short and spiky. She always wore jeans and shapeless oversized black sweatshirts. I had known her for months before I realised that she had a truly terrific bosom concealed under all that baggy clothing.

One boy – I confess, it was me – was just too shy to have anything very much to be with the opposite sex, while Steve kept the girls he was “going out with” – in that modern sense of “staying in bed with” – quite separate from the friendships he entertained within the group.

As for Tom himself, well, he never seemed discomforted by anyone's presence, male or female, but I got the distinct impression that he was waiting for The One, the right person to fall in love with.

Sometimes one of our number would be conspicuous by their absence, perhaps having taken up with a new boyfriend or girlfriend, or perhaps suddenly immersed in some new project, or fad, or diversion. Inevitably, they would eventually re-appear, looking variously tired, or heart-broken, or perhaps just relieved at being able to return to an unthreatening and non-judgemental environment.

All this took place several decades ago, in an era where the bars and public houses were required by law to shut at 10.30pm, and the ringing crying of “last orders, please!” was familiar to drinkers everywhere. In any case, few students could afford to drink to excess every night, and the ritual of a “last pint” was well established with impoverished undergraduates.

At the time, I was an undergraduate student in the Department of Physics. After dinner in Hall in the evening, I would return to my room to work, writing up notes from that day’s lectures, revising earlier notes, writing experimental reports, working on maths exercises for the next tutorial – even reading the textbooks, if all else failed.

Occasionally Tom, also a student in the same Department, and I would work together; with hindsight, I now understand that Tom was not a particularly gifted student, and I often ended up helping him out with revisions or reports.

More often than not, there would be a knock at the door around 9.45pm. It would be Steve, or perhaps Tom, suggesting a quick pint before Last Orders – an invitation which all understood to be a mere formality. Someone would say “Shall we round up the girls?”, or something semantically equivalent, to which the answer was invariably yes, and always resulted in a detour via the females block to collect Jan and Steph and Suzanne, or some subset of the ladies’ contingent.

Typically, we would fetch up in the Mawson Arms, which had a genuine spit-and-sawdust pub ambience, something which seemed so irredeemably exotic to one brought up away from inner cities. The Public Bar had walls tiled floor-to-ceiling, giving it only a very slight resemblance to a late Victorian urinal, and worn and blackened wooden floorboards. A huge old-fashioned bar-top dominated one end of the room, to which had been bolted the hand-powered beer engines necessary to pump the precious brown fluid from the barrels in the cellar.

This particular pub was renowned for entertaining an eclectic mixture of locals and students – Town and Gown, as the expression is. An additional attraction, for the aficionados of Real Ale, was that the publican would occasionally during the winter months serve a dark and heavy ale from a cask stood directly on the end of the bar.

We rarely had money for a second pint – the girls always drank halves, of course, and the boys always paid – and so one of the boys

would suggest a coffee back at the dorm, meaning of course cheap instant with white sugar and sterilized milk. Again, this invitation was a formality, and we walked quickly back to the boys block for the corridor party, inevitably congregating first outside – and shortly after, inside – Tom’s room.

All this was standard practice for weekday evenings only. Most of the group would go home at the weekend, perhaps to see that mysterious boyfriend or perhaps just to get their socks washed by Mum. But, four nights out of seven, the same six people would stay up late and natter about nothing in particular well into the wee hours.

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On this particular evening, Tom produced a bottle of Scotch Whiskey, explaining that it had been a present from an uncle and suggested that we splash a little in our coffee. Needless to say, no-one was going to refuse this offer.

As the conversation flowed, running up to the midnight watershed, Tom picked up the bottle again and made a second pass around the room, pouring a rather more generous measure into each coffee mug. At the time, I remember vaguely speculating that this was an attempt by Tom, who at the time I had suspected was sweet on Steph, to engineer a closer relationship.

We had already settled down in our accustomed places. The three girls sat in a row on the hard and narrow bed the dorm provided, presumably in an attempt to discourage the students from sharing, or perhaps as just another cost-saving exercise. Steve was sitting astride the reversed desk chair, resting his elbows on the hard wooden back. I was slouched in the room’s only easy chair, and Tom was in his habitual place: sitting on the floor with his back against the wardrobe door, using his own pillow as a cushion.

The midnight hour came and went, and the conversation turned sharper, more pointed, as the cuts and thrusts of our sparring got earnest. On that evening, we seemed to be divided into two camps. Steve and Jan maintained that there was no possible physical mechanism for re-incarnation or even the existence of a soul separable from a physical body. Suzanne countered with empirical – or at least anecdotal – evidence that this was something that had been observed, or at least suspected, for thousands of years of human history. I added to this view by observing that current developments of computer technology and so-called Artificial Intelligence was beginning to

suggest a way in which one's spirit might have an existence beyond the brain. Uncharacteristically, Steph and Tom remained on the outskirts of the verbal skirmishes. Usually, both would engage to the full, relishing the nightly deliberations and arguments.

While the debate raged back and forth, Steve, who had a carefully constructed reputation as a Bad Boy to maintain, started to roll a joint. This was not entirely without precedent, although I suspect that most people in the room took only a token toke at the reefer as it was passed around.

What happened next is hard to describe. To this day, I am not sure what combination of circumstances caused the incident. Perhaps it was the cocktail of psycho-active chemicals she had imbibed, or the topic of the conversation. In any case, Steph suddenly keeled over on the bed, twitching and writhing like one possessed – which turned out, as it happened, to be nearly literally true.

All three of the men in the room jumped to their feet. I for one was wondering what to do to help and feeling rather helpless, not wanting to cause offence by actually touching a member of the opposite sex. Sensible Jan took charge at this point, cradling Steph's head in her lap and calling for a glass of water.

I sprang to carry out her instruction, rushing out of the room to the kitchen opposite and rummaging frantically in the cupboards until I found a glass which was tolerably clean. I hurriedly filled it from the tap. By the time I returned clutching the water glass, I could see to my relief that Steph was already showing distinct signs of recovery, sitting up on the bed supported by both Jan and Suzanne.

Suddenly, she stood up, very erect, somehow looking taller than I ever remembered. This also had the effect of accentuating her full breasts, the folds of the shirt clinging to her form in a way I had never noticed before. It was immediately obvious that her whole body language had changed and was wholly unlike the Stephanie we knew.

It was Tom who first realised what had just happened.

“Who are you?” he asked, sounding shocked and dismayed.

She turned to face him, smiling. It was the smile of one used to getting their own way, but amused that someone had been smart enough to get there ahead of her – like a pet performing a particularly clever trick. She spoke a rapid stream of syllables which seemed simultaneously hauntingly familiar and impossibly archaic. Then she

stopped, smiled at us all with a certain acid sweetness and added, “But you may know me as Helen of Troy.”

“But what have you done with Steph?” Tom asked anxiously.

She laughed, a melodic ripple with undertones of an ancient and mysterious awareness which cut through the hubbub in the room.

“I haven’t done anything with her. In fact, I am her.”

Looking back, I suppose I might have thought it was all a joke, a wind-up. At the time, there and then, I was absolutely certain for some reason I cannot explain even now. There was no doubt in my mind whatsoever that this was entirely genuine. In any case, experience of our late-night debates suggested that Steph never spoke anything less than the absolute truth, as she saw it, on any topic.

“What do you mean?” Tom demanded.

The same laugh rang out again.

“I mean that the young woman you know as Stephanie is the re-incarnated form of Helen.”

There was a moment of stunned silence.

“So you have been alive, as someone else, since the time of the Ancient Greeks?” I asked, the first to recover from the shock.

“Yes, but I was always me,” she replied archly, “How could I be someone else?”

She turned around to look at us imperiously.

“My father was a god, you know and, while it is true that I died a mortal death, I did not dissipate at that time in the way that you will, soon enough.”

Again there was a silence. There had been enough earnest philosophical and metaphysical debates in this room for the import of this statement to strike deeply.

“So Steph is you, really?” Suzanne asked.

“Yes, but in, I suppose, a kind of disguise,” she replied, “In most of my incarnations, I never really knew who I was.”

“But what about Steph? She doesn’t know this?” Steve said, “I mean, you don’t normally look or sound like that.”

“She doesn’t know,” she replied, “And she must never know.”

It was Jan's turn to ask a question.

"Why us, where show yourself here and now, in this obscure place?"

Helen laughed again.

"Well, partially, just because of the conversation you were all having. Just my famed capriciousness, I suppose," she added archly, then went on, "But a Goddess must have believers, and I know you all believe in me now."

Then she looked suddenly serious.

"I have taken this step, appearing as the real me, for all of our benefits, but I must soon hide myself away as Stephanie once more."

"But *why* must you hide?" Tom asked with a degree of earnestness I had never heard in his voice before.

She turned to face him, her face darkened.

"I am not the only god or even demi-goddess in the world. Most of the rest still exist. Very nearly every being who has been worshiped or feared – the same thing really – by humans is still around in one form or another. And as a group, we have made some powerful and ancient enemies amongst our own kind, although most have long since decided to forget – or at least forgo – their enmities over the millennia."

"Don't hide," Tom said suddenly, "Don't go away now."

Steph, or perhaps I should say, Helen turned to look at him. Their eyes locked for a long moment. I could see that Tom was completely entranced. I was convinced that at this moment he would have undertaken anything, absolutely anything, she asked.

"I will look after you," he said, in a tone of voice as if he was declaring a formal and binding oath, "Forever."

Helen said nothing, just looked at him with her hands on her hips. I was a intensely penetrating gaze, as if she was trying to look deep into his soul – perhaps, in actual fact, she was doing exactly that. Finally, she nodded slowly, and said, "I accept your fealty," in a manner which seemed a formal acceptance of Tom's oath.

Deliberately, Tom moved to stand in front of Helen, adopting a stance which could only be described as extremely protective.

"Time to go," he said softly, "Bedtime. Everyone out."

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Tom changed, in so many ways, almost immediately afterwards. Before that night, I had never caught him doing any kind of exercise, particularly, other than walking the mile or so to the University campus, rather than taking the bus in order to save the fare. I would occasionally encounter him in the Physics Department – we rarely attended the same lectures any more – and he seemed to have become much more muscular. In a rare reprise of our earlier intimacy, he revealed that he and Steph had become inseparable, and that he was frequenting a local body-building gymnasium.

The rest of the little group of friends drifted their separate ways. I retreated into my books and academic studies, graduating with a first-class degree and moving effortlessly to postgraduate research. I now live a cloistered life of the tenured academic in a British provincial University, my world revolving around this book-lined office in a quiet corner of the Faculty of Science.

Jan never finished her degree. She fell pregnant – I suspect deliberately – and almost immediately hid herself away in some quiet Yorkshire town with her schoolteacher husband. Even now, I get a Christmas card from her every year, usually augmented by a rambling newsletter documenting the minutiae of her children's illnesses and schooling and, latterly, marriages.

Rebellious Steve went from bad to worse, abandoning himself in a vortex of drink and drugs and sex and motorcycles. He killed himself in an accident just a few years later, riding his bike much too fast in the dark on wet roads and careering under a Heavy Goods Vehicle. Mercifully, I am told he was killed instantly.

Suzanne allowed herself to be seduced by Steve – although I am not sure exactly who was doing the seducing – a week or two after Helen had revealed herself to us. He abandoned her shortly afterwards, her increasingly desperate attempts to cling to him repelling Steve as effectively – perhaps even more so – than if she had attempted to push him away.

After that, desperate to attract and retain a man – any man – Suzanne took to sleeping around. The last time I saw her, in one of the dingier bars that suckle up to the University, she looked fat and haggard, very much the worse for wear from drink and poor diet. This bar was not one I often frequented – just a quick snifter on the way home, I told myself – and I was unsure that the woman really was

Suzanne. By the time I had convinced myself that it was her, and steeled myself against my inherent shyness to approach her, she been joined by a man, rough-looking and unshaven, and clearly already drunk. Despite his appearance and his crude pawing of her backside, she appeared to welcome him. I turned away in shock and disgust; she was, I could see, a cheap prostitute.

I could tell you where Helen is now – she does not call herself that, of course, nor does she use the name Stephanie – but I really don't need to. You will have seen her often enough – photographs of the most beautiful woman in the world appear with astonishing regularity in the red-top newspapers and those glossy magazines whose titles end with an exclamation mark. She is never pictured alone, but always on the arm of this celebrity boyfriend or that rich husband, glorying in the wealth and power showered on her by the men under her thrall.

And behind her, in just a few of the pictures, you might just see a dark and blocky figure, never more than a few steps away: her bodyguard and companion, her friend, perhaps, or slave – but never, I suspect, her lover. You might catch a glimpse of my old friend Tom.

So who is Helen of Troy? I am not going to tell you; you will just have to work out for yourself who she is now. Although, I suspect you can probably guess easily enough – after all, she is the one who those journalists always instinctively refer to as a goddess.

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