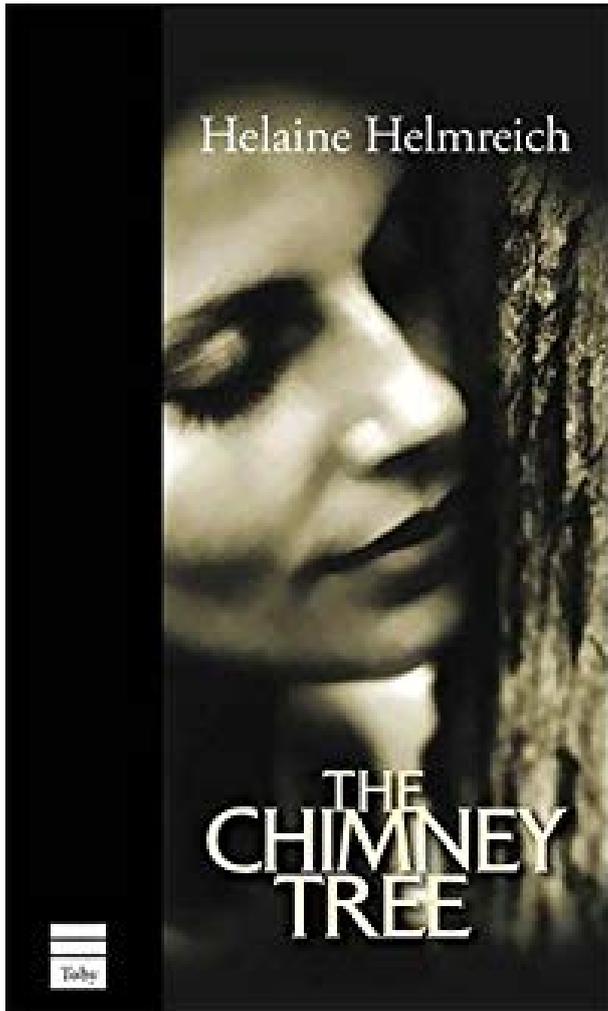


The Chimney Tree



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""Look, Miriam," said Tadeusz, interrupting her troubled thoughts one day. He unfurled a small, rolled-up piece of paper. Miriam gasped. It was a small painting of herself, unmistakable, with her red hair coiled about her ears. Yet the figure wore no clothes at all.

This naked, painted Miriam stood with uplifted arms, fastening her hair. While Miriam tried to recover from the shock of seeing herself so painfully exposed, Tadeusz unrolled two more paintings. With delicate brush strokes and warm toned pigments, each showed a naked Miriam in a graceful pose; her face expressed no shame at her body being revealed in a way no one had ever seen, not even Dina. Each painting bore his signature: Tadeusz Zbirka.

Tears sprang to Miriam's eyes and she blushed to the roots of her hair. "Tadeusz, how. . .why.

. . .what is this?" She gasped. "What do you mean?" Never very fluent in Polish, she could barely choke the

words out.

"Don't cry, Miriam, Oh, please, I didn't mean to upset you.

All great artists paint this way. Their models pose for them in the nude. But I knew you'd never do that.

So I imagined how you would look.

You should be proud of your beauty. In art the body of a woman isn't shameful. "He put his arms around her trembling shoulders. But Miriam would not be consoled.

She pulled away from him and began rushing blindly through the trees. Tadeusz quickly gathered up his paintings and began racing after her, tripping over the tangled bracken along the path, but he soon gave up because of the lengthening shadows and rising wind. Tucking his paintings back into his worn leather portfolio, he started for home. He would visit Miriam's house next Monday afternoon, as he used to, and leave her a note, perhaps. He made his way quickly through the woods to the river, hunching his shoulders against a chill autumn wind.

His eyes did not catch the flutter of the small, rolled-up paper that lay at the foot of the chimney tree. Nor did he see the slim blonde figure slipping silently through the pines as she bent to retrieve it from its bed of twigs and dried pine needles.