

Murder She Wrote

By Stefania Sechi

Helen hated George. The mere sight of him gave her the creeps, and there wasn't a fibre in her body that didn't long to scream and run away. She couldn't stand his ugly face, those cold eyes and sinister smile. Neither could she abide his voice, which sounded like a chainsaw in her ears. There was literally nothing she liked about him, she hated his chequered shirts, his ridiculous moustache which he thought made him look masculine, and his taste in music, which was supposed to reflect how sophisticated he was, but was actually just annoying and boring. Yet it hadn't always been like that. Several framed pictures on her chimneypiece, along with all their wedding photos, proved that ten years ago, at least, she must have felt differently. Oh how she hated to look at that picture now: the stupid expression on her face that said *I will always love you and care for you*, and this horrible dress her mother had urged her to buy. Helen had wanted to wear the gorgeous white one with Brussels' lace around the décolletage. She was not used to finding herself beautiful, but felt that this dress accentuated her full bosom and made her waist look slim. But when her mother saw her in it, she wrinkled her nose in a contemptuous way and plainly told her that such dresses could only be worn by slender women. So Helen chose an artless eggshell coloured one, and now the photo would remind her of her weakness till the end of time.

Throughout all her 35 years there had always been someone telling her what to do. Of course her mother never tired of reminding her what the duties of Joanne Sawyer's daughter were. Strangely enough though, most of Helen's friends seemed to be miniature replicas of her mother. Everybody was making her feel that she should be grateful that they were spending their time with her. Only her best friend Janet seemed to see more in her. She had always encouraged her to aspire greater things in her life than a decent marriage. Especially after Helen had started dating George and the word "wedding" could be heard more often

every day in the Sawyer's mansion, Janet tried hard to persuade Helen to leave him and start her own life. But Helen was still Joanne Sawyer's daughter, raised to be nothing else than a respectable and dependent housewife, and she believed her mother who said it was unlikely that someone else would come along. So, three months later, Helen breathed her "I will" in an eggshell coloured dress.

Determined to be a good wife she kept the house clean as a new pin, served dinner at six o'clock sharp and washed and ironed chequered shirts every day. She went to the hair dresser once a month and bought a collection of plain but elegant dresses. As a result, her collection of pearl jewellery grew from year to year. From the outside their marriage looked perfect, if only there hadn't been this little niggling feeling inside Helen. She didn't even know what it was herself, but sometimes she caught herself daydreaming about a different life. She told herself that this was perfectly normal, but over the years this little voice grew slightly but constantly louder until on that balmy autumn day it suddenly shrieked inside her head.

George had decided that it might be good to go out for a walk. They sat down on a bench and George kept talking about the blessing a baby would be to their lives. Helen didn't listen. She was smoking a cigarette; the one vice she allowed herself, although she had promised George to stop. That day she accidentally blew the smoke into his face, which made him cough demonstratively. It was his way of indicating how offensive her smoking was, just like her mother's nose wrinkling ten years ago.

This was when she realised it: She hated this man more than anyone or anything else in the world. She hated his face and his voice, his clothes and his hair. She hated what he said and how he pronounced every single word that left his ugly mouth. She could not believe that she was married to that man sitting next to her, who now seemed to be a complete stranger to her. She wanted to cut off his tongue or at least cover her ears, because each of his words was like fingernails scratching on a blackboard. She wanted to jump up and run away, but all she

could do was sit there and take a gulp of her coffee. She was too overpowered by her own feelings to move.

Still, she had never been happier in her life. For the first time, she had experienced a true emotion, not one that she felt obliged to have. She had always acted the way people wanted her to, and until now had been convinced that they knew best. But on that day in September she had finally discovered that she was a different person. And the last thing she needed now was an ugly husband who would never accept her true self.

So after all, maybe there was ONE thing she liked about George: The fact that he would soon be dead. George's sudden decease seemed to be the only possible solution for Helen, as it would not only spare her the trouble of a divorce but would also provide her with a considerable inheritance, which would definitely simplify her fresh start. She had always disliked his stinginess and his obsession with investments, but finally she would profit from him being such a philistine. What other opportunities did she have? She had been raised to be a housewife, and thus had never bothered to learn a profession which would provide her with a good income. At university she had studied modern fiction and art, but this was never meant to prepare her for a job. It had only been her family's social status that compelled her to have any kind of academic degree. Although Helen loved literature she had never been self-confident enough to write anything herself and anyway this wouldn't have been of any use now. So, after the perfect creases, her new ambition was the perfect decease.

She decided to make a detailed plan of how she would rid herself of her husband. The only thing that could be worse than staying with him was going to prison, and thus she didn't even dare to tell Janet about her plans, although her friend might have joined her with the utmost pleasure. First of all the, manner of his death had to be decided. Something unsuspecting, something which could pass off as an accident or a natural death. She thought about manipulating his car, but she didn't know how to do it. In addition there was no warranty for his death and a sliced brake line could be discovered easily in case of an

investigation. Her second idea was a domestic accident, but as George hardly climbed ladders or replaced bulbs there was no chance of decoying him into a trap. So in the end Helen decided to prepare a very special meal for him, special not only because it would be his last one but also because of the secret ingredient she was going to use. She had once read about a poison that could kill without a trace, as it degraded post mortem and gave the impression of a heavy heart attack.

But once she got that far in her plans she was beset by doubts. *Is it really the right idea to kill my husband in order to avoid a divorce?* she asked herself. *Maybe it's just a wet idea and I will regret it later! Do I really want to sacrifice a human being for my own happiness?* She racked her brains for two weeks and finally she decided to write down all the reasons for and against his death. It was as if two persons were arguing inside her head, and she was just the recorder of their arguments. She continued like that for six weeks, and in the end her notes spanned over 120 pages in which she had written down everything from her unlucky childhood to the death she foresaw for George. She read through it again and again, making notes at the margins and altering lines that didn't mirror her feelings accurately, because she was too afraid of missing a point. She did want to decide on a death sentence before everything was considered.

One afternoon Helen was reading through her "murder diary" again when Janet came to visit her. As usual she kept ringing the bell until the door was opened. In panic Helen threw the loose pages under the sofa. Janet had never been patient, she was a restless character and always about to do something. She called herself a painter although she hadn't sold a single painting so far. She made her living from illustrating children's books and jackets for Arden Books, one of the big publishing houses in London. Helen led her into the living room and went into the kitchen to make a coffee. When she came back with two floret patterned cups of steaming coffee Janet was rummaging in her huge bag and finally produced a hair slide,

totally unnecessary for her short hair. She never sat still. "So, what's the matter with you? You look pale!" she said.

"Nothing," Helen replied. "I'm just tired. I couldn't sleep last night."

"You should do something else than just housework! If my day started with a broom and ended with a flat-iron I wouldn't be able to sleep either. Go out and do something with your life! Get a job!"

It was always like that. Although Janet had long ceased to pick holes in Helen's marriage she still couldn't hide her disapproval of Helen's life. Only after Janet's obligatory diatribe they could talk about other topics. They kept chatting till George came home in the evening. He sat down in front of the TV and the two women took flight to the kitchen, where Helen started to prepare the dinner. Janet shirked with a flimsy excuse, but Helen knew that she hated spending time with George. If only her best friend knew how much she would have liked to go with her, but what else could she do than spending another boring evening with the man she had married?

It was only after breakfast next day that Helen realised that her notebook was still under the sofa. Strengthened by Janet's obvious antipathy she felt strong enough to take a decision now, she just wanted to read through her arguments for one last time. She reached under the brown leather Chesterfield and her heart missed a few beats: The notebook was gone. She started to tremble and her mouth went dry. *George has found it! Oh my God, he knows everything!* She thought back to his behaviour this morning. *I should have known! He was too friendly this morning.* Everything started moving around her and Helen had to sit down. *Will he tell someone about it? Maybe he is already gone to the police?* She commanded all her courage and dialled his office extension number. He answered the phone with his usual tone of voice. "What's the matter?" he asked her.

"Mmm... do you want to eat deer stew tonight?"

"Yes, as I already told you this morning. I will be home at five as usual." His words echoed in her head. *Sounded like nothing's wrong.* The call had raised her hopes. *Maybe he hasn't read it yet! Maybe he just put it aside without noticing what it was!* Helen started searching the entire house for her notes, but she couldn't find them anywhere. In the end she gave up and prepared the stew.

During the next week she watched every step her husband made in the house. She earned a baffled look when she attempted to follow him to the bathroom and even sat next to him when he was listening to his horrible music. But still she couldn't make out whether he knew about her plans or not. At least he still ate everything she prepared. In fact, his behaviour was more than normal and of the two she was clearly the one acting out of character. At night she lay awake and considered her possibilities. One moment she decided to prepare his "last supper" the next day, two minutes later she thought it was best to confess everything. In the end she came up with the idea of innocently asking him for the notebook, pretending that it was a bad joke.

After a week of sleepless nights her insomnia became visible on her face, and George started to ask questions. She didn't know what to say, because she didn't know what he expected, so she told him she had migraine. She had never been forced to take a decision by herself, at least none weren't about food or washing up liquid. She was so afraid of taking the wrong one that she felt unable to take any decision at all.

Finally Helen decided to ask George for the notes. She asked him to sit down on the sofa which had betrayed her so badly one week ago and went to the kitchen to make cappuccino. While she was foaming up milk the phone rang and George answered it. Helen watched him shaking his head in disbelief. She couldn't understand a word, but he seemed to be very surprised. When he put down the receiver he came to the kitchen and stared at her. She began to feel more and more uneasy, when finally he opened his mouth to speak: "That was Mrs. Candall from Arden Books."

"Arden Books the publisher? What did they want?"

"They asked me to tell you that they have read the manuscript Janet gave them and that they're going to publish it. They're sure it will be a bestseller."