

RICH SHAPERO

THE  
HORNET'S  
SPELL

A NOVEL

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TooFar  
MEDIA

HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

TooFar Media  
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# 1

The 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 circler 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

thews 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.”

### 3

**D**anni'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 whirring 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 moldering—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.

## 4

She's too upset to reveal her feelings in person. So Danni speaks to Raj on the phone. "The natives," she says, "their revel—"

"I understand that it was unexpected."

"Why did the queen take us there?" Danni asks.

"She read your desire."

"Please, Raj. Those aren't 'my people.'"

"Were their festivities so disturbing?"

"That wasn't love," she says. "It was an orgy with children watching."

"Can you remember a time when what you knew about sex bewildered you, but stirred your curiosity and whetted your anticipation?"

"Of course."

"As a child," Raj says, "if you'd seen your parents in a naked embrace—a sincere one, a passionate one— If you'd seen the dance of power and permission, frenzy and assent—you

might have had a better understanding of love when the time arrived. You might have felt less threatened.”

“You think I’m threatened by love?” she asks.

“I do.”

Danni doesn’t know how to respond. And she can tell that, even with what he’s said, Raj is guarding his words.

“Maybe—”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe the real Danni never grew up,” Raj says.

He was thinking of the mummified girl. A repressed child, she thinks. A buried teen. And a woman—of age but lonely—who yearns for the male spirit. His diagnosis seems grim to her.

“Why did they bury her?” Raj asks.

Danni hears the sorrow in his voice. Sorrow and a troubled impatience, as if he’s standing by the coffin with his hands on the lid, eager to free the poor creature himself.

“The moment,” he says, “the young Danni spoke, I realized I’d heard her voice before. She described love to me as ‘a fire she wanted to feed fuel to.’”

“That Danni is ravishing,” Raj declares. “Brave and beautiful.”

With the gift of these words, her gnawing doubts seemed to loosen their grip. She’s desired. Adored even. And not from covert need or misty delusion. Raj knows her.

“She’s alive,” he says. “She’s waiting to be set free.”

His words have muscles. They grab the hope inside her and lift it out of the depths, changing her imagined future

and the world around her. She's smiling, gasping, holding on to those words as long as she can. And she's glad, so glad they're speaking on the phone. If the effect of his words were visible to him—

What then? she wonders, daring herself. What then?

I'm under his spell, Danni thinks, hornet or no. Raj's kind nature, his keen mind, his striking features, his eyes and his well-built body— His warmth, his discernment, his command of her interior world— In yielding to this captivation, if she makes herself helpless, foolish, frail— What does it matter?



She's half asleep. The waves of dream that advance and retreat are full of promise. But they're shadowed with omen too. Offsetting her doubts is her trust of Raj. She feels the allure of the buried teen, but in facing her former identity, there are fears she will have to quell. How many wrong turns has the adult Danni made? How much of her older self will she have to give up?

The waves of dream are like dunes of sand. Danni is standing among them, feeling the granular humps covering her naked feet, rising to her shins like an incoming tide, frothing and pulling as they swell and retreat. How long has she stood here watching? In the distance the desert climbs to a far horizon, and there the border is blurred. Are winds raging along it? Is the sky whirling with sand, or has a sand-colored wall risen like the lid of an opened coffin?

Has the one entombed been set free by nature or man? Or by a simple wish?

As if Danni's thought has stirred her to life, the girl's silhouette appears, stepping through the sandstorm. She drops the last of her reed shrouds, and the blowing grains scrub the paste from her skin. Descending the slopes, crossing the dunes, slighter, trimmer— The same naked image Danni saw in the mirror when she was half the age she is now.

*Aren't you sorry?*

Danni remembers her words. They're echoing in her head, but the meaning's unclear, clouded by her confusion and the girl's angry tone.

Did she mean, "Aren't you sorry you're here, watching this debauch and the worshipped dead?"

Did she mean, "Aren't you sorry you did this to me?"

Did she mean, "Aren't you sorry you are who you are, miserable and alone?"

The resuscitated teen emerges from the blowing sand. She's in the open now, a perfect creature, bigger than life, magnified by the awe and envy Danni is feeling. And from the threatening look in her eyes, the meaning of "Aren't you sorry" seems clear.

*I was ready, the eyes say, for the grandeur and glory of love. You bore me away. You stuffed my mouth with grass, covered my flesh with a paste of ash, bound me in matting, shut me in a box and lowered me beneath the sands. How dare you.*

Danni is swaying. Her hands shake. You've come for vengeance, she thinks.

*I'm the real Danni, the goddess replies. I want my life. And I'm taking it back. Your desire belongs to me.*

“Can you remember a time?” Raj had said. And Danni does now: a time when desire was a mystery she was feverish to explore.

*I'm going to sew your eyelids closed, the goddess says, and bury you deep.*

It's a terrible threat, but her dreaming mind isn't sure if she's receiving the threat or delivering it. She's Danni, and the young desire is alive inside her. Her troubled eye skims the dunes. Her reckless heart craves relief. Her fist tugs the blanket. She whimpers, she moans— Her hand slides beneath the pillow, feeling blindly.

The folds of bedsheet are the rungs of a ladder, and as her fingers touch them, hope urges her on. Over the rungs, and over again. Over and back, amber and black. Six. Five. Four— Three. Two. One— The sound of whirring wings reaches her ears. One. Two. Three— Four. Five. Six—

Up the ladder and back, amber and black. Can a younger Danni induce herself? Humming. Approaching closer— Can a younger Danni— Six. Five. Four— Find her way into the spell on her own? Three. Two. One—

Is the hornet here? Is she watching her now? One. Two. Three— Is she close, so close that Danni can feel the hum invading her head?

Raj, where is Raj— In Danni's chest and down through her center, she can feel the queen's vibration, the hum of devotion for the man she serves. Danni wants so much to be with

him. Four. Five. Six— Over the rungs, back and again, reaching for Raj, yearning with every cell of her body.

Her older self is reluctant, dreading. Has she lost her care for sanity? Has she forgotten there's risk of a lapse like the one with Allison in the diner? What if the hornet never let go? What if she vanished into the trance and never returned?

*Stop fussing, you fool, the younger says. Think about Raj. Up the ladder and down, black and amber, amber and black— He's crossing the threshold of sleep. His humming queen is hovering above. And Raj, knowing the spell has commenced, is entering the dream.*

He's lying on the bed beside her. She's naked and so is he. Danni whispers, "I'm in the spell."

And he whispers back, "We're in it together."

She sees him in her mind's eye—his muscled arms, his coppery thighs. His face turns toward her, half in darkness, the lit half with a ladder tattoo and a glowing box in the place of an eye. A stranger from a distant realm—some other continent, some other world.

There are so many reasons to mistrust him, the older Danni says.

But none of them matter, the younger replies.

"I want you to love me," she tells Raj. And when she looks down, she sees her body, thin and lithe, stretched beside him.

"That's why I'm here," he replies.

It's not her desire, she knows, that's putting these words in his mouth. They're *his* words, *his* thoughts, *his* feelings— And his vision of her has transformed her. She's no longer confused,

no longer in doubt. The new Danni—the one Raj exhumed, the girl he found in the desert—can't live without him.

“I want you inside me,” she whispers.

She kisses his neck.

“That's why I'm here,” he whispers back.

Raj puts his hand on her hip, drawing her closer.

There's no longer a reason for him to dissemble.

“I've never been with a woman like you. You're the one I've been searching for all these years.”

She claws his back. She sinks her teeth into his shoulder, imagining she will have him or tear him to pieces.

“You're mine,” she says. “Make me yours.”

And that's what he does.



Danni wakes the next morning feeling a deep relief. It's as if she's been holding on to something—not just with her hands, but with her entire being—and she's finally let go. The dream was only a dream. She'd imagined she'd given herself to Raj. But despite it being imaginary, she feels the kind of satisfaction a lover might feel from a real mingling. The giving, it seems, has restored her.

She lies on her back, gazing up at the ceiling, giddy, amused, and a little shocked. Madly, without reserve. Unguarded and defenseless. Should she feel some discomfort at that? She doesn't want to. She's discovered something vital with Raj. Something she must never forget. With these

thoughts, it seems she's crossing a boundary, passing into a new dimension, where her youthful spirit is alive and breathing inside her.

It's 11 a.m. Saturday. She puts on a t-shirt and shorts.

Raj's weekend schedule is often full. He has other clients he's seeing, attractive women who've fallen in love with him and who want nothing more than to give him control. Danni fixes herself something to eat, but midway through the meal she retrieves her phone. I'm going to call him, she thinks, and invite him over. Is she playing at this? Yes, just playing. And she sets the phone aside.

She washes the dishes and makes the bed. Then the phone is back in her hand. She laughs to herself and makes the call.

Raj picks up on the first ring.

"I have to see you," she says.

"What's wrong?" he asks. "What is it?"

"Stop whatever you're doing." She gives him her address. "Get in your car—"

"What's happened?"

"Now. Right now, Raj. Get in your car. I'm waiting." And she ends the call.

He won't ignore me, she thinks. He cares for me. We've been through too much.

But she's nervous, wondering what she'll do when he arrives. To shore up her confidence, she revisits her dream, pretending it really happened. What she's given Raj, he can no longer live without. Fantasies, foolish thoughts— "Raj is crazy about you," Allison said.

With these distractions, minutes pass. Then there's a chime at her front door. And when she opens the door, he's standing there: poised, alert, on the balls of his feet.

He's concerned, rattled perhaps. His hair is pleasingly mussed.

"Finally," she says, and she takes his hand and escorts him in.

Her heart is racing. What will she do? What will she say?

"You're alright?" he asks.

She wavers, then—with a gasp—she opens her arms and embraces him.

Raj stiffens.

Sensing his surprise, she releases him.

Danni can see the question in his eyes. And the boxy glint through the rungs of the tattooed ladder— She can see that too. Or is she imagining? So much has happened since her false waking in the diner and her dream the previous night.

"Is there some emergency?"

She swallows and touches her heart. "It's here, Raj."

As she watches, his façade dissolves. His formal bearing, the inquiring look—

"I want—" Her audacity fazes her. She turns her head.

"What do you want?" he asks gently.

"I want to be in the spell with you." She thinks of the night before—what they had done and how she'd felt.

Raj reaches out and takes her hand. "Is there a place you could lie down?"

She faces him, and they study each other.

“There’s a bed in my room,” she says. “And a chair for you.”

Danni’s words sound tentative to her. But Raj is holding her hand.

“Alright,” he replies.

She’s not entirely sure what this means, but she turns and leads him down the hall. When she reaches her bedroom, she opens the door.

Raj follows her in. He stops by the foot of the bed and looks around.

Her private world. “What do think?” she says.

“It’s fine.”

Raj moves the chair so it’s by her pillow. The room has collected the midday heat, and when he straightens, she sees there’s sweat on his brow and on the back of his neck.

“I don’t have air conditioning,” she says.

“Do you mind if I unbutton my shirt?”

“No, I don’t mind.”

She watches as he bares his chest.

“Before we get started—” Raj draws a breath.

“What is it?”

“My objectivity is gone,” he says.

“What do you mean?”

“I want you, Danni. You know that.”

The breath stutters in her throat. “I should use the bathroom,” she says.

Danni needs a moment to calm herself.

She steps before the bathroom mirror, meeting her gaze. *I want you, Danni.* She mouths the words, and they touch her

so deeply, her eye releases a tear that coasts down her cheek.

Danni sighs, removes her tee and leaves it on the vanity, returning to her room bare-breasted.

Raj is closing the drapes. When he turns and sees her, his expression is earnest. No glad smile or casual words to ease the tension. He seats himself in the chair and watches as she stretches out on the bed.

What happens now? she wonders. Will he conjure the queen? If he chooses instead to embrace her, how will she respond? Will her courage fail her? As a partner in love, Raj is still a mystery. She has no idea what to expect.

“Would you like to know how the hornet was born?” he asks.

“I would.”

“I was close to my mother. Very close. My father was on a plane that went down. After he died, we managed, the two of us. She was everything a mother could be. I lost her a month before I left for college.”

His voice is soft. He’s opening a window to an invisible self.

“The morning of the funeral, she was lying in the chapel. I was standing beside her. The hornet emerged from beneath her shawl.”

Danni can hear his sorrow.

“The devotion I’d felt from her all my life,” he says, “hadn’t departed.”

Danni turns her head on the pillow and closes her eyes. Without knowing what Raj will do, she’s putting herself in his care.

“I learned my trade with the queen’s help,” he explains. “The spell is her blessing. For so many years, she’s carried my longing with her.”

Longing: a word she never thought Raj would apply to himself.

“She doesn’t want me to be alone,” he says.

In the silence, Danni hears the hum—outside the house, or rising from a resting place in another room. The queen’s voice is modulated like music, or speech in an alien tongue. Her fervor ebbs and flows as she approaches the door. Then she zooms through the gap.

And with her arrival the hypnotist returns, beginning his transit up and down the ladder. “One. Two. Three— Black and amber, amber and black.”

“Come here,” Danni whispers.

Raj’s voice fades. Her eyes are still closed.

“You’re a wonderful guide,” she says. “But— Don’t sit in the chair. Be naked with me, here on the bed. Hold me, Raj, and I’ll hold you. We’ll enter the spell as lovers.”

“I’ll lose control,” he warns, “over what happens.”

“Please.”

The room is quiet.

“Leave your power behind,” she says.

More quiet.

Then the floorboards creak. He’s rising from the chair.

She lifts her hand to receive him. She feels the mattress dipping beneath his weight. His palm settles on her hip. His bare chest is against her breasts. Has the hornet landed on her

temple, or is he kissing her there?

She puts her lips to his ear. "I can do the count.

"One. Two. Three," she says.

"Black and amber, amber and black.

"Four. Five, and Six—"

The hornet's whirring over their heads. Raj is describing the box of light, passing and returning to it as Danni counts them over the rungs.

Six. Five. Four— Up and then down again, laddering them both.

"We're lighter," he says. "Lighter than ever before. Concentration is lifting our bodies. We're as light as a handful of sand."

"Raj," she says. Her voice is tremulous.

"What is it?"

"I'm nervous, being this close."

"You know what to do to calm yourself."

And with his words, she remembers. Danni draws a deep breath, and another, trying to relax, lowering her mind's defenses.

"There's space," Raj says, "between us and the bed. We're rising, rising— A little more space. And a little more. We're at ease, suspended like this. And the hornet's hum is moving us deeper into the spell.

"At the foot of your bed, a fabric is rolled. A bright brocade. Our tapestry, Danni. It's unrolling beneath us. You can feel it, can't you? The pyramids prickle your shoulders. Vee rows graze your thighs. The giant diamond pulses against

your back.

“Our spell, your freedom— And my freedom too. Around us, the enclosing walls are thinning, hearing the restless hum, feeling our desire to fly.

“Your dwelling is a skeleton now, just pale framing. And as the tapestry moves toward the ribs of your bedroom wall, they lie back. The queen is looping through the bright air beyond, summoning the winds. At her hum they flurry beneath us, tumbling and churning. We’re climbing above the narrow street, over roof peaks and power lines, into the sky. The queen is in charge, leading the way.”

“Little Rob’s fancy,” Danni says. “I’m part of it now.”

“You are. Your father’s gift is the magic carpet I imagined when I was a boy. It furrows and tucks, it bucks and heaves; its leading edge furls, mated to the winds that carry it. And it has your hope woven into it.

“Shall we draw ourselves up?”

Danni rises to her knees and opens her eyes as the tapestry tilts on its edge, swooping around a whorl, bumping and trundling as it settles. The designs she’d woven with the hornet’s help are beneath her, glittering with the promise of desire’s fulfillment.

“The queen’s design,” Raj says.

“My father’s thread.”

Here they are: the sultan of trance, prince of the magical mind, and a girl who’s bound for the realm of the heart’s dominion. They edge forward together, kneeling side by side at the tapestry’s bow.

The air is warm, the hum louder, the breeze untamed. Ahead is a striated sky arced toward heaven, rust and cream, auburn and gold. The dunes below are striped to match, rippling with fawn corrugations, smoothed by a combing wind and the settling of sand. On either side, the corrugations descend into rusty swales and cinnamon valleys. They've been here before.

"Voices," Raj says. "Can you hear them?"

Faintly, she can.

The soiled canopies are visible now, far below. The market umbrellas are pale pebbles. And the tribe— From pinholes in the sand-colored mounds, strings of bodies emerge like ants or termites. They are carrying things—large, pale, misshapen things—in their arms or lashed to their backs.

"What are they doing?" Danni says.

"Trying to find a new nest perhaps."

The native voices reach them like the stridulation of insects. The carriers set their burdens down, and the children circle like grubs.

Beyond the tribe is a broad valley with shelves carved into its far wall, coral and buff, honey and rose. From the tapestry's height, the sandy contours look fluid and silky. The shelving was shaped, no doubt, by the desert winds blasting the stone.

"Why are we here?" Danni wonders.

"Because of the queen."

"You've been here before?"

"Only with you," he says.

"What has she told you?"

The hum is suddenly loud in her ears. The queen has heard her question, but if there's counsel or comfort she means to give, it's not in a tongue Danni can understand.

"Nothing," Raj says squinting, trying to see through the glare.

The sun has so heated the weaving that it's burning her knees. The queen's whirring wings are like the beating of flames. She's looping fifty feet ahead, leading them up the valley's far side, over a wide stairway of hills rising one behind the other.

"Where are you taking us?" Danni wonders.

Turreted walls flank them on either side. The great sandy stairway passes beneath them, rippling as if breathing the heat, expanding and compressing like a concertina.

The way narrows and steepens, the stairway yoked by walls, and beyond the high saddle a giant portal appears—a funnel on its side, its yawning throat glowing, hollowed in the heights or drilled into the sky, it's hard to tell.

Into that blazing hole the queen is escorting them.

The tapestry swoops, riding the winds up the port side of the barrel. The wall is close, circled and lined; and now they're pushed back to the funnel's center, the vapor whirling, honed and thick. The barrel walls seem to rotate around them, pulsing and flaring, carmine and fawn, mango and pink.

As they reach the end, pits appear in the funnel's sides like air holes in cheese, admitting light from another dimension. The hornet's course is straight now, arrowing into the strange domain.

The sky here is grainy. The air is drifting with sand. Below, a plain stretches out, winking and pitting as if caught in the act of creating itself. Are they in a material place, or has it appeared by suggestion—a phrase, a stray thought that, having brought it, might just as quickly bear it away?

Danni looks at Raj.

He doesn't speak. He points.

She follows his finger and sees, far ahead, a broad plateau with a shimmering haze floating above it—a mirage or a silver lake. Inside the haze, bright spearheads are flashing.

The breeze whistles, the tapestry flaps, undulating beneath them.

“What are they?”

Raj shakes his head.

His knowledge had often unnerved her, but its absence now seems a far greater threat. Where is the hornet taking them?

The spearheads stab through the haze, flaring for a time then sinking from view, drowning together in the silver lake.

The metallic sheen is reflection, Danni thinks. The spearheads are pink, orange at the tips and golden below.

“They're made of sand,” she says.

“Look at the streamers.”

Rust-colored pennants fly from the tips, waving in the amber sky.

“Structures,” he says. “Spires—scores of them, anchored on an island beneath the haze.”

The boy on the magic carpet is rapt. Danni's kneeling

beside him, thigh touching his, riding the humps and hollows while the diamond she wore throbs like a living organ. Her father's heart is awake, pulsing at the tapestry's center, shedding brackets to either side.

The wind bats her cheek. Her eyes tear.

"They're the tops of drowned temples," Raj says.

Danni wipes her eyes and peers through the glare.

The towers are rising and falling in groups. Spire clusters, spires in rows and sinuous lines, and spires behind, marching into the distance. The queen arrows ahead.

"She's taking us there," Danni says.

Raj nods, eyes wide, lips parted, all mystification.

Tawny and pink, amber and peach—made from the desert, concretized sand. Each spire has a striated aura, a husk of nested outlines that shimmer and fool the eye; and the pennants that fly from their points are particle streams.

Were they fashioned by human hands? Raised from the plain or lowered from the sky? What's the queen's purpose in bringing them here, Danni wonders. Is the journey a blessing for them? Or a test for her?

Puffs of sand leave the towering flanks, departing like flocks. Streamers glitter and eel away. Danni sees broken spires now, beheaded and stumped.

The hornet dives. The hazy miasma divides like a curtain and the queen zooms through the gap. The tapestry follows, and the spires are near and clear, stripped of outlines and after-images.

Their lower levels are banded sandstone slotted with sky,

riddled with arches and alcoves and hanging balconies. The cupolas are tall and ribbed, of tawny rock, perforated and deeply etched. Each has a ruffled cuff at the top, set with a needle turret and a banderole essing from it.

How did they get here, and who shaped them? Did circular winds whip up the sand and pack the grains, tier upon tier? Or were they built by masons, block by block? Are they the dwellings of some other race? Does anyone live here? Had anyone ever?

Ahead are two spires, side by side. The tapestry glides between them.

Raj is turning his head. "Do you see any people?"

The stony flanks are bored with open-air windows, beehived with eaves, strung with pillars and leveled with shelves. There are cloisters wherever Danni looks. But not a soul can be seen. Not a soul on the many juts and tiers or the sun-splashed sand plots and terraces between.

The hornet's bending her course, and the tapestry's following closely. Are the towers empty? If there were people here once, why did they leave? Had some affliction struck them?

A spire looms directly ahead and a large oculus appears. The hornet aims her course through it. The tapestry follows as if moving on tracks.

The structure's interior walls, Danni sees, are intricately carved. Sconces and coffering, dizzying vaults— The patience and skill is hard to imagine; and so is the devotion and courage to work at these heights.

A fierce rasping—

The tapestry brushes a spire's flank and a thousand bright diamonds are jarred, winking and shifting. Danni sees the symbol at the fabric's center—the giant heart, jolted by spasms. An hourglass appears, then the diamond again. Hourglass, diamond— The hourglass constricts and the diamond expands.

Fixed on these alternations—a timeless truth or an untimely end—Danni's hopes surge and quail, trustful then anxious. Trustful because she's with Raj and they're embarked on their journey together. Anxious because the queen has led them away from the world, with no assurance they will ever return.

The queen goes into a corkscrew dive and the tapestry follows.

Danni shrieks, Raj shouts— They shy from the bow, holding fast to the plunging fabric. It wallows and billows, its great heart swelling; then it plummets again in shelving sweeps. Closer now to the glaring sands, closer and closer—

The prow curls, the stern sinks, drags against stone, and the tapestry settles on a terrace at the foot of a spire.

The cloth is motionless.

Danni picks herself up, and so does Raj. They survey the carpet together while the hornet makes circles around them.

The giant diamond is throbbing, and Danni can feel her father's alarm. He's breathless, she thinks. Nervous for her. Knowing her confusion and wanting to help, but being unable. Danni bows her head and reaches for Raj's hand.

*I trust him*, she thinks, as if to explain.

She faces Raj. He's turned to look at the looming spire, visoring his brow with his hand. The glare is fierce. Danni can feel the heat beating down.

"What's happening to us?" she says.

Raj meets her gaze and shakes his head, as bewildered as she is.

The tower before them is tiered and banded, carved to its heights. Alcoves and coffered, suspended verandas, paneless windows and empty landings— Lifeless, it seems.

"Why has she led us here?" Danni wonders.

"She has something to show us," Raj says.

He's guessing, she knows. She and Raj were seeking their freedom, hoping they might help each other into a different life. But their fate now belonged to the hornet.

The queen buzzes past Danni's ear and sends a lock of hair flying.

She's making loops around them—one, two, three— then she's heading toward the stone stair below the arched entrance.

The hornet hovers over the threshold, waiting. Raj has clasped Danni's hand, and he's urging her forward. As they climb the steps, she remembers how he spoke of the queen's first appearance—his gratitude, his respect. Something good will come of this, she thinks. And what choice does she have?

The steps of the stair are human sized. When had they last been used? Who had mounted them? Those who entered the spire— Were any as unknowing as she was?

Raj pauses before the stone sill, and they step over it together. The sand grains squeal beneath Danni's feet. The entry arch is behind them now, and the queen zooms ahead. Her hum can be heard through the dimness. She's leading them along a pillared passage with keyholes and empty windows on either side.

Raj frees his hand and moves ahead, eager to see. An earlier Danni might have found fault. But she feels only empathy

now. He had tried—really tried—to reach her. They had discovered each other, and with discovery came care. Raj cared about her, and she cared about him. If their journey together left them stranded in a far-off place, lost and confused, who could be blamed?

At the end of the passage, an anteroom appears through a slot. The queen flies through it and her hum fades. Raj is in a hurry. Boyish, she thinks. But she's accepting that, feeling only his innocence and his well-meaning spirit. She's with the real Raj now, a simple soul with dreams of flight, visions of freedom, and the desire to play hero to others.

They pass through the slot into the anteroom.

Raj stops and so does she.

The air is cooler here, the light is dimmer. The queen's hum is near, but she's invisible now. Raj turns and Danni turns with him, seeing the walls. They are carved with floating designs, small and oddly placed. They look abstract at first, then she recognizes the toes on a foot, a jawline, an elbow, a drifting eye. Images of people, once whole, now defaced or eroded. Or— The parts might have been carved as they are, fashioned here but never assembled.

Danni's thoughts turn dark. In the images around her, she sees the Danni she'd wanted to leave behind. The anteroom is a foundry, she thinks, for the urban girl. A workshop. A place where parts had been gathered. In preparation, she thinks. Preparation for what? Sensitive parts never joined. Breaths never taken, sights never seen, feelings never felt.

Raj is taking her hand again, urging her forward,

following the hum to the anteroom rear, into a lit court.

As they enter, Danni sees humans standing on either side, naked in the sun beaming from clerestory windows. They're frozen, unmoving—not living people.

Raj steps forward and so does she.

Statues. Figures carved in the round or in relief on the walls. They're all women, Danni sees, naked or barely clad, in suggestive postures and all in their prime. They have a native appearance, with large almond eyes, brows that are curled and lips that are arched.

Beauties, she thinks. Every one of them. None are slight. All have swelling hips and globular breasts. And the hornet's hum— It's like a nasal clarino played for a harem, a current that runs through the marrow of these adored ones.

Danni is struck by a strange thought: that these are the queen's favorites. For a moment envy possesses her and she feels the need to condemn them, whoever they were. Victims, she thinks. The statues, no doubt, were sculpted by men.

But the rancor falls from her like an ill-fitting garment. What did she know of this mysterious race? Who was she to judge them? Raj is eyeing the statues, not with greed or hunger, but trying to understand. Who were they? When had their living forms graced the spire? Who had preserved them like this, in a desert impossibly distant?

The women are like visitors from an ideal realm, Danni thinks, all perfectly ripe, all bursting with female energy. And they know their craft—the mastery of seduction. It isn't in the warmth they emanate, or their smooth curves and sensuous

postures. It's the confidence they all have in their own allure. One has just turned her back, coy, feigning reticence. Another twists at the waist, rotating her shoulders so her face is visible, smiling, inviting— Who could say no to a night with her?

A statue beside Danni seems to shift as she moves. The woman's head is bowed. She's thinking of her lover and the pleasures she'll give, and she has no doubt how they'll be received. Another nearby has one arm raised. Her legs are covered with symbols—the sculptor's conceit or real scars, it's impossible to tell. Her shoulder looks clawed; she's touching—fondly, proudly—the rewards of a recent embrace.

“What are you feeling?” Raj murmurs.

Danni answers him truly. “Surprise. Esteem. Envy.”

These frozen souls, she thinks, had the expectation of love. And they'd had it all their lives.

A statue seems to be looking past her, with naked emotion at first, then as Danni passes, the gaze turns mysterious. Another smirks to herself, teasing an invisible lover or imagining the conditions under which she'll agree. A languorous statue with her hands over her pubis, pouting lips and promising eyes. The queen is perched on a stony shoulder, and as Danni watches, she uses her hind legs to launch herself back into the air.

Raj has paused before a font where statues are gathered, each preparing for an imminent encounter. One is donning a beaded necklace. Another looks in a mirror and paints her lids. One lotions her arm, another wrings water from a rope of her hair. The statue directly before Danni is deep in thought,

imagining how she will greet her lover, rehearsing the moment. Another at her elbow is touching her breasts, admiring her curves, knowing how the prizes will be received.

At the court's far end, statues are conferring with each other. One discloses her hopes to a friend, seeking advice or encouragement, or persuading her to act as a go-between. A woman opens a folded note, sharing its contents with another. Two play with a monkey, one calming the other's restless heart, reassuring her the wait will be short.

"Fantasies," Danni says.

Raj turns to face her.

Is she going to say more? What can she say? How badly, Danni thinks looking around her; how badly she had wanted to be like them. These fortunate creatures— There's not a cynical woman here, she thinks. They aren't fueling each other's doubts. They're supporting their mutual longing for love, and they're preparing each other for the blessing to come.

"A different world," she mutters. "A better one. Or—"

Raj waits on her words. The queen is hovering before her, seeing everything, in all directions at once.

"Or an impossible one," Danni says.

This, she thinks, is what her teen self might have wished for herself if she hadn't been buried. But what woman on earth lives a life like this?

"Why are they here?" Raj wonders. "All this preparation—"

"It's an artful imagining," Danni says.

The pathos in her voice is for Raj and herself, a desiring woman and an ardent man. The lives they had led, the need

that had brought them together— They were born into a world where love like this had never existed.

“Maybe they were real,” Raj suggests, “in the full flush of life when they posed for the carvers.”

And what if they were, Danni thinks. Did they understand that the gift they’d been given wouldn’t last long? Did they know they were flowers in bloom, and the wilting was just ahead? Were they any wiser, Danni thinks, than she and her friends?

Wiser, yes. Much wiser, even if the desolation to come was out of their view. There was nothing brittle or bitter about them. If they had lived, and the end of their world had come, these women would have had no cause for regret.

“They’re bold and open,” she says, according the ideal creatures the respect they deserve, “fearless in the face of desire.”

“You belong among them,” Raj says.

His words surprise her. Has a sunbeam reached her through a transom? She feels warm, bathed in light.

“I know you, Danni.”

She doesn’t laugh. Her stomach doesn’t churn, and her throat doesn’t crimp. Raj sees her this way, she thinks, because he’s in love.

And with that thought, the queen’s hum returns. She’s hovering by Danni’s temple, her antennae touching Danni, tasting her, smelling her. Then she’s by her ear with a message Danni can’t decode. As she watches, the queen moves away, wings whirring, jointed legs hanging, winding among the statues.

“What is she saying?” Raj asks.

Danni follows the queen with her eyes, wondering.

Is the queen directing her gaze, pointing at the statues’ pride or lauding their playfulness? Is she circling their naked allure, their ease with their bodies? “Just look,” the queen seems to be telling her, “just look.” What does she think Danni’s missing? Is it their fearlessness, their love for themselves, their confidence that their deepest needs will be filled?

“There,” Raj says.

She follows his gesture to a statue’s thigh. On the smooth surface, inches from her groin, is a carved hornet. Raj’s finger moves, spotting another on a statue’s shoulder. And another on a woman’s back. Her waist is twisted, the groove of her spine curving and deep. She can feel the hornet, Danni thinks. The amorous woman knows it’s there.

The queen’s likenesses are all around them, and her hum is mounting to call their attention to them. A woman cups her breast, bringing it forward, rehearsing an offer; there’s a hornet carved on the aureole. Another has one on her middle, approaching her navel. And right beside Danni, a woman is inspecting her arm and the crescent her lover has left with a bite. Inside the print, a stony hornet has settled.

Are the carvings all depictions of a single hornet? Or had these unusual people gathered and tended them? Had the women felt the hornets’ presence, goading, intrusive? Or is the conceit that the influence was beneath their awareness? The statues are as they were when Danni first saw them, frozen and lifeless. But she feels now how possessed they are by erotic

expectation, and those with the hornets seem the most brazen.

A statue beside Raj is burning with the fever of love. Danni can see the urgency in the look she has for her lover. She's prepared to give everything, to be the source of ecstasy for them both. Close by, there's another with a hornet on her heart and her hands by her groin. She's facing her imagined partner, spreading herself.

The queen's hum is trembling the air. Danni watches her hovering before Raj's eyes, wings red-orange.

Raj reaches for her hand, takes it and squeezes.

Only a foolish woman would wonder what Raj is thinking, a woman entirely unlike those gathered here.

The queen turns and makes a line for the court's far end, then halts in a sunlit frame, waiting.

"She wants us to follow her," Raj says.

Danni looks in his eyes, giving way to strange speculations. Is this antique civilization the queen's work? Through the portal of Raj's spell, had the two of them vanished into it?

A statue across the court is staring at her, as if Danni's wavering is visible and she's waiting to see which way Danni will fall.

The queen is waiting too, hovering two feet away, antennae twitching.

Danni sees the desire in Raj's eyes, and that's all she needs. Like the statues around her, she feels the gift she's been given. She takes Raj's hand and they step forward together.

The queen is humming, looping through the light. They follow her into a large circular space like the bottom of a well,

with a stone stair spiraling up. The heights of the spire appear above them, crossed by rays from opposing windows.

Raj releases her hand, urging Danni before him. She places her foot on the first step and rises beside the sand-colored wall. The inside of the spire is ringed with niches, empty niches, lit by the sun. As she climbs, the queen ascends with her in a slow arc, following the spiral.

Rings of niches, rings above rings—

But as they rise, the niches are no longer empty. There's a carved couple in each. The pairs are all in the round, all on their feet, naked in frozen embraces. It's as if the women in the lower court have found their partners and been spirited here. Some are coupled, in the middle of an erotic embrace, and some are not; some have men as lovers, some have women.

Danni looks over her shoulder.

Raj is as surprised as she is. But he's trusting the queen.

Steps, more steps. They're climbing higher—

The queen's hum drones in the throat of the well. And to Danni, it's an inevitable sound. Wherever the hornet guides them, she is going.

An empty niche appears on her right.

The queen doubles back, whirring past Danni's nose, buzzing around and behind her, bumping her hip, herding her into the shallow space. Raj follows, edging beside her.

They are facing each other now, with the wall of the niche on one side and the spire's throat on the other. In the light from above, Raj's arms look muscled. His chest is broad, his skin burnished; he has the symmetry and poise of a statue.

His body is a gift, she thinks, worthy of sharing. He's eyeing her, it seems, with similar thoughts. Danni takes his hand, raises it to her lips and kisses it.

"There's a great nobility," he says, "in making love."

"Is that the theme here?"

"Maybe it is."

The hornet hums close, urging his hand onto her shoulder, hovering beneath her chin, tucking her elbow, shifting her hip, coaxing them together.

The queen's puppetry amuses Danni. She doesn't need encouragement. She lowers her hand to Raj's groin and cups his balls. He bends closer, sighing, and she kisses his neck. He strokes the backs of her thighs.

There's a pause in the queen's attentions. She's backing away, whirring her wings, watching. Raj squeezes Danni's waist, smoothing her buttocks, spreading them while he bites her ear. All around them, she sees the hungry faces and contorted bodies of the frozen couples. They may have been carved from stone, but they're covered with enamel or a plaster that's polished and glows like skin.

They were put here, Danni imagines, for her personal use, and she includes what she sees in the niches with what she's feeling. A woman stands on one leg, having lifted the other to encircle her partner's thighs. The sight makes desire boil in Danni, and as she mimics the movement, the hornet appears before her, shifting her gaze.

Over the queen's whirring wings, Danni sees two women in a niche. One has the breast of her partner in her mouth.

Danni puts her hand over her heart, squeezes her own and lifts it, rolling her nipple between her fingers. As Raj takes the gift, the queen shifts again. Danni sees, in a niche beyond the hovering wings, a swooning woman with her head thrown back and one arm raised to pull her man's hair. Danni mirrors the movement and Raj moans, looming over her, making her back arch.

He's licking her ear. His wandering hand makes her heartbeat quicken. The queen hums closer, and Danni can feel his fingers now, trailing over her ribs, crossing her middle, bound for the place the queen knows she wants him to touch.

Is he stirred and led, as she is, by the statues around them? The couples, she thinks, are speaking to them in a secret language.

Where her thighs meet, the nerves are waking. With careful fingers, Raj is opening her up. She twists to give him access, opening farther. She gathers herself, drawing a breath, then she takes his length in her hand and, with a gasp of welcome, she guides him in.

Gently, slowly—

Danni closes her eyes.

When she opens them, all the couples have come alive. They've paused in their ardor and have turned to stare at them. In the spreading smiles and glittering eyes, Danni sees a fervent greeting. Raj is seeing it too.

Then the couples plunge back in, statues no more, zealous and hungering.

And they do too, with fresh pleadings, raw demands,

forceful entreatings.

The queen is humming around Danni's rear, circling her hips like a woman in the market inspecting fruit. With Raj's thrusts, Danni feels the vibrating hum deep in her womb. His abandon is mounting, and so is hers. And the niched couples are with them, moving with urgency now, as if in the struggle for love they are fighting for their lives.

Amid the frenzied sounds, a chorus of humming rises. Had hornets been carved on the couples as they were on the women in the outer court? Were they stirring now? Their voices throb with the queen's, echoing in the well like the fateful tolling in an old bell tower. Danni sees them now, looping around the tossing heads and writhing bodies.

A scream. A man slips off a ledge and falls from his niche, dragging his partner with him. Raj's rhythm slows and Danni looks down. The bodies are lost in the shadowed darkness.

She faces Raj. His eyes are wide. The other couples seem not to notice. None have halted. One pair is quivering, approaching the end.

Danni feels Raj throbbing inside her.

The queen lands on her arm. The translucent wings freeze, the spindly legs stiffen, her black thorax sinks. And from her striped abdomen, a needle emerges.

A sharp pinch, her wrist spasms, fingers flexing. Danni cries out.

Raj holds her close. "She's freeing us," he says.

And believing that Raj knows, Danni does nothing to still the spasms.

The queen buzzes across her sternum and settles between her breasts, hind end sinking, the needle appearing again.

Raj is whispering her name, looking into her eyes.

The queen stings her again, sending an electric charge through her center, shaking her trunk. A burning, a livening— A gripping of her insides she's never felt.

The couples are swooning in each other's arms, but they're reaching out too, moaning her name. Danni, Danni, Danni— Their ardor is reckless and raw, but Danni can see through the claspings and clawing, the scratching with nails and biting with teeth. The hum is directing it all.

The queen is unsheathing her needle again, but this time Danni is ready. She knows what it is and she welcomes it.

The queen descends to her hip, settling on it.

Danni holds her breath and the needle drives in.

"Thank you," Danni gasps, "thank you—"

Her body is shaking. Raj's embrace is holding her up. The hum is still with her, but it's not an insect vibration. It's the hum of her blood she's hearing. It's the drumming of her heart in the well of her chest.

The amorous couples are spasming too—stung, beset, lost in their frenzy.

Raj is lifting her. Danni settles, thighs wide, arms circling, utterly open. In the niches, choked gasps, mad gapes, blushing and flooding in every face— Fiends of freedom, angels of pleasure, whimpering, wheedling, groans and welcoming tears—

The queen lands on Danni's navel, buzzing fiercely,

crawling down. The hornet knows the spot well—

A tickle of jittering wings, then the jab, and an electric shock travels through every nerve of her body. Shaking, uncontrollable shaking, a seizure, mindless and overwhelming—

Raj, the one she's claimed and taken inside her— He's swollen to bursting and still thrusting, his face flashing pink and orange, honey and gold.

Then all at once he's expanding. She's ruptured and torn, but expanding with him. Stretched, magnified, spread and prolonged—

The confinement is ending. The freedom and kinship the spirit craves— Finally, finally, the longed-for mingling. Where does she start, and where does she end? Raj, Raj— The prison of mortal flesh is gone.

Somewhere above, a sizzling current divides the sky, white as chalk. And in a heartbeat it falls, electrifying them both, and all the niched couples together.

White, blinding white—

And the spire explodes.

Structure ends, grains fill the air—a myriad grains, flying in every direction, a chaos of sand.

For a long moment, Danni lives in the blessed particulation, listening as an infinite bellows releases its breath. She and Raj are one with the deserts and valleys, one with the spires and the figures within: granulated. Aery, suspended, inconstant— What did they have in this scanty state but the trembling sensations of sand in motion and the sublime cohesion that draws them together?

Danni clings to Raj, listening to the hum: a spirit sound, the sound of timeless emotion, the long-drawn comfort of desire fulfilled. Could there be any sound truer or deeper? She is with him completely, lost with Raj in the hornet's spell.

Suspended, their thoughts wander together.

*All I've ever wanted is this*, she says.

*Myopia*, Raj whispers.

And Danni understands. Her world has irised tight. There is nothing but heart-struck feeling and the shudders of the man she loves; nothing but innocent joy borne on an endless hum.

*Love is a portal to another world*, Raj says.

*A better one*, Danni sighs.

And with her sigh, the hum softens and the particles re-cohere.

The walls of the well return, along with its towering heights and the couples in their niches.

They're silent now, in relaxed embraces. Danni sees contentment in the women's faces. They're more beautiful now than those in the outer court. Held by a lover, hip to hip, an arm around her waist, the weight of her breast in a proud palm; gazing at her partner with the same mix of obsession and thanks she's feeling with Raj, knowing their majesty and united dominion.

The spire dwellers live here, away from the world; committed to love, adoring, noble, lofty as gods; supremely innocent and free as the air.

Will they turn back to stone? And she and Raj, Danni

wonders. Are they still mortal, still flesh and blood? Have they passed into some other state?

“Is this our home?” she says, lifting her head, meeting his gaze.

“Do you want to return?”

The amorous couples are falling asleep in each other’s arms, the beginning and end for each other. Where had they come from? Did they have other lives? Were their memories like dreams, dreams best forgotten?

Danni squints at Raj, seeing him now—really seeing him—for the very first time.

“This is where we belong,” she says.

As the words leave her lips, she knows she’ll never return to the world she’d left. The city, her country— Jobs and diversions— And the people too: workers, friends, mentors, family— Everything in the life she’d known will be forgotten.

She feels Raj’s arms around her. And as the light continues to fade, they drift into their future together.

The hum is retreating. Through barely parted lids, Danni sees the hornets leaving the niches and the motionless couples. Winged and striped, they rise in the well of the spire.

There’s a globose nest, papery and brown, hanging from a sand-colored corbel, and the hornets are converging on it. Like a mummy’s head shrouded in wrappings. Or the wafering head of the giant before the wind blew its fragments away.

The queen leaves Danni’s shoulder, joining the others.

The hum fades slowly.

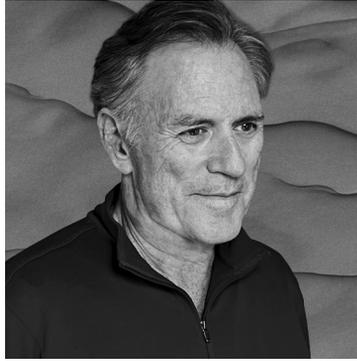
In the mummy’s head, above its chin, is a gaping mouth.

As Danni watches, the hornets disappear into it. The queen is last, and as she vanishes, the humming ends.

Silence, long and trailing. And darkness too.

Then Danni hears Raj's voice:

"Three. Two. And One. The spell has ended. We can open our eyes."



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.