



RICH SHAPERO

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BUT NOT
READY

A NOVEL

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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

TooFar Media
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A buzzard teeters on a branch, slapped by the breeze. It rustles and regains its balance, gathered with others in the tall trees. Denlon, shivering, feels the wind too. He's in pants but bare-chested, stepping through the darkening woodland. He halts, puts his hand to his chest and draws a deep breath, imagining his lung inflating. Then he glances back, seeing the steep decline of the knob at his rear. Forested valleys, dark ravines, descending to hills and valleys, endless and hidden from view. Forward, the slope reaches the knob's summit and the convex limestone cap that covers it.

He continues forward between two tapping hickories. Spider lines cling to his chest as a bright bowl of sun flares into view.

His feet leave the humus. Limestone is beneath him.

It's as he remembers, rocky plates mottled by lichen, like the shell of an enormous turtle, a female dreaming of laying her eggs in the spring. She's dug herself into the litter for

winter. All around her, the buzzards are perched in the trees. Against the glow in the west, the birds tip and lean, feathers rattling, bald heads ducking to follow him.

“He’s ours,” one mutters.

“Less they feed him to the hogs,” another hisses.

“Or dump him in the crick.”

With cautious steps, Denlon crosses the turtle’s back. He’s middle-aged; not young, not old either. But he’s been condemned, and his arrival here reminds him of that. He lives in the womb of a cheerless oblivion. He’s on the crest of the darkening knob, gazing beyond, yearning for the light. The declining sun hangs before him like a tulip tree bloom, bright amid black clouds, with a serrate orange halo and golden arrows fired at its center: a portal, a way of return, impossibly distant. As he watches, the petals clench, narrowing the egress, reducing it to an irregular ember.

There had been time, plenty of it. But the time had run out.

The sky’s cloudy ceiling grumbles in the south. The dimness is smeared by rain. A familiar odor reaches him: vapors from the mine on the far side of the knob, sulfur from the Sweethome. He was on the list. Ma had given them his name.

One of the buzzards bats its wings and lifts itself into the air. Others do likewise, leaving their perches, hovering amid the trees, then gliding together. A dozen, a score of them now— They’re circling the fallen tree, the prostrate black walnut at the edge of the turtle’s shell. Its long trunk divides the slope. The dead walnut is hard to mount, but there are places where you can scramble beneath.

Denlon remembers when it went down. He was watching, not far from where he is now. The bushy crown dropped, the trunk landed with a boom, and its compass of roots was like a spider springing out of the earth. In the years since, the peckers and bugs had joined with the rot to separate the giant stump from its trunk.

And that stump—

Is more than ugly. It's a monstrous thing: a reaching hand with innumerable fingers, stiff and crinkled. The tapers are gloved with crusted clay, and they creak in the wind and the cold. This spectral hour breathes life into them. The root hairs shiver. The dry clay cracks. The wooden fingers move.

Denlon turns, descending the slope, putting distance between himself and the stump and its gyre of buzzards. He could return the way he'd come, but the incline below is open to him, and he knows it well.

When he reaches the gaunt persimmon, he looks back.

The buzzards are flapping around the stump, gabbling to it, encouraging it. The wooden fingers, silhouetted against the sky, quiver and spread, feeling the air.

The mountains rumble. A boom and a flash. Rain smokes against a nearby slope. Another boom, this one so fierce it shakes the knob. And as he watches, the giant stump tips over onto its belly.

Its tapers dig into the rocky soil, squealing, scraping.

Is the monstrous thing coming alive?

Denlon can see— The root mass is shifting, scrabbling, moving between the trees, descending the slope, hurrying its

limbs like a wooden crab.

Does it know he's here?

The squealing is suddenly louder. The dark stump rears, lifting itself, root arms spread, scarves of spiderweb and gauzy mycelia waving. Its tapers are testing the air, seeking.

He's hidden by darkness, but the warm spring wind flows up the slope like blood, carrying his sign.

The monster can smell him or taste him. The root mass falls forward onto its limbs and scrabbles down the slope, closing the distance quickly.

The stump's special terror shakes Denlon's frame like a high-voltage shock. A glum gasp, a desperate groan— He turns his back to the monster and hurries his stride.

The way is steep, the plates of rock slide. Another boom shakes the earth and sky, and now— There's a thumping behind him, thumping and clattering— The sounds stir a fear in him that no earthly comfort can allay.

Hurry, he tells himself. It's close, too close— It's right behind—

An awful creak and a root arm butts his shoulder, toppling him, rolling him over. The leaf litter's flying, gritty appendages plow around him, feeling and finding him, grappling him with hairy claws.

One pins his shoulder, another digs into his hip.

Denlon tears free, sledding atop the loose mold. He trips, stumbles, rolls over a bluff, gets his feet back beneath him and scrambles down. Around him the shrubs are shaking, the wet wind is smacking his face. He descends a narrow

ravine, shouldering past clutches of saplings— Behind him, the stump breaks through a windfall, descending a soil-slide, root arms waving.

Forward, a cloudy face appears in the sky, rising above the trees. The brow is lined. A dark hollow appears like the pit of an eye. The swell of a cheek. And its chin tapers like an inverted bell.

Ma, Denlon cries out.

A dart of wind sucks between the cloud's cheeks, and an elderly voice sounds in his head. *My dear boy.*

Ma's eyeholes blow through, a star appearing in each. Feeling stars. Stars of infinite care.

Denlon's moving as fast as he can, but it's not fast enough. The spiderous mass launches itself and lands behind him. A snaking taper circles his waist and draws him against the stump's twitching center.

He wails, and the high pitch of his voice startles him.

He struggles free of the snaking hold, tripping, pants catching on branches. His stride is short, his legs are shrinking—

Root arms behind him, reaching—

I'm getting smaller, he thinks.

His trousers foil his escape. The waist has fallen around his thighs. He's a boy again, and a six-foot drop seems an enormous height—

Denlon grabs a sapling and hangs, feet dangling. Then his pants slide free and he lets go, landing hard on his side, rain clattering over him.

Behind him the wooden monster is turning this way and

that, probing the thickets.

Denlon is naked, slick with mud. He wipes his cheek with a little hand and regains his feet as the stump swings toward him. A terrified sound from innocent lips and he's running again, descending the muddy slope, feeling his bitty genitals jiggling against a hairless groin.

Abruptly the trees vanish. He's reached the edge of the forest.

Denlon sees three yellow lights below. There's the shack, with a lamp in the bedroom window. And a pair of lanterns are on the porch. A twist of smoke rises from the crippled stovepipe. The collecting smoke had fed Ma's aged visage, but it's dissipating now, along with her caring eyes and worried look.

The shack is unchanged. Its roof is still sagging. The siding is patched with board scraps and tarpaper, and a shutter swings in the wind, hanging by a single hinge. The shack faces the funnel-shaped sinkhole. The rocky vortex seems to be pulling at the earth around it, drawing everything into it. The sinkhole is twice the size of the shack. Part of the dwelling's foundation is gone, and it looks about to plunge in.

Denlon turns. The monster is right behind him, groaning and creaking with malicious intent. *Ma*, he cries, stumbling toward home, giving way to a child's defeat.

He'd gambled his future. He'd bet everything on a mistaken conviction. He'd lost himself in a futile undertaking. And now he is going to get his due. Sobs well in his undersize chest.

What a pitiful creature he is. And the shack makes it painfully real.

No need of crying, a man's voice says.

Denlon looks up and sees his father. Pa is standing there facing the threatening stump, as if by his will alone he could stop the thing in its tracks.

Pa is as he'd been the last day of his life: left arm jiggling, right leg gimped, wearing a dome hat with an irregular brim, a headlamp protruding from its front. As if he can feel Denlon's desperation, Pa raises his hand and switches his headlamp on.

The beam shifts from side to side, lighting the frightening mass, its thready webs, its reaching tapers. And for a moment the monster is frozen in black and white, like a tumor on a CT scan.

Look at that, Pa murmurs, and he stoops to raise his son in his arms.

Pa has black rubber boots on his feet and black rubber gloves on his hands. The metal devices attached to his hip rattle and clang, and as he's lifted, Denlon hears the squeak of coal dust in Pa's clothes. His small head approaches his father's, and he sees Pa's sooty face, eyes peering over his sharp nose, lower lip wet and curled.

"You're saving me," Denlon sobs.

Oh Denny boy, Pa wheezes, *I hope I am*.

The wind lifts his coat. *We'll do whatever we can*, Pa rasps in his ear.

A small woman—a much younger Ma, in her mid-twenties—steps beside Pa.

It ain't right, Ma grieves.

No, it ain't, Pa agrees. Ma puts her head on Pa's shoulder.

Then he hands Denlon to her, and the three of them survey the stump together.

It's motionless now, root arms inert, as if fixed by the beam from Pa's headlamp.

We gotta stop that thing, Pa says. But there's uncertainty in his voice, and his headlamp is flickering.

Ma's chest is warm and her voice is soft.

I gave you life, she says. *I've come back to restore it.*

Pa puts his arm around her. She gazes at him with deep devotion.

Denlon feels his parents' care. They understand the danger he's in, and they're going to protect him.

"I'm not done," he assures them both. "I'm not going to leave."

And with that, the lights in the shack go dark and Pa's headlamp winks out. The ugly stump vanishes, and so does the miner and his slip of a wife.

There is only the echo of a child's resistance in the darkness.



"Denny, Denny—"

He's gasping, the tail of a plea in his throat. Denlon opens his eyes.

He's breathless. His chest is thumping, heart racing— A bedside lamp clicks on, and the pillow beside him is lit. He

turns, hearing a crack that sounds like a root arm snapping but is only the shifting of a bone in his shoulder.

“You’re tangled in the sheets,” Bett says.

He’s shivering, covered with sweat. When he tries to sit up, he fears he’ll vomit.

Then he feels Bett’s hand on his hip. She’s loosening the twists of linen binding his legs. “Sorry,” he mutters.

“A bad dream,” she guesses.

Denlon exhales. “A stormy night back in West Virginia.”

She raises her hand and touches the skin below his eyelid.

He realizes: there are tears on his cheeks. “What time is it?” he wonders, lifting himself, turning away, drying his face with his hand.

“Half past three.”

“I was in the forest behind our home,” he explains. “Pa was with me. And Ma. They were trying to help me.”

“Your mother was being helpful?”

“It was a dream,” Denlon laughs. “A stump was chasing me—the roots of an old walnut. It looked like the growth in my scan—like a hand with fingers reaching in every direction.”

Bett shakes her head. His words upset her. “The threat is preying on you.”

Denlon sighs and waves his hand, dismissing the fear. “We’ll have more information in a couple of days.”

The image in the scan, he thinks, was less alarming than the one in his dream. Simpler, more mundane. But the danger’s still palpable, impossible to dispel. And Bett is right: he’s tried to suppress his fear during his waking hours, but it’s

surfacing in his sleep.

Two days before, he'd sat in a chair beside the surgeon while she zeroed in on the tumor they'd found in his left lung. She'd magnified it for him, dialing into its depths then rising through it, seeing the reaching tapers in three dimensions. "Spiculations," she'd called them.

How old is the growth? Did the malignancy start in his lung? Where else in his body are the agents of death extending their claims? At the moment it's all a mystery. In a few days they'd have PET scan results and a report from the pathology lab. In the meantime he'd be a pilgrim waiting for the oracle to speak.

"We have to take this seriously," Bett says.

"We do," he agrees. "But there's Franny. And Pete. He had a simple operation, and he hasn't had a recurrence. People survive things like this.

"The thought of the end—" He looks at Bett. "It's always with us. And the knowledge too—that it might be sudden, unexpected. But to look too closely at that—" He shakes his head. "Life is enough of a struggle." His words are weighted by memories of delays and diversions, plans impeded, hopes deferred.

Bett, he knows, is right to be worried. But it's his nature to play the optimist. He's not going to dwell on mortality until circumstances force him. Meanwhile, his brewing subconscious will imagine the worst, dreaming of Ma and Pa, reaching into the past for their help, wishing they were like they were when he was a child—harmonious, united to protect him.

Denlon stands, opens a dresser drawer, grabs a t-shirt and pulls it on.

I'm not afraid, he thinks. The aspiration I've carried through life won't die with me. He steps to the window and draws the curtain.

As late as it is, Arlington is sprinkled with light. A commercial jet is blinking its wing tips, preparing to land. He's called this his home for thirty years. Most of his life.

The image reflected in the glass isn't a boy or a teen. But his strong jaw is still there. He has a full head of hair, and the graying is tasteful. And he's only an inch shorter than he was in his prime.

He has a mate—a beautiful woman, inside and out—who believes in him and does what she can to help him. And she knows how determined he is. He's devoted his life to being more than another mouse on the knob, and the reward for his struggles is right before him. That's what he wants to share with her and everyone else: his "Temple in Lime."

As he looks out at the sleeping city, he imagines he can see the Temple complete, lit up against the night sky, glowing above the mundane structures. Five irregular groves, towering to leafy roofs, where branches project in every direction. The bastions are woven like boles and vines in a dense forest, but the members are made of limestone, with undulating arches and keyholes between. And where the branches put forth, there are webs of mosaic glass colored gold and green. The roofing boughs are thatched with copper leaf.

Less a building than a mystical woodland. And a deeper

mystery is found within. Its enclosed spaces are defined by lime spans and rippling corrugations, like the curtains you'd see in a well-lit cavern. Its heights are hollowed by elliptical loges and drip with tear-shaped chandeliers. All who enter, however inured they might be to metro ennui, are transported to another realm.

Denlon's Temple in Lime. A place of inspiration in the guise of a community center. A powerful vision and a personal one. A vision he'd carried with him for so many years. He longed with all his being to bring it into the world.

There was no pretense. He was self-aware. The project was a glorification of origin, a transmutation of his lowly beginnings. In the Temple, the memory of his childhood was preserved, the good years before Pa died. It was this that imbued his work, his mission in life, what he wanted to share with the world. He wouldn't let go of it. No, never. Even with death threatening. He wouldn't let go.

"Come back to bed," Bett says.

He can see the concern in her eyes. The surrounding skin is creased and shadowed, and her straw-colored hair is mussed. Bett's vulnerability frightens him. The discovery of his malignancy had shaken her, and he knows the wait for the pathology report has been hard for her.

She holds out her hand to him.

Then his mobile rings.

"It's Romero," he guesses. "A new brainstorm about the surveys."

He grabs his phone and steps into the bathroom. But it

isn't Romero.

"Denlon?" The voice is male and hesitant.

"Speaking."

"We've never met. My name is Foster. I'm married to Tracy. I'm sorry to call under these circumstances—"

How long has it been, Denlon wonders. Maybe a year. Things were peaceful with his ex, but they didn't speak often.

"It's the middle of the night," Denlon says.

"I know. I wouldn't have called if things weren't dire."

"Dire?"

"Tracy's in trouble. She was diagnosed with cancer in January."

Trace, Denlon thinks. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"They found a mass in her stomach," Foster says. "It's metastasized. It's in her kidneys and her throat. And they think that—" He halts and draws a breath.

Denlon pictures her on the day they met, feeling a fondness from earlier times.

"She needs to see you," her husband says.

"Forest? It's late. I'm not recalling your name."

"Foster."

"We're not close," Denlon says. "We rarely talk."

"I know that. You need to understand— She's terminal. Hanging on. Her mental condition is— I wish I didn't have to bother you. But Tracy's doctor thinks it's important."

"You're calling from—"

"Pittsburgh. I have two grown children here. I'll be honest with you. I want to help her, but— Making this call

wasn't easy. Her doctor thinks you should be here. If you could spare a few days—”

Denlon moves the receiver a few inches from his ear, depriving the voice of its intimacy. “I'm really sorry, but—”

“Tracy's dying,” her husband says. “She's in another world, seeing things that aren't there. She speaks to you. She calls your name in her sleep.”

“I can't. I really can't.”

“The mass in her abdomen,” Foster says. “She thinks it's a fetus. She thinks she's carrying your child. Her doctor wants you to come.”

Tracy is dying. And she thinks she's pregnant.

“Her doctor wants you to come,” the man says again.

2

The sun is up. They're in the car, and Bett is driving. Denlon is on the phone to Romero, talking about the Temple.

"Let's get the amended survey data filed by Wednesday," Denlon says.

Romero commits to the deadline and ends the call by expressing his confidence. There aren't many obstacles left. The latest drawing revisions are in. The remaining public approvals are nearly in hand and the funding consortium's oversubscribed. It's not hard to imagine breaking ground before year-end. The younger man's optimism matches Denlon's. For the firm, the project means status: a public building in an enviable location. For him and Romero, it will be the realization of a waking dream.

As he disconnects, Bett turns onto the highway.

"This is crazy, Denny."

Bett is upset. Why, in the middle of this uncertainty about

his own health, is he getting on a plane to Pittsburgh?

“Her husband should be supporting her.” Bett shakes her head.

“The doctor says it’s important,” he tells her again. “I may get the news today.” He’s talking about his scans and the pathology report. “As soon as I hear back, I’ll let you know.” He puts his hand on his left pectoral as a demonstration of his care and commitment.

Then, with Bett focused on the roadway, he thinks about the reunion with Tracy. It’s hard for him to imagine her as Foster described. She was always the resolute one, the sure eye at the helm. They’d met in their last year of college and faced the struggle to survive together. Tracy was a working man’s daughter—calm, of a practical mind and determined. Attractive too, but that wasn’t what drew him. It was her clarity. She had confidence in him. She understood his sense of purpose and she valued his strength. Together they were headed for something better. Her love was an expression of her faith in them both.

She got a job as a clerk in a department store. He ran a printing press and took architecture classes at night. The print shop was purgatory—a damp basement where he fed black ink to mammoth presses that rattled and pounded like the coal crushers from which he’d fled. The future had been dubious, but he committed himself to his dream of building things the world had never seen. With Tracy’s confidence, he’d granted himself permission to hope. He sharpened his mind with study, and he sharpened his manner and speech.

Ultimately, they found their way to good incomes and a comfortable home. He made a living as an architect, though his high-flown goal remained out of reach. He was able to support Ma, and Tracy kept an ailing aunt going. But they wanted a family and they failed the test. That's how things unraveled.

A childless future— For Denlon there was disappointment, but it drew him closer to Tracy. It was different for her. When she learned they couldn't have kids of their own, she grew distant. To Denlon's surprise and dismay, the commitment and devotion no longer mattered. She just wandered away.

The hope for a child had been vital to Tracy. It gave meaning to her life, the way the Temple gave meaning to his. When the hope faded, it was replaced by the anguish of failure.

Now, somehow, with the threat of death upon her, Tracy's hope had returned. Her dream of a child has come back to life. That's the reason he's flying to Pittsburgh. He's still in her heart. And she is still in his.

The airport cutoff is just ahead. Bett makes the turn and slows as the terminal appears.

The car pulls to the curb and stops beside the sliding glass doors. Denlon leans close and kisses her. "I adore you," he says.

He grabs his traveling bag and steps out. Bett mimes a kiss and he waves as she pulls away. Then he's moving toward the airport entrance, passing through the terminal doors.

As often happens to him in public structures, Denlon has a reaction to the space around him. The design is impersonal,

authoritative and rigid, trying hard to be sleek. As many times as he'd passed beneath the bald ceilings, he still found them oppressive. The architect had imagined travelers would find the cold efficiency modern, but the airport had been a relic on the day it opened. It was a cautionary now, a showcase of bad ideas, a reminder that the human spirit draws inspiration from natural forms.

The strength of a tree's trunk, the sinuosity of its boughs, the hatchwork of limbs and forking branches— The shifting angularity of light beaming through the lush mosaic, the fluid smoothness of cavern lime sculpted by time— In his Temple, the spirit would be coaxed, not herded or bludgeoned. The soul would hear the whisper of something familiar, subtle and vague, blurred and deep, as it might be suggested to a dreaming child.

The airport is busy. The noisy foot traffic obscures a woman speaking over the paging system. According to the posted departures, his flight is on time. Denlon steps to the ticket counter and takes his place behind a teen in a green ski jacket.

He hears a voice: a whisper, high-pitched and creaky.

Is the skier talking to him? No, the boy has his phone to his ear. The attendant behind the counter motions, and the skier kicks his backpack toward the luggage scale.

It won't be easy, the creaky voice says. A familiar voice, aged, female.

Denlon turns. There's nobody near him.

No mercy in cancer, Son.

The voice is Ma's. "What the hell," he mutters.

He can hear her breath by his ear. It's as if Ma is right beside him.

Is it you? he wonders.

The old turtle, Ma replies.

"May I help you, sir?" The attendant behind the counter is staring at him. The skier is gone.

"Three twenty-one," he says, "to Pittsburgh." He shows her the boarding pass on his phone.

Denlon can hear Ma sighing in his ear.

You can't bargain with death, she says.

Her voice is laden with remembrance. Cancer had taken her, and the end had come quickly.

Denlon shuts his eyes and shakes his head. He can see Ma's high brow, her gray hair twisted at the rear and held by a twig. When she scowls, her lips lose their wrinkles.

"Are you alright?" the attendant asks.

You've returned to torment me, Denlon thinks.

I'm here to help. I care about my boy.

"Sir?"

Faces are turning in his direction.

"I'm fine, I'll be fine." He sees his phone on the floor and stoops to retrieve it. The glass is cracked.

The attendant is motioning him away. Denlon picks up his bag and wipes his brow with a trembling hand. Three hours' sleep. Tracy, the pending pathology report—

He's taking uncertain steps, listening, moving down the causeway toward the security queues. It's the dream, he thinks.

The shock— The image in the scan, the ugly mass with tapering arms reaching in every direction.

Denlon stumbles into a flight attendant. Her ankle gives and she falls to her knees.

“Look where you’re going,” she says.

“I’m sorry.” He tries to help her up but she ignores him, rising and swatting the dust off her skirt.

He starts forward again, but his attention isn’t on the terminal or the travelers around him. He’s listening for Ma.

No breath, no words. Just silence.

The voice wasn’t real, he thinks. His mind produced it. That’s happened to others. People hear voices. Pitiful souls locked away in institutions. Then he realizes there’s another explanation. The cancer has spread. It’s in his brain.

Denlon thinks of Tracy. Being face to face with her after all these years. Lost in a delusion caused by—

Stop, he thinks, trying to calm himself. He’d imagined Ma’s voice. He’s fine, he’s just fine.

“Flight three twenty-one to Pittsburgh is now boarding.”

Denlon passes through security and enters the terminal. His gate is crowded. He takes his place in line.

Nearby a mother is seated, nursing her child. As he notices them, the infant sobs and the nipple’s dislodged. When the mother tries to put the baby back to her breast, the coverlet falls from around her. She takes things in order, getting the infant resettled, bending forward to retrieve the coverlet, unwilling to be rushed for modesty’s sake.

Denlon can’t look away. The breast is larger than the baby’s

head, barely dimpled by the tiny hand. The nipple, engorged with milk and blood, is stiff as a finger, deforming the infant's mouth.

A child, Ma whispers, makes the world a joyful place.

Her venomous tone makes Denlon shudder. He raises his hand to his ear, as if he might touch the stinging voice. He's tempted to answer, but he stops himself.

"Have an enjoyable trip," the gate attendant says.

Denlon passes through the gate, enters the jetway and makes his way onto the plane. He locates his seat, squeezing past the legs of a large balding man who's talking with someone in the row forward.

When Denlon sits, the man faces him.

"Louie's my name," the stranger says. His large hand grasps Denlon's arm. "Back to the Pitt, hmm?" His string tie has a silver clasp with a crossed pick and shovel, and as Louie leans toward him, the clasp swings in the space between them.

Denlon doesn't reply.

Louie winks. "You've got mother on your mind."

"What are you talking about?"

"Friend," the big man grunts, "Sunday is Mother's Day. The old petunia is eighty-three. Can't wait to see her." He pats Denlon's leg. "Louie's gonna buy you a drink."



As the aircraft is landing, Denlon wakes. Louie bids him goodbye and the passengers file off the plane.

Denlon exits the airport warily, listening. The voice in his head is quiet.

At the curb, the taxi stand is empty. He waves at an approaching cab, and it screeches to a halt, narrowly avoiding a collision with a hotel bus. Denlon opens the rear door, stows his bag on the seat and slides in.

“Where to?” the cabby asks.

Denlon reads the address from his phone. The cabby punches it in and pulls the taxi into traffic.

“You from Pittsburgh?” The taxi guns between two shuttle vans. “I was born here. No place like home.”

As he speaks, the corner of the cabby’s mouth jerks. Catfish on a line, Denlon thinks, imagining the man at the bottom of a stream while someone above tugs on the hook.

“Don’t run the light,” Denlon says.

The cabby pounds the brakes, and the car screeches into the intersection.

“Is it far?”

“Too far to walk,” the cabby replies.

Denlon checks his messages and sees a new one from Romero that boosts his spirits. They’d found a fabricator for the Temple roof.

“Plans for Mother’s Day?” the cabby asks.

Denlon is silent, listening for Ma.

He opens the window, hearing only road noise.

“My mother is gone,” he says.

And he hopes it’s so.

From the day he left the knob, Ma had harried him. He

sent her funds without fail. He paid a neighbor to look in on her, to cook and do chores. No manner of attention satisfied her. She shared every discomfort with him, every problem, even the most trivial ones. What had changed him, she wondered. Didn't he care? He called her often, and her first words were always, "When are you coming home?"

He'd done his best to be patient with her, but as the years passed, his weariness turned to aggravation. He was taking care of her. Why couldn't she let him make a life for himself? Would she ever stop badgering him? She knew how hard it was for him to carry the guilt she heaped upon him.

"What's the number?" the cabby mutters, consulting his electronics.

Denlon looks at his phone. "Fifty-two oh nine."

"Almost there," the cabby nods, slowing at an intersection and making a turn. He cranes over the steering wheel. "Ambulance parked down the street."

Denlon comes forward, peering through the windshield at the houses ahead—trees, lawns, hedges— He can see an emergency light over the roofs of the parked cars.

"Hope that isn't your stop. Forty-nine twenty-seven, forty-nine thirty-nine. Fifty oh nine. Here come the neighbors."

Denlon sees figures crossing the blacktop ahead.

"Fifty-one fifteen, fifty-one twenty-nine. Probably some old guy with a bad heart. This patch is full of seniors. Driving a meat wagon: there's a job. I had a woman last year, delivered on the way to the hospital. Right where you're sitting. Wait a minute." The cabby rolls down his window. "Bad news, pal.

Fifty-two oh nine. That's your stop."

The scarlet van is parked at the curb. Between the trees, men in white uniforms appear. Denlon is lurched to the side as the cab turns into a driveway across the street.

"It's a woman," the cabby says, "and they've got her strapped down."

Denlon grabs the handle and wrenches the door open, stumbling across a lawn and into the street.

Two paramedics are carrying a metal litter with a struggling woman on it. She's sobbing and howling at them. Most of her body is beneath a blanket. A crowd of shocked elders are standing on either side.

"Trace?"

At the sound of Denlon's voice, the elders turn as one, eaving their brows with tremulous hands, squinting through glasses.

Tracy is suddenly quiet, head cocked to the side, staring at him.

Denlon steps toward her.

Her body is bent at an odd angle beneath the cloth. Has her spine been damaged? One of her legs is twisted, the other is folded beneath the blanket. Her head is couched against her shoulder as if there's something wrong with her neck.

The paramedics reach the rear of the van.

"It's you," Tracy says.

Her face is the same, but her eyes have changed. Desperation blazes in them, fear and animal pain.

"Let me down," she says. "He's my husband." Tracy

struggles to free herself, rocking the litter.

One of the medics looks at Denlon. “She needs to be taken to the hospital.”

Denlon nods.

Ignoring Tracy’s curses, they lift the litter and roll it into the van. The doors slam shut.

Denlon hears a muffled shriek, then the van is pulling away, speeding down the block, siren blaring.

He stands there, stunned. Moments pass and the street empties.

The taxi is gone. Denlon’s bag is on the drive. The oldsters have returned to their crossword puzzles. A man is standing in the doorway of fifty-two oh nine looking at him.

“I’m Foster,” he says, and he disappears into the house.

Denlon steps along the walkway and through the entry.

Tracy’s husband is in the living room. A coffee table is in pieces between two overturned chairs, and the remains of plants and broken pottery are scattered between them.

Denlon sees something glittering on the carpet. It has a familiar look, and when he stoops to retrieve it, he sees the pendant he gave Tracy the night they moved in together.

“A lot’s happened.” Foster’s voice rises from the bottom of a well. He’s big, rotund and unshaven. “Will you come to the hospital with me?”

3

After you and I spoke, I returned to the bedroom. She was still asleep.”

Foster swallows, looks in the rearview mirror and changes lanes.

“Around seven, she was delirious again. I couldn’t understand what she was saying. And her body—” He blinks and draws a breath. “It’s crazy, I know. But it *was* just like—”

He glances at Denlon, confused, unclear. On the phone the previous night, he had seemed unsettled by the doctor’s suggestion. But he’s frightened now, welcoming Denlon’s help.

“I’ve been through two pregnancies,” he says. “Tracy’s middle looks like my first wife’s. Swollen, bumpy.” His face tightens. “Last night, when she was asleep, the thing inside her was shifting.

“I tried to talk to her, but she didn’t hear me. Her eyes were open. Wide open. While the bumps were moving. I thought: Tracy’s dead and whatever’s inside her is trying to get out.”

Poor man, Denlon thinks. The malignancies had thrown Tracy's mind off its track. And because they were coupled cars, Foster was going with her.

"I helped her sit up," he says. "I don't think she saw me. She started making these *cooing* sounds."

"The light's turned green," Denlon says.

Foster nods and the car moves forward. "She bent over and turned her head, as if she was listening to it. Then her lips pushed out." Foster exhales. "They went tight against her teeth, like this, and they pushed out again. She was speaking to it."

Foster takes one hand from the wheel and touches his forehead.

"It was hurting her. I could see something below her ribs, like an elbow, pushing farther and farther out. I was afraid it might—" He takes a breath. "I put my hand on it and pressed. It moved to the side. She leaned back, and the thing seemed to huddle down. Tracy closed her eyes, and she was breathing normally again.

"I sat beside her until she woke. I told her I wanted to take her to the hospital. She said she wasn't ready.

"I explained what had happened while she was sleeping. She seemed surprised, frightened. Then she turned on me. Angry, really angry. She said—"

Foster swallows and shakes his head.

"What did she say?" Denlon asks.

"She said she knew what I was up to, and she wasn't going to . . . let me."

“Let you what?”

“It was strange,” Foster says. “After so many days of being disconnected, we were finally talking as we normally do. But what she was saying was completely crazy.

“I told her you were coming. She clung to my words. She spoke your name over and over. Then the moment of clarity passed, and she was unreachable again. Like I wasn’t there. Like she was on the phone, listening and talking to someone else.”

Foster sighs. “She was calm until the ambulance arrived, but when they tried to escort her out, she went wild. She seems to think that—” He exhales.

“What does she think?”

“That I’m jealous. That I’ve convinced the hospital to—
To abort your child.”



Doctor Janits is dish-faced with a crumpled nose. It’s as if long years of tending to others have quarried his features.

“We’re doing our best,” he explains to Foster. “She’s not happy about being here.”

The three of them are standing in a waiting area.

Janits turns to Denlon. “You’re her first husband?”

Denlon nods.

Janits points to a chair, motions to Foster, and the big man steps toward it.

“Come with me,” Janits says to Denlon.

He turns and leads Denlon down a well-lit corridor.

“It’s a difficult time,” the doctor says. “Tracy doesn’t have long. Three months ago, we were trying to save her. Now our job is to ease her departure. You understand?”

“I do,” Denlon says.

“The malignancy has metastasized quickly,” Janits says. “We can’t stop the spread, and to try would only make the end more difficult for her. The complication is that the cancer has found its way to her brain. She’s delusional. We can reduce her pain, but we’re not able to restore her cogency—to reconnect her with reality.

“Tracy has been expressing her desire to see you. Foster says there’s no disharmony on your side.”

Denlon shakes his head. “None,” he says. Losing Tracy had been hard. There was a part of him that had never gotten over it.

Janits stops in front of swinging doors and gestures Denlon through. Another corridor stretches before them.

“In situations like this, we take a patient’s requests seriously. We’d like to honor her last wishes. What more can we do?”

They approach an intersecting hallway and Janits gestures Denlon to the left. They pass a counter with shelves of instruments behind it. Three nurses emerge from an adjoining alcove, one carrying a rack of test tubes filled with blood. The hallway connects to another corridor extending to the right.

An involuted maze, Denlon thinks. A labyrinth with Tracy at its center.

“She’s frightened,” Janits is saying, “and aggressive. She’s spent a good deal of time here in the past few months, and she isn’t happy about being back. She’s quieted down, but she was violent when we admitted her. We’ve had to restrain her. I don’t want you to be concerned or surprised about that.”

“I saw her being loaded into the ambulance,” Denlon says. “Her body looked badly cramped.”

“Some of that’s caused by the malignancies,” Janits replies. “Some of it’s due to her pain. Some of it’s psychological.”

“There are times when it seems like she isn’t listening, or is unable to hear us or see us. I believe her withdrawal is partially willful. But the greater portion may be beyond her control.”

Janits leads him around a corner.

“How can I help?” Denlon asks.

“Reach out to her,” Janits says. “Be with her. Comfort her. Based on what she’s told us, it’s you she needs.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“You must have been happy together.”

Denlon sighs. “Very happy. For a long while. But we couldn’t have kids.”

“When reality is too much for us, we find comfort in delusion.”

The elevator doors open. Janits motions and they start down a narrow hallway. There are offices on either side, windows sealed by vertical blinds.

“Don’t initiate any discussion about her malignancies,” the doctor says.

“How long will I—”

Janits shakes his head. “Let’s see how it goes. The room has a window of one-way glass. We’ll be monitoring things should any problem arise.”

They pass a lab bench and desks. The doctor stops before a white metal door with a small window.

Janits gives him an encouraging look, takes hold of the chrome handle and turns it slowly.

The door swings open.

Denlon steps through and closes it behind him.

The room is twelve by twelve with cream-colored flooring and cream-colored walls. Tracy is lying faceup on a gurney, but her eyes are closed. She’s beneath an ivory blanket. Below her chin, Denlon can see the neckline of a green hospital smock. Thick red straps cross the blanket, securing her arms and legs.

He moves closer.

Tracy’s fists are clenched. Beneath the blanket, one leg is stretched, the other is bent at the knee. He wonders how much pain she’s feeling.

She’s the one, Ma whispers.

Denlon’s heart sinks.

The one you sheltered with when you left your poor mother.

He takes another step forward.

Shake yourself, Ma says, as if speaking to Tracy. *Look who’s here.*

Tracy’s face turns toward him.

It’s lifting her spirits to see you.

“Denny,” Tracy smiles. In her eyes, there is absolute recognition. “You knew. Didn’t you.”

What did he know?

“Our baby,” she says.

Denlon sees the emotion in her eyes. The young woman he’d married, the one he’d never forgotten—

“Our baby,” Ma mimics.

What do you want from me, Denlon thinks.

Nothing but the regard a devoted mother deserves.

“Here,” Tracy says. “Inside me.” She looks at her swollen middle. “Your son,” she draws the word out.

There is pride in her voice.

“I’m so glad,” Denlon says.

His words bring damp to her eyes. And Denlon sees love in their depths—the love that had touched him for so many years.

I’m going to cry.

Please, he begs. Please stop.

Tracy lifts her chin and parts her lips, urging him closer.

Give your wife a mountain boy’s welcome.

Denlon steps closer. He’s focused on Tracy, remembering all the vulnerability and fondness he’d felt in his youth.

He reaches the side of her gurney and raises his hand to touch her cheek.

“We were lucky,” he says.

Tracy smiles. Somehow, through the trials she’s suffered, her need for him has returned. Her warmth, her softness, her sensitivity—

“You did it,” she murmurs.

“What do you mean?”

“You knew my tubes had opened. You sent me your seed. When I was asleep.”

Denlon doesn't reply.

“I know,” Tracy says.

What does she know?

“Hills magic,” she grins.

It was an amusement they'd shared during their marriage: that Denlon had access to Appalachian wizardry that was beyond the grasp of his city-bred wife.

“Some secret way,” she says. “A spider bite. A thread of fog on the wind. Or a baby snake: when I was asleep, it crawled through the crack.”

Tracy seems to be taking the joke seriously. Denlon glances behind him at the one-way mirror in the door, imagining Janits peering through it. Is there a mic in the room? Can the doctor hear what's being said?

She's crazy, Son.

“You did it for us,” Tracy says, profoundly grateful. “You found a way.”

You abandoned your Ma for her.

That's enough, he insists, feeling the old dread. This isn't the Ma of his early years, before Pa died. This is the Ma he had feared, the one who'd had power over him, the one who'd done everything she could to load him with guilt. He imagined her piercing eyes—brown, bitter, withering.

Tracy's body bucks, wrenching at the straps. “Help me,” she gasps.

“Are you in pain?”

She seems all at once confused, as if her attention's been called to something fearful. "He's been growing so quickly. My womb had to stretch. My organs were in the way. They said my body didn't want him."

"The doctors?"

Tracy nods. "It isn't true. He just needs more room. His arm grew up the side of my chest. I could feel it there when I took a deep breath. One of his legs circled my back. It was rubbing against the knobs. It frightened me," she admits, sharing some of her doubt.

"There was a bitter taste. They thought something was wrong with my kidneys. I could feel his fingers trying to get a grip. Then—"

An odd expression appears on her face, startled but gloating, as if she'd experienced something unexpected and had found it pleasurable.

"His head reached my heart," she says. "His wispy hair is growing around it." Tracy sighs. "Denlon. I knew you'd come."

Her wish fulfillment is vivid to him: the young woman who desperately wanted a child, and the dying woman imagining she is pregnant.

They're a twosome. Mother and son. Ain't love grand?

"The contractions started this morning," Tracy says. "My breasts are ready. They're full of milk. Undo me, Denny."

Denlon stares at the straps.

"You want to see," Tracy laughs, "don't you?"

You heard what the sawbones said. They're gonna throw her

on the ash heap.

“Help me, Denny.” Tracy is thrashing her shoulder and twisting her trunk.

What about Baby Root? How’s she gonna nurse him and change his diapers? She can’t care for the boy strapped down like that.

“Undo me,” Tracy insists.

Don’t be heartless like your Pa. Let her loose.

Denlon is about to object when the door flies open behind him.

Tracy screams.

Denlon’s knocked to the side, doctors surround the gurney. A nurse grabs his arm. Two interns subdue Tracy while Janits raises a syringe and a vial. The plunger retracts, filling the syringe, then Janits steps closer and jabs the needle into her arm.

“You’re alright?” the nurse asks.

Janits eyes him with a frown. Denlon isn’t waiting.

He’s hurrying through the doorway and down the corridor, jostling a robed patient, past a lab tech wheeling a cart.

“How do I get out of here?”

A woman in uniform gives him directions and Denlon continues down the hall, through a swinging door and into another corridor. He’s running now. Janits and the others know. The doctor had heard what Tracy said to him.

It’s none of their business, Denlon thinks. Tracy’s madness belongs to the two of them. It’s their tragedy—their sorrowful past and hopeless future. Tracy is leaving the world.

And death, for her, isn't just the end of mind and body. It's the end of her most precious wish, her most fervent desire.

She can't accept that. She isn't ready.

At the end of the corridor, he starts down another, remembering his dream of the night before. He has a crying need for the comfort and care he'd felt long ago. From his mother, before Pa died; and from Pa himself.

I'm right here, Pa says softly.

Denlon's feet are still moving, but he's stunned. Surprised but relieved.

Glad to be back. Pa laughs.

There's a nursing station ahead.

Poor Tracy, Pa says.

Ma made it worse, Denlon thinks.

She wants to help, Pa says, *but she don't know how.*

She's mean to me, Pa. And she's mean to you.

Since the day I died, things haven't been right between us. It isn't her fault. Your Ma is afraid.

Of what? Denlon wonders.

She has two sides, Son. A caring side and a frightened side. The frightened side gets angry. She thinks we abandoned her.

You understand, Denlon thinks.

I understand, Pa says.

The station on Denlon's left looks familiar. He remembers the shelves of instruments, and he turns at the connecting aisle.

Where are you going? Pa says.

Back to D.C., Denlon thinks.

It's time to settle this, Son.

Settle how?

You have to go home. Back to West Virginia.

The corridor leading to the reception area appears before him. Pa is right, Denlon thinks. He can't live with Ma's abuse in his ears the rest of his days.

You can't die that way either, Pa says.

Foster sees Denlon approaching and rises from his chair.

"How did it go?" he asks.

"The doctor wants you," Denlon lies. "He's in the ward."

Foster can tell something's wrong.

"On your own." Denlon waves the big man toward the corridor.

A tone sounds nearby. Elevator doors are opening. Denlon hurries toward them, passing through the gap as the doors close. The elevator goes straight to ground level.

A cab is parked in the turnaround. Denlon hurries toward it, opens the back door and slides onto the seat.

The cabby swings around: the catfish, with a hook tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Thought you'd be here," he says. "Where to?"



Denlon's on an expressway now, headed south. At the Pittsburgh airport, he'd rented a car. He has nothing but what's in his pockets as his bag is still in Foster's front room. He retrieves his phone.

There's a message from Romero. An important meeting is planned. "When are you coming back?"

Denlon calls Bett.

"Where are you?" she asks.

"I just left West Penn Hospital."

"That doesn't sound good. How is she?"

"Not good. It's in her head. She's out of her senses."

"Oh no."

"She doesn't have long."

"What's your arrival time?" Bett asks.

"I'm not returning tonight. I've rented a car. I'm four hours from Charleston. I'll spend the evening there and drive to the knob in the morning."

"You're going home?"

"I am," he says.

"Denny— Have you heard from the hospital?"

"Not yet."

"You should be here." Bett's upset. "We should be facing this together."

"I promise I'll call," he says, "as soon as I get the pathology report."

Should he tell her about the voices he's hearing?

"I have to make my peace with the place," he says.

"You're talking as if—"

"It's important to me."

Silence on the line. Bett's trying to accept his decision.

"Is there anything we should do for Tracy?" she says.

"Knit her a baby sweater with five sleeves. I'll call you

tomorrow. Rest easy, sweetheart.”

“Goodbye then. I love you.”

Goodbye, Ma says as Denlon disconnects.



Rich Shapero's novels dare readers with giant metaphors, magnificent obsessions and potent ideas. His casts of idealistic lovers, laboring miners, and rebellious artists all rate ideas as paramount, more important than life itself. They traverse wild landscapes and visionary realms, imagining gods who in turn imagine them. Like the seekers themselves, readers grapple with revealing truths about human potential. *Dead but Not Ready* and his previous titles—*Xiphactinus*, *The Hornet's Spell*, *Hibiscus Mask*, *Beneath Caaqi's Wings*, *Dreams of Delphine*, *The Slide That Buried Rightful*, *Dissolve*, *Island Fruit Remedy*, *Balcony of Fog*, *Rin*, *Tongue and Dorner*, *Arms from the Sea*, *The Hope We Seek*, *Too Far*, and *Wild Animus*—are available in hardcover and as ebooks. They also combine music, visual art, animation and video in the TooFar Media app. Shapero spins provocative stories for the eyes, ears, and imagination.