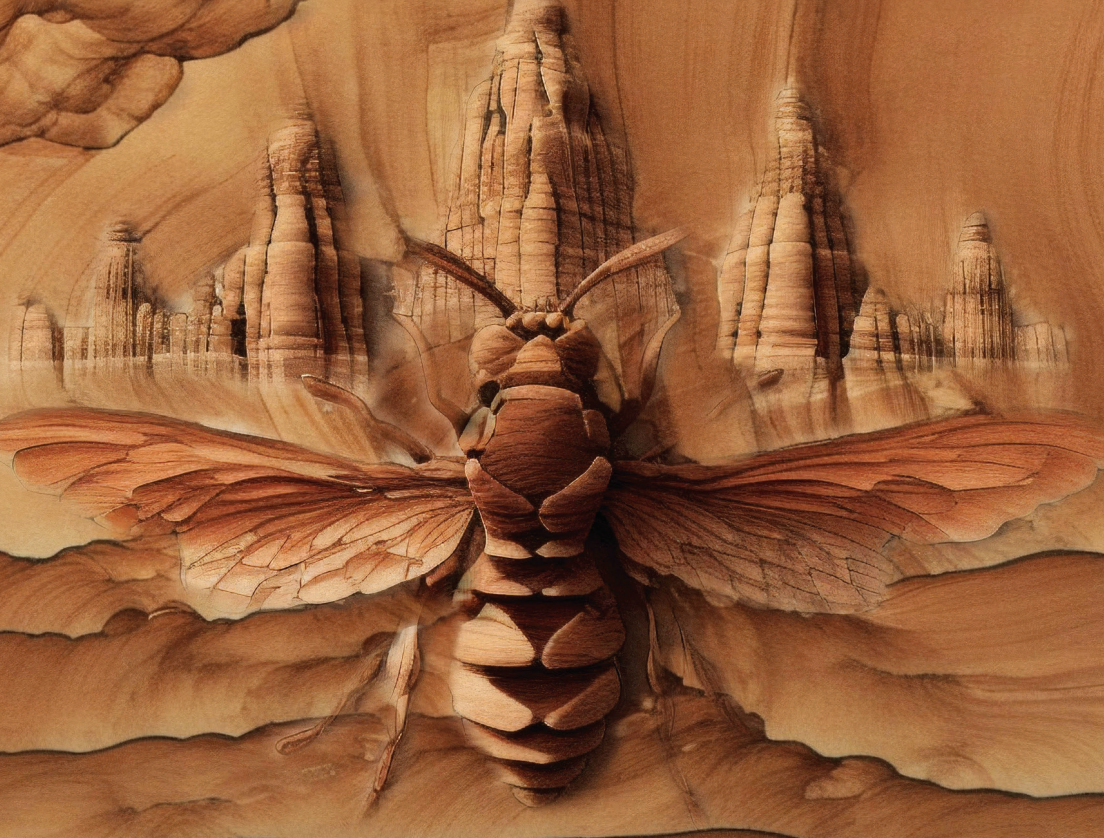




RICH SHAPERO

THE HORNET'S SPELL

A NOVEL

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A NOVEL

TooFar
MEDIA

HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

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1

She house on the corner. A modest dwelling, quiet and white. As she mounts the flagstone steps, the walls on either side of the door turn gold, and the sun's reflection seems to lift the grains of sand from the stucco. She stops before the welcome mat and puts one foot on it. Committed but hesitant. She is here to share sensitive information, intimate personal details, with a total stranger. By the doorframe, an old-fashioned fixture: a brass circlet with an ebony nipple. She presses the button, and a buzz sounds within.

Danni puts her fingers to the fringe of dark hair at the base of her neck, checking its fall. Relaxed, layered, attractive but careless. She's in jeans and a green blouse.

The knob turns, the door swings open.

A man greets her, smiling gently, tipping his brow. He's wearing a sport coat and a white linen shirt. No tie, collar open. Tall, with a strong jaw and sparkling eyes.

“Danni,” he says, extending his hand.

She takes it. “Raj,” she nods, returning his smile.

In the photo she’d studied online, he had black hair; and black it was. The photo, because of the lighting perhaps, left the question of his heritage open. But now, in person, with the sun full on his face, he doesn’t look Indian or Arabian. He’s as pale as she is. No matter, she thinks. But it matters, if only slightly. Having a heritage closer to hers seems to stir the threat. She’d taken some comfort from the thought that he would be viewing her from a distance.

Raj steps back and motions her in, and she crosses the threshold.

It’s an orderly front room. Two armchairs with rattan frames and ample cushions with a floral print. Against the wall is a divan upholstered with tan leather. Raj gestures at one of the chairs and she sits. He lowers himself onto the other.

“Danni,” he says again, inclining his head, considering.

There’s a glass of water on a side table at her elbow.

“Short for Dannith,” she says. “Dad talked about naming me after his father, Daniel, if I was a boy. My mother wanted a daughter. Lifting the name was a reprisal for her.” She inclines her head, mimicking him. “You don’t look like a ‘Raj.’”

“You expected a turban?” he laughs. “My given name is Robert. I was ‘Rob’ as a toddler, but a picture book captured my imagination. I found a red scarf in my mother’s closet, wore it over my shoulders and rode a bath mat around the house like a magic carpet. Uncle Andy called me ‘Raj’ and the nickname stuck.”

He is older than she is, Danni thinks. By how many years—eight, ten? Is he as conscious of this as she is? A younger man might be less regardful, she thinks. With age there's the likelihood of deeper perception. And peril. She'll be disclosing things about herself that are intimate and painful.

"Allison's a friend of yours," Raj says.

"A good friend," she replies. "I trust her judgment. She speaks highly of you."

He's intuitive, Allison had said. Raj has an understanding of the human spirit, and he has a pure heart. You'll feel safe with him.

"We understand each other," Raj nods. "Over the phone, I got a general idea of the help you're looking for. The moment that stood out for me was when you said you were losing confidence in yourself."

He's calm, formal, professional. There's energy in his voice and intensity in his eyes.

"I'm doubting everything," Danni says, "and I'm angry. I'm not very happy right now."

He absorbs her words without reacting.

"I'm nervous," she admits. "I know next to nothing about what you do."

"I may be able to help you, or I might refer you to someone who would be a better fit. Depending on your circumstances. Would you like to explain what's causing the distress you're feeling?"

Danni exhales. "I think I should start by—" Her words trail off mid-sentence. She shakes her head, puts her hands on

the arms of the chair and starts again.

"I don't like the world I live in," she says. "Actually," she allows him to see the upset in her eyes, "I hate it."

"What is it about the world that you hate?"

"I'm alone. Completely alone. There's no such thing as 'romance' anymore. Everything happens online and the numbers are huge. There's nothing special about you. You're dispensable. The connections are superficial and the men you meet are immature, stupid, depraved, misogynistic, selfish, boring, pathetic, depressed— And they want you to be their mother."

Danni stops. She has come to unburden herself, but her voice is so cynical, it's hard to hear.

"I have a profession," she says, "and I've done a good job of taking care of myself. I'm determined and smart, and when I look in the mirror, I see an attractive woman. But I'm twenty-six and there's no love in my life. I'm feeling hopeless. I can't go on like this."

"You're lonely," Raj says.

"Very," she replies. "I always imagined I'd have a partner."

"The world you live in,' as you say, is foiling these desires."

"That's right."

"You've had bad experiences with men," Raj says.

"I have," she nods. "'The world has changed,' I think; 'men are different now,' I think. Then I wonder if it's me."

"If you're comfortable sharing some of these experiences—"

"That's why I'm here." She speaks more quietly now. "Men aren't serious." Carefully, slowly. "They don't care about

what's going on inside you. They're oblivious to feelings, yours and their own. I like sex. An orgasm is a wonderful thing, but there has to be more."

Raj is listening, but his lips are sealed. He's sitting straight in his chair, Danni thinks, head high, chin tucked. Is he naturally self-assured or is his stiffness calculated, an affect for some purpose?

"I'll be honest," she says. "We're not going to click if you're going to hide behind your therapist's shield. Allison's high regard brought me here, but you're a man and I'm hypersensitive. I need to know what you're thinking."

"That's fair," he says. "I'm wondering why your impressions of men are so uniform. Men are as different from each other as women are."

"Maybe I bring out their ugly side," Danni says. "I don't know. Really I don't. Men have been rotten to me. The things they've done— The things they've said—"

"Can you give me a few examples?"

"Telling you who he wants to have sex with. Sharing his fantasies with you—giving you the gruesome details about what he would like to do." Her eyes widen with disbelief.

"This is a stranger?" he asks. "A man you know well? What were the circumstances—"

"Strangers, yes; and men I thought were my friends."

"If someone is inclined to callous or hostile behavior, they often give you signals beforehand."

"I ignore them," Danni says. "I act cool, as if I'm too tough to care. I pretend that I'm invulnerable, that no kind of

crude behavior will bother me. And then I regret it. I'm angry with them and myself."

"Is acting cool important?"

"I don't feel like I have any choice," she says.

"If you're unhappy with the way men are treating you, how would they react if you explained this to them?"

"That's not how it goes," Danni replies. "You become part of the boys' tribe. You act cool to get their attention, and you use your cool to protect yourself. The boys forget you're a girl . . . if they ever cared."

Raj looks puzzled. "Why do you have to be part of the boys' tribe?"

"They're gathering after work, and I want to be included. I want to get messages and calls. I want to be appealing, I want to be invited out. I'm not going to be the one stuck at home."

Raj's brow is furrowed.

"You don't understand?" Danni says. "They have the power."

"You have power too, don't you?"

His words are spoken gently. She'd asked him to declare himself, but his question angers her.

"The power I'm supposed to have," she says, "doesn't exist. It's an illusion. You grow up in a city like this with progressive values. You go to a liberal school and everyone knows the right things to say. Women are included, there's a show of treating us as equals. But we pay the price."

"There's a man I work with," she says. "He'd been nice to me. I thought he was my friend. He attacked me out of

nowhere. We were reviewing drawings we'd drafted together. In the middle of a technical discussion, he tells me I'm 'manipulative.' Then he calls me a 'man-hater.' I couldn't control myself. I screamed at him. Then I ran to the restroom and burst into tears."

Danni sighs and raises her hands.

"Did you have any fear," Raj asks, "that his accusation might be true?"

"It's not true."

"But you weren't able to shrug it off, to disregard it?"

"No, I couldn't. I wasn't tough enough."

"More than upset and anger," Raj says, "I'm feeling grief in what you're telling me."

"Grief that I'm so weak."

"Or grief for something you've been forced to give up. 'Where there is the will to power, there can't be love.' That was Jung."

The hardness of his jaw and his eaved brow, Danni thinks, give him authority. The softness in his eyes is like bait for a pitfall—a cleverness some men have. But Raj is empathetic. He wants to understand.

"You meet men," Danni explains, "who seem enlightened. Their political and social views are normal enough. They treat you like an equal. Then the façade dissolves. Their liberal values are chatter. It's all just a game for them."

"You mean," Raj interprets her words, "there's a pretense of right behavior, but it's disconnected from the reality of the struggle for power."

“That’s right. Beneath the trope that women and men are the same, beneath the bullshit of the level playing field, all these ugly things are happening.”

“I’m impressed,” he says, “by your candor and sensitivity. From what you’ve told me so far, you seem to have two competing self-images. One is that you’re an energetic and attractive woman. The other is that you think you need to be more like a man. It’s hard for me to believe that you haven’t drawn interest from a partner who is more to your liking.”

“I’m exaggerating,” Danni admits. “I’ve had male friends, real ones: boys and men I could be myself with—who didn’t require me to be subservient, who I didn’t have to be pretty for or laugh when their jokes weren’t funny. The one I’m close to right now is gay. You can always tell the boys who’ve grown up with female influences in their lives.”

“An important insight,” Raj says. “But you don’t have to be gay to be sensitive. Most boys have mothers, and most mothers are loving. Most men carry that memory with them.”

Danni bows her head and sighs. “I thought I’d found him,” she mutters. “That’s the reason I’m here.”

“You were in a relationship that didn’t work out?”

She nods. Allison is right, she thinks. He’s thoughtful and kind. She closes her eyes, draws a breath and begins.

“His name is Jerome. We were together for five months. The first month, it was casual dating. He was playful, fun to be with. Then it got serious. I was trusting him, starting to believe we had a future together. We talked about ‘commitment’ and what that meant.”

Danni halts, and Raj respects the pause.

“It was something small. Stupid. But I saw who he really was, and it shocked me.

“We were at the beach. I was putting lotion on my legs. ‘Let’s go,’ he said. He stood up and kicked sand all over me. Instead of apologizing, he laughed. ‘Look what you did,’ I said. He waved his hand. ‘You can wash it off. Let’s go.’

“‘I’m not in the mood,’ I said. ‘I want some sun.’ He got angry at me. ‘Are we going to argue about this?’ Then he turned and headed for the water. He was gone for quite a while, swimming and talking with two girls who were floating nearby. I couldn’t hear what they were saying. Finally, they came out of the water together, and the three of them stood in the surf, laughing and having a merry time. The girls were in string bikinis, nearly naked. Jerome touched one of them on the shoulder. The connection I thought we had—that invisible link—was gone. Completely. It was like I no longer existed. The connection was only something I had imagined.

“Jerome started back, and the closer he came, the more alone I felt. I had my sunglasses on, and when he reached our towels, I pretended I didn’t see him. He acted like nothing had happened. He spoke to me, and I didn’t respond. ‘What’s the matter with you?’ he said. Then he attacked me.

“It was as if he’d been storing up hostile feelings, and they were pouring out all at once. He was loud, and his words were critical and dismissive. There were so many private things he knew— And he was turning them all against me.

“I didn’t fight back. I lost my voice. I was speechless. I know

how to defend myself, but I didn't. I was furious in my head. But in my center, I was feeling frightened and miserable.

"People were watching. I said, 'You're making a scene.'

"He said, 'I don't care. I like the ocean, and I like my freedom.'

"Freedom?' I thought. 'What does that mean?' Then I surprised myself. I stood, I lifted my towel and shook it out. That made things worse. 'What are you doing?' he said. 'I'm leaving,' I told him. 'I'll get a ride back on my own.' And I picked up my things and walked away. 'We're done,' he shouted. 'We're done.'"

Danni sighs. "And we were."

A moment passes, then Raj speaks gently. "A painful experience. How long ago was this?"

"It's been a couple of months. I took some time off, and I'm back to work. But I'm not on the mend. Why didn't I see who he was? His meanness was always there, but I was ignoring the signals. I was acting chill. I shaped myself around him without even knowing. I hate myself for that, and I hate him for making me act that way.

"I told Allison, 'I can't continue like this.' And she agreed."

Raj seems to be weighing his words.

"How old is Jerome?" he asks.

"My age. Twenty-six."

"For some men, that's early to take on the responsibilities of a long-term commitment."

"Whatever the reason, I was deceived—by him or myself."

"When you recall your best times with Jerome, how close

did it come to the kind of relationship you think you want?"

"Not close at all," she replies.

"Can you put into words what you think you want?"

"Real love," she says. "A passionate connection. A fire that I want to feed fuel to. Something deep and lasting, that gives meaning to life."

Raj is silent. Or nearly so. A faint hum is stirring beneath his breath. Or some winged insect is loose in another room of the house.

Finally he speaks.

"I understand why you're here," he says.

Danni sees empathy in his eyes, and she feels a moment of confidence, in him and herself.

"Your frankness is striking," Raj says, "and so is your courage in facing these challenges. I can help you, I think. I have some ideas about how we might proceed. We can call it a day and resume at a future time. Or we could start with a brief session now, if you like."

"I blocked out the afternoon," Danni replies. "But—"

"You have some concerns?"

"I've never done this before. I'm not sure I'll be a good subject."

"Don't worry about that," Raj says. "Hypnotism is simpler than most people think. The brain has some special abilities, and we aim those abilities in a particular direction. We use suggestion, along with your mind's innate ability to imagine other realities.

"We might start with a little history, travelling the path

that brought you here. Then we could focus on the wish you've expressed. Give the wish energy. Give it encouragements it may not have received before."

"The idea of being in a trance," Danni says, "is intimidating. I don't like giving up control."

"There's no cause for unease about that," Raj assures her. "I can't make you do anything you don't want to do, and I wouldn't try. I'll be your companion and guide. I'll have control only with your permission, and you will grant me permission only when it feels natural to you. If I make a suggestion, you will follow it only when what I suggest is congruent with your desires."

"We would do it here?"

"Right here." He nods at the divan against the wall.

Physically, it looks harmless enough.

"I'll want you to mute your phone," Raj tells her.

She removes her phone from her pocket and silences it.

"To avoid an interruption," he says, "we should have you use the bathroom before we get started."

Danni rises.

"Down the hall, on the left," Raj motions.

She doesn't take long. When she returns, she pauses before the divan and seats herself on it, crossing her legs.

"You can remove your shoes," Raj says. And as she's removing them, "Most people find it comfortable as is, but if you'd like a blanket, just let me know."

He rises, steps to the window and closes the drapes. "Dimming the room will help." Raj turns to the switch for

the overhead light, there's a click, and he becomes a silhouette.

As he reseats himself, he glides his hand through the space between them, motioning her to lie flat.

Danni eases her shoulder onto the leather and settles on her hip, facing him.

"On your back please," Raj says.

She shifts herself so she's faceup. A vulnerable position, she thinks, for sleep or love or anything else.

"Make yourself comfortable," Raj tells her. "There's no rush. Let me know when you're ready."

Danni folds her arms over her middle and crosses her legs.

"Try to relax. Arms by your sides. Legs apart. Steady your breathing."

She does as he says.

"Concentration is important. I want you to pay close attention to my words. Open yourself to my voice. Take my suggestions in. Focus on them. Let them touch you. You will feel increasingly more at ease. And with that ease will come trust. That's our foundation, Danni. The trust that develops between us.

"Close your eyes now. You're going to breathe deeply to calm yourself. You'll take a breath each time I tell you to. You'll draw the air in, slowly, deeply; then just as slowly, you'll let it out."

Is it his sober delivery or his artifice? Danni finds his words comical, and she begins to laugh. She shakes her head and opens her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I think I'm nervous."

“Shall we try again?”

Danni resettles herself and closes her eyes.

“Relax your shoulders,” Raj directs her more pointedly. “Take the resistance out of your back and your middle.” He sounds almost stern. “Draw the air in slowly, deeply. Now let it out. In and then out. Breathe in and breathe out.”

With this voice, Danni thinks, there might be a penalty for disobedience.

“Breathe in, breathe out. In and then out.”

He wouldn’t violate her trust, would he? He wouldn’t harm her for some reason unknown to her, or for no reason at all. That she was having these fears distresses her more than the fears themselves.

“Don’t wander away from me,” Raj says. “We need your calm. Breathe in and breath out, Danni. In and then out.”

She reins herself in and follows his orders.

“In and then out,” Raj says, “in and then out. Your breath is slowing, drawing deeper. You can feel the expansion in your chest, and a sense of detachment, a numbness spreading out from your center into your arms and legs. A deep breath, expel the air slowly. Another deep breath. I want you to bring the focus of your attention, your full attention, to the state of your body. Search it, Danni. Your limbs, your middle. Your shoulders, your neck and head— Look for any discomfort, any reluctance, any uncertainty. And now, as you release your breath, send that discomfort with it. Breathe in fresh energy, breathe out reluctance. Breathe in confidence, breathe out concern. Breathe in fresh hope, and exhale mistrust.

“You’ve sought this calm. And now you have it. And in this state, feeling relaxed, feeling open, a new sensation reaches you.

“Humming,” Raj says softly. “Distant. Mounting in volume then softer. Fading to almost nothing; then closer again, with a buzzing edge. Distracted by something, the sound wavers, smooth, muted. And now it’s closer, much closer. You can hear it approaching. The hum is louder, the sound is determined and strong. Your attention is fixed on it now, fixed precisely.”

Is she hearing the buzz or imagining it? The hum is clearly audible. It’s part of his voice, rising from the soft ramp in his throat where the rounded words are forming. The hum accompanies them when the words emerge.

“The hum means us well,” Raj explains. “It’s come, knowing we need it. Knowing it can lead us to what we desire. And as the sound moves closer, it’s enticing us, inviting us to join it.”

Danni can hear the hypnotist breathing, breathing weightily, releasing the hum from beneath his breath.

“We’re together,” Raj says. “You and I. We’re joined in our purpose. The hum is around us now, moderating, slowing, sensing; and as it accepts us, the buzz sharpens and the hum boosts.”

If he would allow it, she would open her eyes. The sounds he’s describing seem real, and they’re coming from him. The hum is rooted in Raj’s chest, rumbles in his throat and slides over his lip; the buzz is a friction between his palate and tongue.

“Are you at ease?” he asks.

There was no point in being defensive. “I am,” she says.

“What you’re hearing is the sound of another creature. A third presence. Maybe it passed through an open window. It was somewhere at the rear of the house, circling in the hall or behind a door. Now it’s here. Around us, between us. You can feel the air from its whirring wings. It’s hovering close. Very close.”

The hypnotist is silent now. The pause, it seems to Danni, is a flourish, as if a magician has dropped his cape and a promised object has appeared behind it. In the silence, she hears the humming beside her left ear.

“With this sound,” the hypnotist says, “comes confidence, energy and hope. There is nothing in this world or in any other that will hinder us. Wherever we go, we will nurse our future and take with us the feeling of being fully alive.

“This creature— Trust me. Keep your eyes closed. This creature— If you turn your head just a little, you’ll see it.”

Danni imagines she turns her head and looks into the darkness.

“It’s there,” Raj says, “beside your temple, inches away. The translucent wings, its hanging legs, its shifting feelers. And its giant eyes.”

It’s Raj, Danni thinks. Without seeing him, she knows he’s come out of his chair. His head is inches from hers and he’s—

“Calm,” he halts her thoughts. “Calm, Danni, calm.”

She has no reason to fear him or invest him with evil intentions.

“Calm,” Raj says. “Relax yourself. Just relax.”

His words are softer now. He is back in his chair, she thinks. Maybe he’d never left it.

“The words drifting between us,” he says, “are as much yours as mine. And our thoughts, our thoughts— We are together, Danni. But the hornet is something apart.”

The hornet, she thinks.

“It’s kindly,” Raj assures her. “It’s curious. It’s hovering between us, watching you. Humming—to us or itself, who can be sure?

“The hornet,” he tells her, “is a means of induction. A script.”

Relax, Danni tells herself. Just relax and let go.

“The hornet is tasting the air around you,” Raj says. “It’s examining you with its copper eyes.”

The hum is varying now. The hornet is sensing her state. Or Raj is moving it forward and back to accustom her to its presence.

“How big is it?” Danni murmurs.

“Sometimes she’s the size of a fly,” Raj says. “Sometimes her head is as big as your fist. She’s our guide, Danni. The hornet will lead us.”

She, Danni thinks. That’s reassuring. Raj’s tone is gentle. He’s willing to honor her trepidations if she’s willing to yield control. The command Raj wraps himself in isn’t unpleasing. She wants his help. That’s why she’s here.

“Her wings,” Raj says, “are moving so quickly, they’re nearly invisible. Her abdomen droops before you, striped

amber and black. And at the abdomen's tip, you can see a stinger. Only females sting. This one's a queen."

A queen, Danni thinks. What does that mean?

"You're fully relaxed," Raj says. "You're accepting her now. Trusting her. The concerns you felt at first are gone."

"The queen's lower part is banded with stripes, amber and black, amber and black. It's a ladder, Danni. A ladder for us. A ladder by which we are meant to descend."

"I want you to focus on the stripes. Amber and black, amber and black— I want you to count them for me. One. Two. Three. You're laddering down, laddering down. Four. Five. Six— Amber and black, to the stinger and back. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One— Reaching the top, then back down again. One. Two. Three, down and down. The stripes jitter as the wings whir. Four. Five. Six—"

"You're sinking, Danni. Sinking deeper. Deeper and deeper, descending into the hornet's spell. Six. Five. Four— With every transit over the stripes, amber and black— Three. Two. One, deeper and deeper— And back down again. One. Two. Three— Every breath, every throb of your heart, every rung of the humming ladder— Deeper and deeper—"

"The striped queen, this strange being, knows your mind. She knows what you're seeking. Rungs, more rungs; however far you descend, it seems there are more. Four. Five. Six, deeper, deeper— Into a state far deeper than waking: the realm of sleep, of dream, of unleashed imagination. Deeper and deeper—"

"You're falling into the hornet's spell. Falling and falling,

and you don't want to stop. Freedom, deliverance, the long-sought release—to drop down this endless ladder, knowing you're in the queen's care, knowing she will guide you to what you desire.

“Are you feeling her energy now?”

“I am,” Danni whispers, seeing no reason to spoil the effect.

“The hornet's wings,” Raj says, “are the wings of your heart. She's the queen of your mind, the queen of change, the queen of your fate. She sees the past and the future alive inside you. You're in a trance now, Danni. And I'm in it with you.”

What future, she wonders, can the hornet see? Does the creature know her troubles, her potentials, her hopes and dreams?

“Where are we?” Raj asks.

“Outside. It's evening.”

“Is it hot or cold?”

“It's cool,” she replies. “There's a breeze.”

Danni can feel the breeze on her skin.

“The queen,” Raj says, “is hovering before us with an electric aura snapping around her, and the aura is lighting the earth. What do you see?”

“We're standing in a sandy wash,” Danni says. The surface is webbed with roots. To the right, the trunks of large trees are split into arcing boughs with snaking branches, naked and silver-gray.

“There's a crescent moon above us,” Raj observes, “and the air is misty. Can you hear an owl call?”

“Should I open my eyes?”

“No. Keep your eyes closed. You’d prefer not to open them; and if you wanted to, you wouldn’t be able.

“The hornet is moving along the wash. You and I are following. Tell me what you’re experiencing, Danni.”

“My feet are bare. The sand is squirming between my toes. The trees are twisted and bent. Their crowns are bony and whorled, boughs swept to one side as if they’d been caught by a storm. The forest is quiet now.”

“The chaos struck at an earlier time,” he guesses. “Is that what you mean? We are seeing only the memory of it?”

“That’s right.”

“I know these trees,” Raj says. His manner of speaking is changing again. His delivery is gentle but firm, as if he means to help her through some kind of unpleasantness. “There’s not a straight line to be seen, but the trees have a primitive grace. They are strong and persevering. They accepted the violence. They endured it. They’re cypresses, Danni. They belong to the underworld.

“There, through the web of branches— Do you see it? It looks like a house.”

And she does. Through the grid of bony branches, a ruined house is visible, turned on its side. It had been uprooted and thrown about, but you could see where it once stood, as the cobbled chimney is intact and erect. Nearby, a clothesline is rigged between skeletal trees. Children’s garments are hanging from it as if they’d been pinned there just moments before.

“This way,” Raj guides her.

The hornet is changing course, leading them between stony humps, seamed and eroding. The sand is wetter here, chilling her soles. Ahead, a slope rises steeply up.

“What is it?” Raj asks. “What’s wrong?”

Danni is shuddering. Without thinking, she knows what she’ll see.

The print of a giant foot. Bare, naked. A line of orbs where the toes pressed into the sand. A reflected skim at the heel, where water has ponded. Another print. And another. Danni has seen them before and she knows who they belong to.

Suddenly the clatter of boughs. Danni looks up.

Above the slope a sandstone cliff rises, and at its top are two trees. Skeletal trees. On the trunk of each, at the same height, is a giant knot.

Fists, Danni thinks. A shadowy figure is standing on the cliff with its shaggy arms raised, gripping both trees, shaking them fiercely.

The hornet has halted, and so has Raj.

As Danni watches, the thrashing stops and the giant’s fists open. He steps forward, lifting his shaggy arms. Then he growls, makes fists of his hands again and pounds his chest, while a bellow of rage emerges from his woolly head.

“What do you see?” Raj asks.

“The giant,” Danni replies.

She knows this monster. He’s been with her for a long time.

“You’re afraid of him?” Raj says.

“Of course I am,” she answers, upset with Raj for asking. And upset with herself.

The giant is motionless now, still as a snag, his silhouette crossed by a web of branches. He is so much taller than she is, and he's covered with fur. There is fur on the giant's legs and fur on his arms and fur on his cheeks.

"What is he doing?" Raj asks.

"Venting his rage," she says.

"He's angry?"

"Furious," she replies, reluctant to say more.

"Does he know we're here? Can he see you?"

"Yes, he can see."

"Who is he?" Raj asks.

Danni shakes her head, refusing to answer. The giant's face is mostly hidden—blotted by darkness, bark and sand stuck to it, his expelled breath like a mask of steam.

The hornet's behind them now. Ready to escort them back to the wash and the tipped-over house.

"We'll return the way we came," Raj says. "He may forget about us."

"He won't forget," Danni says.



When she opens her eyes, she sees the ceiling of Raj's front room.

The lights are off. The dimness is thick, and so is the silence.

How much time has passed? Is he waiting for her to speak or rise? I'm back, she thinks, imagining him seated in his chair.

"How are you feeling?" Raj asks.

"Alright." To her, the reply sounds defensive. The hypnotist has the giant in mind, she thinks, and he's trying to be delicate.

"When a trance is over," Raj says, "it's helpful to talk."

His voice is tranquil, affable.

"What should we talk about?" Danni turns her head. He's seated in his chair as expected, but at some point in the session, he'd removed his coat.

"You look comfortable," she says.

"I was feeling at ease with you. Is that alright?"

"Of course." She rolls onto her hip, facing him. "The hornet."

"Something I dreamed up," he admits. "For a first session, I felt little resistance. But— You were frightened. And upset."

"I was," she agrees.

"By the giant," he says.

"Yes, by the giant."

"Is he familiar to you?" he asks. "Have you seen him before?"

"Women have fears, Raj. There are a lot of giants for us. We have nightmares about men who rape us or beat us or kill us. You must know that."

He looks like he's been slapped in the face.

"I was relieved," she adds, "when you brought me back."

He doesn't reply. Is he going to turn on the light?

"I asked you a question," Raj says gently.

"What question?"

"Have you seen him before?"

She sits up slowly. "Yes, I've seen him."

"Often?"

"In my dreams, yes. Often."

"What does it mean? Who might he be?"

"Does it matter?"

"I'm going to say the obvious." Raj's tone is kindly. "The giant is your creation. He was born from your thoughts and feelings."

"I didn't think he would show up here."

"How long has he been with you?"

Since I was a child, she thinks. "I didn't come here for this," Danni says. "It's the opposite of what I was hoping for."

"He may be important. He might have appeared for a reason."

She nods, rising.

Raj stands. "Would you like to—" His voice trails off.

"I'm not sure," Danni says. "Let me think about it."

2

That night, Danni dreamt of Raj. He appeared not as a therapist, but as an inhuman presence, a two-dimensional billboard image—a head and neck painted on the side of a building. The sky was dark, the street deserted. His face was half-blotted by shadow, and a black ladder was tattooed on the lit side. And instead of an eye, there was a rectangular gleam—an amber box between two rungs. Danni stood on the asphalt, looking up, feeling the pull.

Slowly the hypnotist's will lifted her. She rose to his cheek and grabbed hold of the ladder. Her hands shifted, her feet pushed at the rungs. "You're a marvelous subject," Raj said. He had worked with many female clients, behaving his best, preying on none. Waiting for the one. His eye was before her now, bright, blinding. She entered the boxy gleam headfirst knowing something fearful was happening to her but feeling compelled.

The next morning, on waking, she dismissed the dream. For a time, Danni decided, she'd put Raj out of her mind. The appearance of the giant had meaning, no doubt. But the thought of digging deeper with Raj was too unsettling. It wasn't until the following week that she reconsidered, and her thoughts rose in a safer context, with two friends she'd known in college.

Sabine is blue-eyed with large lips, half-Jewish. Zara is round-faced and petite, half-Chinese. Both are stylishly dressed, tastefully made up, and both have short hair. They've brought lunch with them, and the three women are seated around Danni's dining room table, drinking wine from long-stemmed glasses.

"Modern times," Sabine sighs.

"I was just," Danni looks from her to Zara, "feeling unhappy." She speaks softly, hoping they'll understand.

"Of course," Zara says.

"We're all unhappy," Sabine replies. She pours more wine into Danni's glass, then adds to Zara's and her own. "It helps to talk about it."

"You can't be afraid of that," Zara agrees. "We all have so many pressures, so many reasons to question ourselves."

"She helped you?" Sabine asks.

Danni lifts her brows, hesitating.

Sabine can see her discomfort.

"It was a man," Danni says.

In the silence, she can see Sabine imagining. And Zara is too. Imagining her disclosing intimate things to a man she

doesn't know.

"What does he look like?" Sabine asks.

"Dark hair. Clean-shaven. Tall," Danni replies.

"Red alert." Zara looks at Sabine.

Danni laughs. "He was very professional."

"You couldn't find a woman?" Sabine wonders.

"Someone I trust knows him," Danni says. "She recommended him."

"All his clients are women," Sabine nods at Zara.

"Young ones," Zara joins in.

"Stop," Danni laughs.

But her friends are enjoying themselves.

"How old is he?" Sabine asks.

"Don't be so cynical," Danni chides her.

Zara sips her wine. "He's going to get into Danni's pants."

"He was trying to help me," Danni says.

Sabine rolls her eyes. "He's a guy."

"There are plenty of female therapists," Zara points out.

"I know someone you'd like," Sabine nods. "She understands our problems."

Danni is silent. She's not sure what her problems are, and she wonders who will be up to the challenge of sorting things out.

"Be careful," Zara tells her.

"Some troubling things surfaced," Danni says. "Things from my dreams."

Her friends are silent, watching her.

"He was with me in the spell. Listening to my words, trying to understand what I was feeling."

“Spell?” Zara frowns.

“What kind of therapy is this?” Sabine asks.

“He’s a hypnotist,” Danni says.

“He puts you in a trance?” Sabine’s surprised. “You sit there with your eyes closed?”

“Lie there,” Danni says.

“Oh great,” Sabine laughs.

“Do you remember what happened?” Zara asks.

“Yes, I remember.”

“Everything?” Zara pressed her. “Are you sure?”

As far as I know, Danni thinks. What could she say?

“I believe I can trust him.” Her voice is firm, and as the words leave her lips, it seems her decision is made.

“She’s in trouble,” Zara tells Sabine.

“He may be able to help me,” Danni says.

“Don’t let him help you without a condom,” Zara advises.

Sabine raises her glass and downs what remains. “You know,” she’s speaking to Zara but looking at Danni, “it sounds exciting.”

When the two are gone, Danni puts the empty glasses in the sink. Then she steps into the bathroom and looks at herself in the mirror.



The ripples in the flagstone steps are streaming with rain. She’s reminded of the sandy wash. There are shoes on her feet, and she’s stepping between puddles, imagining she can feel

the grains giving beneath her soles. Danni reaches the welcome mat and presses the black button. A buzz sounds within, and a moment later the door opens.

Raj's smile radiates a comforting warmth—a warmth that seems foreign, born in a distant place. He's glad to see her.

Danni collapses her umbrella, shakes off the water and crosses the threshold. Raj takes the umbrella and helps her out of her dripping coat.

She seats herself. Raj lowers himself into the hypnotist's chair, facing her.

"Was it a difficult decision?"

"Not really," she answers. "Two girlfriends helped."

"They're supportive of what you're doing."

"The opposite, in fact."

"They're part of the frustration you're feeling," he guesses.

Danni nods. "Doubt, cynicism, the chill mindset— It's everywhere. I'm drowning in it."

"That makes trust difficult."

"It does," she says. "There are always questions."

"Love isn't that complicated."

"Really?" she shakes her head.

"You've talked about men. That's your preference?"

"I prefer men," she says.

"Just one? Is one enough?"

"One would be fine."

"So your challenge is finding him. He doesn't have to please— What are your friends' names?"

"Sabine and Zara."

“He doesn’t have to please Sabine and Zara. You don’t have to model behavior for them or anyone else. I have this theory,” Raj says, “that our gratification comes from narrowed vision. The solution to our problems is to restrict the view—and our emotional engagement—to what is truly personal.

“It’s right to be concerned about issues that affect others; but it’s a mistake, I think, to put those concerns at the center of our lives. Intimacy, proximity, deep emotion— Mom, dad, brother and sister. And the work we love. That’s what belongs at the center. Our joys come from enforced myopia: shrinking the view.”

“Is life that simple for you?”

“No,” Raj says. “The idea is simple. Life is hard.”

“Because?”

“Because of all the things we want. Things that are out of reach. And because of our fears. The fears we carry with us. Like the giant.”

Danni doesn’t reply.

Raj is silent, waiting.

“Alright,” she sighs. “The giant.”

“Have you thought about him?”

“No.”

“If he’s a deeply personal presence, and he lives in your dreams, we should know who he is.”

“I can’t argue with that,” she says.

“You’re willing to face him?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

Danni visits the bathroom. Then she stretches out on the divan. Raj douses the lights and the second trance begins.

“You are conscious,” Raj says, “of your body, the weight in your hips and shoulders. But when you close your eyes— Close them, Danni. With your lids sealed, the awareness of your body begins to fade. My voice enters your ears, and as you listen, it expands to fill the breadth and depth of your mind.

“My voice will be your myopia. It’s here to narrow your view. It’s the living presence of everything that stirs your deepest emotions, everything intensely personal.”

She imagines Raj has risen from his chair. He’s approaching the divan and stooping over her. As in the billboard dream, half of his face is in shadow. On the visible side, she can see the tattooed ladder.

Then the induction begins, and Raj is taking her up and down the rungs, dazzling her mind when she passes the gleaming box. Black and amber, amber and black— He tells Danni the hornet is sleeping “in my hand.” And once she’s fallen into the spell, he opens his hand and releases the queen.

The deep hum, her wandering spirit, is hovering beside Danni’s ear.

“She’s wise and she’s fearless,” Raj says. “Shall we ask her to find the giant for us?”

“Alright,” Danni agrees, though the idea unnerves her.

“He may need to be slain,” Raj says. “Could you do that?”

Slain? What does that mean?

“I would need some kind of weapon,” she says.

“Use your imagination,” he tells her. “Choose any weapon you like.”

“Will you help me?”

“I’ll do whatever I can,” he replies.

And with that, Raj parts the curtains on the baleful underworld, the cypress forest, a boneyard of trunks and boughs struck by storms and frozen in the onslaught. Runnels of sand wander between the trees, and they’re following one, stepping over roots gnarled and gray like frayed cables. On either side trunks tower up, platy and cracked, boughs ragged and bent, crossed like ancient legs, branches like spindly fingers all reaching in the same direction.

The quiet rivets the senses. Danni moves with caution, listening, looking, with Raj beside her. Where is he? Where is the giant?

In the forks of the skeletal branches are woody cones the size of thumbs. And the sand is littered with them, a hint of the dying forest’s desire, its wish to continue. But nothing is sprouting beneath these trees.

Raj points at a scarred trunk. Did the giant claw it? Did he strip those boughs or uproot that snag? Did he dig that pitfall or pile those logs? Signs, uncertain signs, questions that slow your steps and stop your mind but cannot be voiced.

Here there is silence, vacuous silence, a silence that is more than the absence of noise. The quiet is a hollowing out, an emptying, a state where words are not to be spoken and sounds are not to be heard. What irony: that in the aftermath of raging violence there should be such quiet. No matter how tall the tree, it falls with the sound of a settling feather. No matter how intense the feeling or how much a feeling craves speech, the lips must not move.

Where is he? Where is the giant? Do you hear that creaking? Is the breeze shifting a bough? Did a dull snap sound in the wake of his steps? The trails of fog winding through the gray trunks ahead— Are they the orphans of clouds or the remains of his breath?

Raj— I'm not sure I'm ready. It's such a dreary feeling, lonely and hopeless, wandering here in this secretive place with the thought of the giant squeezing your heart. Are you with me?

I am, Raj assures her. Your eyes, use your eyes—

And when she scans the ground, she spots them.

In a sandy wallow: giant prints. Some are halved, the heel or toes washed away by rain. But here, right here by this splintered stump, the prints are fresh.

Is the giant behind that cleft trunk, crouched in the lee of that bony brake, hiding behind that lopped-off crown? A low groan—the sound of shifting boughs? Are your feet trembling the sand, or are those footfalls?

Danni sees him now.

He's standing between two trees, watching her. Twice her height and covered with fur—an image of humanity's past, when all that mattered was strength and brutality. His eyes are glinting. Rods of steam chug from his nose.

There's a tension in his frame. His claw quivers—

Then the giant is charging toward her.

Danni screams, and the silence is broken. Cracking branches sound in her ears, thuds of a heavy tread, the chug of breath—

A weapon, Raj said. What could she use to defend herself?

A tunnel appears before her—an arcade of skeletal boughs, a battery of antlers reaching from leaning trunks. Danni is hurtling beneath them, gasping, churning her legs.

The giant is right behind her, pounding the earth, following her down the hall of bones. His breath devours the air, shocking her ears. A giant arm swings, with giant fingers and giant claws, and the reach barely misses. The gust tickles her back, the broad stride drawing still closer—

Does she imagine she can outrace him? Her legs are churning, she's trying, trying.

A sob breaks from her throat. The arcade's frozen boughs are relics of a battle that was fought and lost. The giant growl is swelling behind her head.

A mammoth tree rises before her. She's diving beneath its stilted roots, scrabbling between wooden bars, on her back now, sliding on sand—

His furry arm lunges between the roots, sweeping from side to side, feeling blindly. She dodges, recoils, trapped and terrorized, the giant arm swiping again and again, trying to fish her out.

Then the lunges stop. She hears his thuds circling. Through the bars, she can see the clouds of billowing breath around him.

Her lips are frozen, but she's crying inside. Please, please—

Danni's legs cramp. Shudders and heartthrobs shake her frame. The brutish growl reaches out again, as if he can hear her thoughts and is answering them.

The great head appears in a gap between stilts, nose covered with drool and sand, eyes aflame, fur littered with leaf mold. The giant arm swipes again, and this time it catches her, grabs her and drags her out.

Danni is lifted into the air. His grip stops her breath, his chest is steaming. The giant is shaking her fiercely, growling and jabbering in a feral tongue.

I'm here beside you, Danni: Raj, your companion, your friend. And from what I can see, no weapon is needed. There's no monster to be slain.

Trust me, and we'll find our way through this together.

The giant is trying to speak to you, imagining his babble and snuffling will be understood. A sound like grievance rises in his throat—a complaint, an appeal. And a familiar scent reaches your nose. Deep and rich, rich and remembered.

Who is this creature? Where is he from? Why does his terrible proximity trigger stifled longings and sweet recollections?

The giant is grumbling with resentment now. It's as if he can hear your thoughts. You can see, as well, the pain in his eyes. A strange beast— There is no mistaking his wretched state or his consternation.

Our queen is humming in your ear. You see her at your eye's corner, and now she's circling the giant's head. And as she circles, his inscrutable mouthings are joined to the hum, and the joining gives birth to words. Stray words at first, then the words run together and phrases emerge.

The meaning's jumbled, but you know the voice . . . and the giant's eyes and his sensitive smile.

Who is he, Danni?

Her breath stops. The panicked rigor drains from her limbs.

“Dad?” she whispers.

The complaint in the giant’s eyes softens and melts. And with the melting and the queen’s translations, Danni’s heart opens.

But the queen cares little for that. She seems to have neither patience nor pity for the shaggy beast. She’s buzzing in his face, backing him up.

“She knows his mind,” Raj says. “She knows why he’s here.”

The tree behind the giant has low branches hooked like a candelabra. And as he backs toward them, Raj reaches for a hook and catches a fold in the giant’s neck.

What is she doing? Danni wonders. Why is the queen hovering by her father’s ear? Why are the giant eyes glowing again, glowing at her?

“There’s a gift,” Raj says. “Something precious the giant’s been waiting to give you. Growling and impatient. Sorrowful, but determined to give.”

Her father sets a clawed finger on his larynx, and as Danni watches, he runs the claw down his front, slitting himself. The hornet’s buzzing by the giant ear. It’s as if he’s listening to her, taking her guidance.

The furry claws reach out, grasp Danni’s wrists and place her hands on either side of the split. At his urging, she spreads the lapels of her father’s chest, opening him up.

In the wet darkness inside, innards appear, balled and jumbled, glowing brightly, each a different color.

“What do you see?” Raj says.

Her father’s organs are masses of thread, silky skeins, soaked and gleaming.

The hornet’s still humming by the giant ear, prompting him.

He’s anchoring his oversize feet in the soil, raising his arms, stretching his body. As Danni watches, the sides of her father’s open chest tense and swell. The muscles turn flaxen and the taut flesh splits into cords, springing over his exposed innards.

The queen is buzzing beneath Danni’s palm, tickling it, lifting it, guiding her hand beneath the taut cords, toward her father’s insides. Danni touches a glowing mass. With her mandibles, the queen pinches the end of a purple thread and rises with it, unwinding the thread from its skein.

Her wings whirl, bringing her closer. She’s putting the thread between Danni’s fingers, hovering over the giant’s stretched thews.

“She’s showing you,” Raj says, “the place where the thread must be inserted.”

What does he mean?

“The gang of thews is a warp, Danni. The glowing thread must be woven through it.”

Her father is breathing hard, but he isn’t resisting.

She raises the thread and pushes it between the thews, as the queen directs. And as soon as she’s done that, the queen passes her another and hovers over the spot she wants it inserted. Danni looks at Raj with the yarn kinking between her fingers.

“The way to freedom,” he says.

His words make no sense to her.

“Let’s bring you out of the spell.”

At his words, the hum mounts and the queen rises before Danni’s eyes.

Raj is laddering over the stripes. “One. Two. Three. Black and amber, amber and black. The forest is fading. We’re starting back. Four. Five. Six—

“You’ll remember everything,” Raj says, “the emotions you’ve felt, the thoughts you’ve had, the mysteries and speculations.

“Your body’s relaxed, in the queen’s care. Six. Five. Four. Her rungs are riding beneath you. Three. Two and One— Your mind is clearing. Lucid, more lucid— And now back down. One. Two. Three. And when I reach Six, you will feel yourself coming out of the trance. Four. Five. And Six.

“You can open your eyes.”

Above her, the ceiling of Raj’s front room appears.

“You are fully awake,” he says. “Back in the world.”

My father, she thinks. His open chest, the glowing yarn— She has no idea what it means.

She sits up slowly.

Raj is in his chair, his face in shadow.

“We can talk if you like.”

Danni doesn’t reply.

“If you’re too tired—”

“No, we can talk.”

“Tell me about your father,” Raj says.

“He died right after the divorce.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen.”

“And he died of—”

“Cancer,” she explains. “At the end, we weren’t very close. While he was sick, I only saw him a few times.”

“When did the giant appear in your dreams?” Raj asks.

“I’m not sure. I was very young.”

“We all depend on our mothers for protection,” he says. “The power of the father inspires fear. But for you, the fear persisted. What might have caused that?”

Danni nods, understanding the question. Raj thought the answer was important. And no doubt it was.



A month passes.

Danni is seeing Raj twice a week now, and at every session they return to the forest with the hornet to visit her opened father. The tree he’s hooked on is iron-hard. Its boughs are drilled with wormholes, and there are spots where escaping sap is crusted like caramel. But its roots still grapple the soil, and a vestige of greenery graces its crown, a flattened roof that keeps the rain from them while they weave.

The queen buzzes and hums, dipping and looping between Danni, the warp and the bright skeins, passing threads to her, showing her where to insert them. With her father’s neck on the hook and his feet secured below, Danni lifts his

threws and pulls the lines through them. Skip four, pick up two; skip two, pick up one; tie down, double back, drop three and pick up again, like a harpist plucking her strings.

A fabric of memories, Dad's and her own. Some come quickly, easily; some are harder and challenge the fingers; some of the colors are bright, some muted or somber; some of the designs are simple and register quickly, others take many lines to come clear.

A mingling of orange and yellow threads brings a memory of leaves falling from the beech in the yard. Dad is raking. Danni is running around the trunk, throwing leaves in the air. Dad takes armfuls from his pile and hurls them over her, and the sky is a dizzying dome, yellow and orange and blue.

Lines of threads, silver and black, weave a bright disk surrounded by darkness, the memory of a dream and the morning after, when Dad sat on her bed listening to a great adventure. "Last night," Danni said, "I flew behind the moon." And the diamonds woven on either side are Dad's wondering look and the smile that said he'd circled the moon himself, one night in his youth.

The pace of the work accelerates. As soon as Danni has taken a line from her mandibles, the queen returns with another. And when each course is done, Raj beats it down, forcing it against previous rows. Danni is thankful for his labors, for the unexpected pleasures and revelations, for the revisitation of her father's spirit. There are moments of tension, of course. Moments of doubt, moments of fear when she's waiting to see what the design will show. But Allison's words are

with her. “Raj has a pure heart. You’ll feel safe with him.” And she does.

As they work, he listens and delves, and she answers freely.

“How often were you together?” he asks.

“A lot,” she says. “When I was small, I had a satin gown the color of this scarlet thread. He’d put on a suit and take me to grownup places. I would travel with him. And at home, we pretended. He’d hold me up and fly me over his head.”

“When he left,” Raj says, “you thought he’d abandoned you.”

“I did.”

“When your parents were still together— Did you see a cruel side to him?”

“Never,” she says. “I loved him. I’ve missed him so much.”

She pauses, looking up, seeing the giant’s lolling head. He’s barely conscious, but in the dark eye orbits, two morning stars are flickering. A wayward breeze lifts his hand, and it settles on Danni’s arm.

As the first month leads into the second, a larger pattern in the weaving emerges. In the queen’s selections—which cords to lift, what color the threads, where to feed them—a complex design is hidden. Vees have appeared, rows of traveling vees, peaked and inverted. And the stacking of vee rows gives birth to diamonds—interlocked rhombi, like rows of teeth or peaks behind peaks. The palette is warm—sandy and cinnamon, copper and cream, peach and rust, amber and rose—colors of gladness and fond feeling. Whether it is Danni’s plucks and tugs or Raj’s tamping, or a flex of the warp by an errant gust, the pattern moves like something alive.

Is the design an expression of the hornet's mind or her reading of the giant's? Is it drawn from her father's past, memories lost or confused? Or is it a prefiguration of a place and time yet to come? Provoked by Raj's questions, Danni's thoughts go in many directions; but as the weaving approaches completion, a new feeling emerges—tenderness steeped in sorrow.

A bracing wind, and the ranked vees jog and link and stack. And as the peaks settle back, and the courses combine, a giant diamond appears, pulsing at the tapestry's center. The fabric has a heart where her father's heart had been, and the brightest and gentlest and most sensitive colors are woven through it. The magic of love, Raj says, lives there, and the glittering angles moving out from it are sharing the heart's bounty on every side.

A cloud passes over. A myriad pyramids wink and invert, flipping over each other, and the flukes and vanes of the fabric dim. The pattern flickers, the great diamond dices and disgorges itself, turning into an hourglass; and at that, Danni quails. *Come back*, she implores, *please come back*. And at her appeal, the hourglass swallows itself, and the great heart returns.

The new rendering of her father has been accomplished with her own hands. What a miracle the hornet's performed, Danni thinks.

Raj considers the meaning with her after the spell is over.

She's seated in the chair. The lights are on and Raj is leaning forward with an earnest expression.

"You've resuscitated him," the hypnotist says.

She feels a great relief in the return to her father's care. *His love is with me again*, Danni thinks, and she imagines the tapestry's diamond pulsing and glowing.



The next morning, Danni wakes feeling a new lightness. A tension at her center is gone, a weight she's been carrying has been removed. Her father is near, it seems, looking over her shoulder, close to her thoughts.

Around noon, the heat mounts. Danni makes a bed of towels on her terrace and stretches beneath the sun, eyes closed, feeling the warmth, communing with his presence. The sessions with Raj are having a dramatic effect, she thinks, but where they are leading is hard to tell.

She returns to him the next day.

At his suggestion, they sideline the spell and talk at length. His observations are pointed and her answers are thoughtful.

"You've been haunted by the giant for a long time."

Danni nods, understanding why the weaving has been tinged with sorrow. She's lived with her father's eclipse for so many years.

"I lost him," she says, "when my parents split up. My mother said he'd betrayed us. He didn't care what harm came to us."

"She had her own reasons for condemning him," Raj says.

"She hated him. She would shut herself in her room and rage, shrieking at him until her curses turned into tears."

"Before the breakup, you saw them fighting," Raj guesses.

“A lot. It was bad and got worse. But the giant,” Danni shakes her head. “Why would my dreams do that to him?”

“To protect your mother,” he says. “To share her fear. To be angry on her behalf.”

Danni’s remembering.

“She may have needed that,” Raj says.

Danni begins to cry. Her tears are for her unlucky parents, and for herself and the burden she’s carried. In the sorrow, as well, is a seed of hope that, from the things Raj is exposing, a brighter future might somehow emerge.



Most of the glowing threads have been used. Little remains of the giant’s insides. It’s summer now. The sun is out, and the air is warm.

Danni steps onto Raj’s porch and pushes the black button. The buzz sounds within and the door swings open. Raj greets her, extending his hand, leading her across the threshold. Her trust in him is high, her gratitude deep; and his professional demeanor notwithstanding, Raj exhibits a very personal care for her.

“My special client,” he says.

She smiles and bows her head, knowing his good humor comes from more than the devotion she’s shown in the weaving. Because of the weather, or because of their increasing familiarity, he’s dressed more casually than in the past. Shorts and a sleeveless shirt. Raj’s legs are coppery.

“Working on your tan,” she remarks as she steps toward her chair.

She sits and reaches for the glass of water that’s always there.

Raj settles across from her, interior for a moment, as if he’s uncertain about broaching something.

Danni sips while Raj takes time to frame his thoughts.

“You deserve,” he says finally, “my respect for your courage and determination. You’ve applied yourself in a way few people do. The rediscovery of your love for your father— It’s touched me . . . in a way I’m not used to being touched.”

His statement is a bold one, and she takes a moment to digest it.

“The weaving with you and the queen is the center of my life right now. It feels like we’ve been at this for years.”

She is about to say, “We know each other so well,” but she stops herself. How well does she know him really? He’s the hypnotist and she is his subject.

“Our tapestry,” he observes, “is nearly done.”

The rows of colored weft are approaching her father’s chin. The passages are tight, the brocade tamped down. Its warp has the strength of the giant’s thews, and the fabric’s design—its magical heart and traveling vees—has the shimmer of mirage and the luminosity of silk. The weaving has changed Danni’s account of history, and because of the deep emotions it stirs, she imagines it will change her fate.

With positive feelings for Raj, she stretches out on the divan once again, and he ladders her over the rungs. The hornet

appears and conducts them back to the hoary cypress, where the shaggy head hangs from the hook and the giant feet are anchored below. Between, the tapestry stretches, something to behold and admire.

The queen is by Danni's ear, holding an emerald thread, humming and guiding her fingers. Danni lifts the warp, opening a space to slide the thread through, remembering her father handing her three translucent wedges of that same hue. She was working on a picture in fused glass, and he'd cut the pieces for her.

Finally the moment arrives. The queen leaves off and hovers above. Danni ties the last knot and lowers her hands. Raj steps back.

The tapestry's done. The giant's thews are invisible now. The weft threads obscure the warp completely.

The hornet's hum mounts, and with it the wind. And as the flurry strikes the tree and its weaving, the remaining parts of the giant are lifted and carried away: his wafering face, his head and hands, his withering feet.

Danni feels his departure keenly, imagining his lonely end and the grief he must have felt being estranged from his only child. Then she remembers Dad's laugh. And the woven heart stutters and its haloes expand.

The queen hovers before her eyes, and Raj begins to unwind the spell, traversing the rungs. Six. Five. Four— The bony woodland becomes translucent. Three. Two. One. The air turns foggy, and as Danni traverses the ladder, the wild scene vanishes and the ceiling of Raj's front room reappears.

The tapestry is finished, she thinks.

Where will the journey with Raj go from here? She's feeling a gratitude that would be hard to express. And there's more than gratitude in her heart. Much more.

She turns onto her hip, gazing through the dimness at the silhouette in the chair.

"Your labors have been a prayer," he says. "An asking."

For what, she thinks. An asking for what?

"I'm imagining," Raj says, "a primitive village in a foreign land. Years ago, the women awoke to find that the men had all disappeared. One has thrown herself into her weaving. She yearns for the male spirit, and the weaving is a prayer for the men to return."

"That's what you want, I believe," Raj says. "That's why you're here."

An alarm rings in Danni's head. "The male spirit," she murmurs. What does he mean? He isn't talking about memories now. He's talking about flesh and blood.

Her heart is pounding. Despite her attraction to Raj, he's frightened her. The only "male spirit" in her life right now is him.

"What are you thinking?" Raj asks.

His tone is neutral, but Danni can't quiet her fears.

"I'm asking myself about your motivations," she says.

"You're worried I'm losing my objectivity?"

"Are you?" she asks.

"I'm proud of our progress together," he says. "The psychic world of women today is full of giants."

Danni absorbs his meaning and his intimate tone.

"You didn't answer my question," she says.

"The peace you've made with your father can free you, Danni. He's made you a gift of passage."

"You still haven't answered my question."

Raj regards her without replying.

"You're too clever for me," she tells him.

"I'm trying to be professional."

"It's not unusual for a woman to fall in love with her therapist. Is it."

"No, it's not unusual."

"There's a name for that," Danni says.

"We call it 'transference.' It can work the other way too."

"I see," she murmurs. He has finally answered her question.

The dimmed room seems, for a moment, like a third presence. As if, Danni thinks, its experience of troubled clients and the hypnotist's spells had bestowed some unique awareness. And with this suspicion, she feels the danger in her attraction to Raj.

"Should we take a break?" he asks.

He's sensed her disquiet, she thinks. Or he's remembering therapy's rules.

"Yes," Danni says. "I think we should."

Danni's time off opens the door to new faces. It's easy enough to repost her profile online and choose a few interested men. She restricts herself to dates her age, and while in the past she'd been annoyed by superficiality, she finds that quality to be newly appealing. It's a relief to be with someone who doesn't know her past and isn't probing her deepest feelings.

A first date can be just for laughs, and intimacy isn't expected. She goes out a half-dozen times and has fun. No stress, no demands, feeling safe and relaxed. She likes the last in the string, so she sees him a second time. But in the restaurant, when they're side by side, she imagines Raj is watching, listening to them talk and hearing her thoughts. And that night, when she falls asleep, Raj seats himself in the chair by her bed.

"You've been watching me," Danni says.

"I have," he admits.

“What do you think?”

“You’re moving backward. But—”

“But what?”

“I’m not going to dictate to you,” he says.

He’s playing his older, wiser self. “You’re not jealous,” she speaks facetiously. “You’re indifferent. Is that the idea?”

Raj doesn’t reply.

“I don’t like that you’re spying on me,” she says with a threatening spite, but she’s secretly glad that he is.

The next morning, she wakes at dawn and thinks about Raj until her alarm rings. “I’m going to call him,” she muses. Then she falters, fighting the impulse, aware of her tendency to make mistakes.

The next evening, she goes out a third time with her new friend. But he wants sex now, and he reminds her of Jerome.

She arrives home at midnight and rings Raj.

He won’t pick up, she thinks. But he does.

“Danni?”

“Raj,” she laughs. “Why aren’t you asleep?”

“I was,” he says.

She’s nervous and a little hostile. “I haven’t heard from you.”

“I thought we agreed—”

“Aren’t you wondering how I’m doing?” She can’t keep the edge out of her voice.

“I have been wondering,” he says. “I’m glad you called.”

“I’ve been testing the waters,” she says.

“Is it going well?”

"I know it's late," Danni sighs. "I was thinking of you. That's all. I'm sorry I got you up. Really, Raj. I'm sorry."

Another two weeks. A few more dates. And it's seeming to Danni that the Raj of her dreams is right. She's moving backward, and she's upset about that. She's upset, as well, about the power that Raj has over her, even in his absence. She imagines a tryst with him in a distant place, on a mountain or by the seaside. Then she reminds herself of the difference in age. He knows so much about her. And she knows so little about him. She decides she's going to ask him over. That will force him to forget his ethical constraints and let go of the power his role gives him. It's asking a lot. Maybe too much. She wants to stop thinking about Raj. But she can't.



On rising, Danni had put on slacks and a blouse, but by ten, the weather had grown unbearably hot, so she changed into shorts and a halter top. Standing before Raj's door now, she runs her palm over her brow and uses her fingers to wipe the beads of sweat from her lip.

She pushes the button and hears the buzz within, imagining her arrival has stirred the hornet. Raj is in the kitchen, she thinks, running water into two glasses. The queen is rising from the counter, hovering beside him, moving with him toward the front door.

When the door opens, Raj is beaming and Danni's relieved. He's as happy to see her as she is to see him. And he's

as dressed down as she is, in a loose linen shirt and running shorts. She might have been visiting a good friend.

He motions her in, and she crosses the threshold. Above the vee of his shirt, Danni sees a patch of his chest; and on either side, the muscled curves of his arms.

He turns to a hutch and lifts a glass of water, which he passes to her.

“Thanks,” she says.

Raj raises a second glass, eyeing her over the rim.

“Your hair is longer,” he says.

She touches a lock on her shoulder. “I’m letting it grow.”

“Darker, isn’t it?”

She nods. “I stripped the frost out.”

“I like it that way.” He faces the client’s chair and motions her toward it.

It’s all exceedingly friendly, she thinks. But Raj is the hypnotist and she’s his subject. He’s the therapist and she’s the client.

The lights in the room are off. She takes her seat. Raj lowers himself into his chair. The room has lost its intimidation. But the man— His mystery seems to have deepened. As in her billboard dream, his face is half-blotted by shadow. He’s folded his hands in his lap, and his fingers look tangled like knotted rope.

“As well as I know you,” she says, “I can’t get past your name.”

“What do you mean?”

“You seem foreign to me. Unfamiliar, exotic—” She shakes

her head. "You're not bothered, I hope."

"No, I'm not bothered." He draws a breath. "In the time that's passed, you've thought about our sessions?"

"I have," she says. "I've replayed what we did, and I've reflected on your conclusion—that I'm yearning for the male spirit."

"What do you think?"

"I'm not sure," she answers. "The transference thing has been gnawing at me."

"Gnawing?"

"Maybe it's not transference," she says softly. "Maybe I'm just attracted to you."

In the quiet, Danni avoids his eyes. "My feelings about the future— They're bound up now with my feelings about Raj." She can only do this by pretending he's not in the room. "He's different," she says. "He's wise, without being vain. He's strong, without being harsh. But he uses his spells to wield control, to have power over his subjects. I'm trying to imagine what it might be like if he treated me like an equal." Danni's eyes are closed. She sighs and opens them. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Raj says.

Is he forgiving her or encouraging her?

"When we began," he says, "you were very keyed up. Nervous, tense. You're calmer now. Unreserved, relaxed. But your language—"

"My language?"

"It hasn't changed. 'Power,' you say. 'Power' and 'power' again."

“Power matters,” Danni replies.

“You’re right, of course,” Raj shakes his head. “But—”
He’s muzzling himself. “Go ahead,” she says.

“You may not see yourself this way, but your guard is always up. You’ve been protecting yourself for a long time.”

His words pierce her. How can he do this? She’s just declared herself. She said she was falling for him—

“It’s not what you think.” Raj leans forward. “Please. Listen to what I’m saying. Love can only emerge when the power’s turned down. There has to be a truce. Only then can two spirits come together.”

She exhales into the silence. “What are you telling me?”

“If there’s love, a new kind of power will rise from the mingling. Real love isn’t disabling.”

Is he trying to get under my skin? she wonders.

“Desire is our goal,” he says. “Desire is the state we long for.”

“We?”

“We,” he replies.

In the silence, they consider each other.

“With the queen’s help,” Raj says, “you’ve freed your yearning for the male spirit. How will you satisfy that yearning? You can’t see love through the lens of power.”

“You think I care too much about it?”

“I do.”

“What do you know? You’re a guy. And you have *all* the power in this relationship.”

“That makes it harder for me, Danni. Not easier.”

“You’ll have to explain that.”

"I'm no giant. I'm human, like you. And, like you, I have needs and desires. I'm alone. Like you. My role—my power—puts most of the women I meet off-limits."

"But you're not going to give it up," she says.

"You're wrong about that. I *want* to give it up. Hypnotists need love too."

Danni hears the need in his voice, and when she meets his eyes, she can see his naked entreaty.

"Love is a journey," he says.

She can see a different Raj now, a much younger Raj—a child at the prow of a bathroom mat, headed into the sky.

"You're not a quitter, Danni. Are you."

A strange romantic appeal, but that's what it is.

With feeling, she says, "No, I'm not a quitter."

Raj exhales and leans back in his chair.

"Are you ready?" he says. "Shall we conjure our spell?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

She rises, steps toward the divan and lowers herself onto it. Raj's expression of desire, and her welcoming of it, has changed everything. She feels both more at ease and more at risk. She stretches out in the familiar manner, arms at her sides, legs uncrossed.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes," she says. "Get our hornet humming."

And with that, Raj begins, calling on the queen, seeking her help. She's close, waiting. She rises from some resting place in the front room, humming, hovering between them. Raj greets her with reverence, then coaxes her closer to Danni.

And after the countdown of calming breaths, he takes Danni up and down the hornet's abdominal stripes, while the whirling wings link themselves to her heart and mind.

The queen is beside her ear.

"Lids sealed," Raj says.

Her eyes are half closed, and when she seals them completely, the hum mounts.

As always, Raj is speaking through it. And as always, his voice is altered. Every word has sharp edges. Every direction is throatier, deeper, more commanding. The hum grows louder, clearer. The queen is stirring Danni, piquing her senses. Her ears are tuned, her inner eye focused, and the hypnotic canvas is spreading across her mind, ready to be painted.

"We're back in the woodland." Raj's voice is low and earnest.

Danni can see the gray trunks and the meshes of bony boughs around her.

"Is the giant here?" he asks.

"No," she says. "He's gone."

"And the tapestry we wove—"

The queen's hum fills the silence.

"Where is it?" Raj asks.

"On the ground. Shall I unroll it?"

Raj encourages her, so she kneels and does as he suggests.

"Is it as glorious as you remember?"

"Oh yes."

"What do you see?"

"Colored arrowheads. Lines of vees with pyramids inside

them.” And when she touches the diamond at the tapestry’s center, the vee rows flash and the pyramids loosen, rising from the surface and settling back in.

“This is your freedom, Danni. The tapestry is your transport, and the hornet is your guide.”

Danni can see the queen before her, wings whirring. Her jeweled eyes glitter and her feelers twitch.

“Are you ready to fly, to be borne by the winds?”

What a question.

“Crawl onto it, Danni. Stretch out on your back.”

She does as Raj says, feeling the sawtooth vees under her thighs and beneath her palms.

“There’s hope in the weaving,” he tells her. “Your father’s wishes. His watchful care.”

She can sense her father’s presence, beneath and around her.

“You’re coming with me,” she says.

“Yes, as before. I’ve entered the trance. My voice will be in your ear.”

“Not just your voice. I want—”

“Don’t worry. I’m climbing onto the cloth, seating myself at the helm.”

The weave is shifting beneath his weight. Or is she only imagining that? Is Raj still seated in the therapist’s chair?

“Are you ready?” he asks.

“I’m ready,” she replies, even though she’s not sure she is.

Be with me, she thinks. Please be with me.

“Gently,” Raj says, “and slowly.” And Danni feels the tapestry rising.

“Wish the walls away,” he tells her.

Danni does as he asks, feeling an expanding hollow, as if the world is opening around her.

“A breeze is blowing,” he says, “ruffling our fringe.”

She can hear the breeze along with the humming.

“It’s cooling your legs, tickling your arms, touching your nape. A wind is sliding beneath us.”

Danni feels a buoying in her hips.

“Another comes from behind,” Raj says. “It’s turning and waiting, listening to the hum. And now, as the queen climbs, the winds follow, lifting us.”

Danni is rising, the tapestry undulating beneath her. She feels a lightness and a new freedom. The hornet’s hum and Raj’s voice are carrying her into the sky.

“You’re with me,” she gasps.

“I am, and I’m not going to leave. This is our journey, Danni. Yours and mine. The sun is behind a cloud. Its beams are raying like the spokes of a wheel.”

“Where are you taking us?”

“I could ask you the same question,” he says. “The queen follows your lead.”

She can hear the deference in his voice.

“The battered woodland is behind us now,” Raj is saying. “We’re moving freely through a peaceful sky. Do you feel the sun’s heat? An amber glow is filling our forward view.”

Yes, she thinks, I feel it. “I’m warmer. Can I open my eyes?”

“Not yet. For now just relax, listen and imagine.

“You’re free, Danni. Perfectly free and light as air. Where will we find what you desire? The sky is asking and so are the winds. The threads of your father’s woven innards— They’re asking too.

“The queen is speaking to them. The queen knows.

“Puffs, windy darts, and with every ripple in the magic cloth, pyramids unpuzzle. Vee rows jump, the glittering saws shedding bright teeth in every direction.

“On either side our wavy passage leaves golden flutes, like sweptback wings. Ahead, in the realm into which our queen is leading us, the sky has turned copper and peach. Rusty cumuli billow above a land of ocher hills and valleys, silent and motionless.

“Below, a low-angle stairway extends to the limit of sight, treads rounded and smooth. A desert world. A world of sand, contoured and groomed by an infinite comb. Cream and apricot, cheddar and fawn, dunes bunched and bound and combed smooth again.

“The queen’s spiraling down and our tapestry follows.

“Sinuous shelves, gullies and pits—nutmeg and orange, sienna and brick. A hill with rusty striations like the circles a potter makes in clay on a wheel. Glens and banded gulches, with curls of sand combed over the rim. A landscape drifted and smooth, its sharp edges banished or hidden from view.

“We’re dropping down, gliding into a valley scribed with contour lines the color of rust. A torrid place, where the wind carries sand and the sun is blazing. A tribe lives here. Primitive people.”

A tribe? she wonders.

“Open your eyes.”

Danni parts her lids, blinded by glare.

“They shelter beneath the sand,” Raj says. “Look down.”

She turns onto her shoulder, peering over the tapestry’s edge, seeing little at first—flashing slopes, a labyrinth of gullies, hillocks swimming in haze. The sun’s directly overhead, and it’s beating on the dunes with a blistering force.

“There,” Raj says.

Danni follows his gesture and the blur resolves: a ring of sand-colored mounds with a marketplace at its center. The stalls are covered with soiled canopies, crowded together like mushroom caps.

“The queen’s taking us down,” he says.

What does it mean? A blasted settlement in a barren place—

The tapestry drops, coasts and drops again, its sawtooth patterns dicing the light, pyramids crawling the surface.

“Dried sheaves,” Raj says. “Gourds hanging in nets. Purple balls, onions perhaps. Fenced stalls with goats and pigs. Where are the people?”

Danni can see: the grounds are empty. Ragged banners flap in the wind.

“There,” Raj points. “They’re gathered in the basin beyond the market.”

Danni spots them. People crowded together. Naked people.

“Closer.” Raj speaks as if he’s repeating the queen’s command.

The tapestry sinks, humping and hollowing, vee rows flashing. And a harsh music rises to meet them.

“How long have they lived here?” Raj says.

Dusky-skinned and unwashed. They’d thrown off their clothing, or they’d never been clothed. They’re in the middle of some kind of celebration.

“Look at their faces,” he says.

The men are made up or masked, their identities hidden from view. They’re making a terrible racket, bowing violas, pounding marimbas, hammering on drums. The women stand apart, unmasked, watching as the men bellow and shriek and mimic animal poses. At the periphery children are visible, gobbling fruit, ladling honey from jars, dribbling it over loaves, stuffing the syrupy food in their mouths.

All at once rockets are fired, and in every hand there’s a rattling clapper that signals the end or beginning of something.

Danni sees a man turn with his erection in his hand. He grabs a woman and enters her from the rear. She bends to receive him on all fours, groaning like an ox. A girl nearby has her hands over her eyes, shamed it seems; but she’s peering between her fingers. A man beside her watches, chafing his member, exciting himself.

Directly below, a pair of women are holding their breasts, teasing a man hunched like an ape. Another, pregnant and almost to term, lowers herself onto her side to please two men, one passive, the other spastic and crazed. Danni flinches at the force of his lunges. The violence, the raw lust, is frightening, exciting and repellent.

Look away, Danni thinks. But the drama rivets her. The hornet is humming, the tapestry sinks and the clamor mounts. Sun gleams on the naked bodies, frenzied and feverish, slick and sweating. The men are railing and pummeling brutes, while the women submit, matching vile to vile. Figures with black hoods are winding through the quaking assembly, wailing with outstretched arms like sorcerers summoning a crisis. And when the first orgasm strikes, the hooded figures convulse as one, recognizing the one who's been struck, howling and pointing and rubbering their legs.

"What are they doing?" Danni says.

"Freeing their demons, I suppose."

The tapestry descends while the sorcerers chant, the marimbas ring, the viols screech and the beasts force their needs on each other. The tribe's blood is boiling. Growls and sobs, repugnant odors, a swamp of wet parts sliding together, hissing and hissing again, as if some shared instinct is opening and closing an electric circuit. For Danni, it's an image of hell.

Has the hornet summoned this degraded scene and its chain of seizures?

Love has no part in this, Danni thinks.

And as if to prove her conclusion, she sees the children now, ringing the writhing bodies, watching, pointing, frightened and repulsed. The boys wear crowns of reeds. The hair of the girls is bound up and braided. Are they meant to view the atrocity? Is it some kind of sick instruction?

Why has the queen brought us here? she wonders. Why is she showing me this? She must know that I'm drawn to Raj.

Does she think this will excite me?

Danni has trusted Raj, but this is shaking her trust.

He's watching her. "You're troubled," he says.

"Why are we here?" Danni asks.

At that moment the marimba beat and the viol screech condense to three notes, in sequence, repeated. Dramatic, insistent, imposed on the hornet's hum. Then two notes. And then one: a solitary throb that beats at the senses as if the brain is a nut that needs cracking and the tribe is a hammering rock.

A procession is forming, Danni sees.

The sorcerers have banded together. They're winding through the naked crowd, leading a half-dozen men carrying a wooden coffin. At the crowd's edge, more rockets are lit and flame through the sky, while the single beat continues to pound: a salute, perhaps, to a savage god or a dead ruler in the coffin.

The degenerate men hoot and howl, hunching and kneeling as the procession passes. A naked boy is in front of the sorcerers now, banging a drum; and behind the coffin is a throng of women, naked, disheveled and grimy, each carrying an unlit candle.

Below the tapestry now, the procession halts. The hammering throb continues and the naked devotees raise their left hands. Boom, boom, boom— Then the drumbeat stops, and all Danni can hear is the hornet's hum.

The sorcerers ring the coffin. They're raising its lid. The drummer boy shouts and all the villagers, adult and child, fall to their knees.

Danni expects to see something monstrous, dead or mold-ering—the remains of a fallen leader, the relics of a primitive saint. But there's something alive in the box, shifting its limbs, struggling against its sand-colored bindings.

A mummified corpse flexes its knees, getting its feet beneath, standing slowly.

The reed mats shift around its trunk, and its arms emerge, covered in crusted paste. A hand rises and pulls a plug of grass from its mouth. There's a clay mask over its eyes and brow. The mummy opens its arms to the tribe and the reed matting falls away. The god of these desert lepers is a young woman, and as she removes her mask, all the raised candles ignite at once.

Danni sees herself in her teens, standing in the coffin held aloft by six boys. The reed shroud is around her ankles, and she's turning to regard the crowd.

She'd been buried alive, Danni thinks. Would she vent her horror with a scream? Would she swoon? Would her eyes shrink to raisins and her cheeks turn to bone at the sight of the savagery around her? Would she crumple back into the box and slide the lid over herself?

But the exhumed teen isn't shuddering. She's lucid, aware, unsurprised by the adoring natives. She's accepted them, Danni thinks. And she's bound to them. No quailing, no dread. No hiding her eyes.

Her teenage appetite lusts like theirs, and she's stirred by their iniquity. It seems that she knows no better. And with that thought, Danni feels everything worthy and proud recoil

inside her. It's the grownup Danni who shudders, it's Danni's adult lips that tremble.

The teen Danni turns and spots the woman above, kneeling on the tapestry. The young goddess raises her arm and points, staring right at her.

"Aren't you sorry," the goddess says.

This mad minx—this image of herself, morbid, exhumed—is angry.

Danni looks at Raj. "What is this?"

He sighs. "This is your world, Danni. These are your people."

She's stunned, and in a moment, she fears: she's flirting with evil. Her teenage self is a sock puppet, and something terrible is moving inside it.

How have I allowed this to happen? she thinks. Once again, she'd found her way to meanness and despair. "Aren't you sorry," the sock puppet said, meaning, "Don't you regret being here." And Danni does. She truly does.

All at once the relentless throb overcomes everything else, and in a single beat the sky turns from amber to black.

The hum is a softening sound, a vanishing sound, a sound of return.

The spell is ending, Danni thinks. She's coming out of the trance.

The tapestry is gone, and so is the hornet.

She's lying on Raj's divan, opening her eyes, lifting her shoulder, seeing darkness. Is it really this late?

It's evening, it seems, in the hypnotist's front room. She can see his silhouette in the chair.

He's silent, watching her.

Danni's nervous, self-conscious. Her halter top's twisted. It's binding her chest. Is her breast showing? She tugs at the top, trying to straighten it, turning onto her hip, feeling vulnerable and exposed.

Raj is still silent, still watching.

She puts her feet on the floor. He was with her, she thinks. He saw what she saw.

"Tell me," Raj says, as if he can hear her thoughts.

"We were in a desert land with natives," she says. "They worshipped a younger version of me."

"You're upset about that?" Raj asks.

"Did you put those things in my head?" Danni rises to her feet.

Silence. He's staring at her.

"I thought you cared for me," she says.

Raj doesn't reply.

She checks her pockets, grabs her purse and steps toward the door. When she reaches it, she puts her hand on the knob.

Behind her, Raj speaks. "You're still in the trance."

But she doubts that she is.

"Danni," he says as she opens the door. His voice seems to come from a distance.

She crosses the threshold and closes the door behind her, turning to face the darkness, descending the steps toward her car, parked by the curb.

Has she violated some compact with him? Has she failed herself? Danni pushes the questions aside. She's upset with

the power she's given Raj and fearful about how he's used it. And she's questioning her attraction to him.

She unlocks her car door, settles onto the seat and starts the engine.

Danni thinks she is on her way home, but she isn't.

A labyrinth of streets shuffle and link before her headlights, and after an uncertain interval, she finds herself pulling into the parking lot of an all-night diner.

No one is there but Allison, who is waiting in a corner booth. An overhead bulb is shorting, and the light flashes and dims on her friend's face. Older by almost a decade, Allison is a calming, leveling force; and she's wise.

Through her smile and greeting, Danni can see her concern.

"How is it going?" Allison asks.

"Not very well," Danni says. "I thought—" She stops herself.

"What did you think?"

"We just finished a session," Danni says. "I saw things that surprised and upset me." She explains how they came upon the desert dwellers, how they witnessed the tribe's debauch and the procession that followed, and how her teenage self rose from the coffin.

Allison raises a banded mug, amber and black. She frowns, puts the mug to her lips and swallows whatever is in it.

"You know," she says, "Raj is crazy about you." She sets the mug down and shakes her head. "That's not quite right. Raj is crazy about the woman you want to be—the one buried inside you."

Danni is silent, thinking of the mummified teen.

"You can understand that, can't you?" Allison says.

No, Danni thinks, I can't. I want him to accept me as I am.

"How do you feel about him?" Allison asks.

"I'm not sure," Danni says. "I'm confused. I'm spooked."

"Being spooked might be a sign you're in love."

"I'm worried he's trying to control me."

"For godsake," Allison laughs. "He's a hypnotist."

And with the word "hypnotist," the flashing bulb pops and the diner dims. Allison is frozen now, laughing at Danni with the mug in her hand.

The hum of the hornet returns. The roof of the diner dissolves, then the walls, then Allison. There is only the corner booth and an amber sky above.

Then the booth is gone, and Danni's on her back again—hearing the whirring wings and feeling the breeze. Her eyes are open. The sun is still in the sky.

She's riding the humps and hollows, borne by the wind with Raj at the helm. She can feel the vee rows beneath her thighs, shifting against her shoulders. Raj is piloting their return. Danni wonders what he's thinking.

As they approach his dwelling, the hum fades; and when it retreats, she is lying on the divan in Raj's front room.

I'm waking from the spell now, she thinks.

And the meeting with Allison in the diner—An illusion, she thinks. But—Was it fashioned from yearning, the unfulfilled desire inside her? Or was it an expression of *his* desire, crafted from the spell that ruled her mind when she gave him control?

“Raj is crazy about the woman you want to be,” Allison said. Had Raj put those words in her mouth? Danni wonders if he’s trying to reshape her—for her benefit or for his own? Her attraction to him, she thinks, has strengthened his power.

Danni turns onto her shoulder.

Raj is still in his chair. Something is binding her chest. Her halter top is twisted. She mutters to herself and tries to straighten it, wondering if anything has happened between them.

Happened, happened—

Is she worried about that? Or is she wishing something *had* happened? She’s distressed and confused. Does she want his attentions, or is she threatened by him? The hornet, the spell, the power she’s given him— How could she be anything but threatened? Raj was seeing her in a way she hadn’t been seen before, by anyone. Even herself.

With hardly a word, Danni rises and makes her exit.

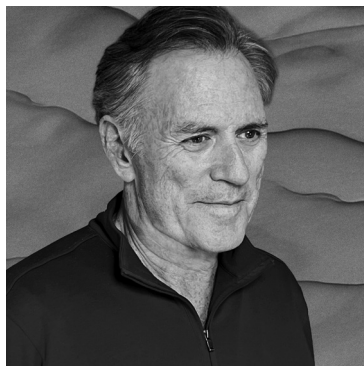
It’s late afternoon.

Barely aware of the world beyond her windshield, she steers through the streets. Fortunately, traffic is light. She’s thinking about Raj and her reflexive mistrust. There’s no reason for her suspicion that he’s manipulating her, exerting his power to change her for some shady purpose. “I’m trying to shield myself,” she says out loud. There is too much pain in imagining what Raj must have thought, seeing the mummified teen, the poor buried girl— Why had she been entombed? How long had she lain there, bound in her shroud of reeds, stretched on her back with the coffin lid over her?

My god, Danni thinks. What has become of me?

She had shared with Raj how far she was from the woman she had hoped to be. And now, in the mirror his queen had held up, it appeared that she was already dead. Coming to him for help was the last stroke in a long sequence of humiliations. The only good fortune was that her poor father wasn't alive to see it. Failure, miserable failure. A fruitless struggle, and the despair and self-loathing that comes with defeat.

She is seeing herself finally, Danni thinks, through clear eyes. And she is more to be pitied than the people in the desert, as repellent as they were. That she had somehow arrived at this desperate place— To have so little—nothing, in fact. Not love or any likeness of it. Not passion, not lust— Nothing but distrust and confusion. However well-meaning Raj's efforts had been, he had turned her against herself.



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. *The Hornet's Spell* and his previous titles—*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.