

**SHE**

SHIREEN JEEJEEBHOY

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*For Mum and Dad*

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# chapter one

## THERE WAS ONCE A WOMAN

**TIRES** HISS AGAINST the road. A gentle bump bump at high speed wakes her up. She stretches against the confines of the seat belt and blinks open her eyes. Pitch night engulfs the car. The glowing numbers on the dashboard clock draw her eyes: 12:54.

“Wow, I can’t believe the time.” She yawns, “Did I really sleep that long? I can’t believe it’s that late. Did we run into heavy traffic? That sucks. I thought leaving so late in the evening, we’d miss the Toronto-bound traffic. I guess not, eh?” She smiles at the driver, but he looks stoically ahead. Her eyes drift past the clock again and suddenly widen. “Hey! Do you know what time it is? It’s almost summer solstice time. How cool is that, being out in the country at the exact hour?” Still no response.

Sighing, she looks out her window and frowns. Not only are they late, but for that matter, where are they? This country road doesn’t look like Highway 10. Pickets of a prim wooden fence fly by, the ground at its feet rising into view and disappearing. The fields beyond vacuum the meagre starlight, and the car’s beams cannot penetrate into their depths. She leans toward her window and cranes her neck to look up at the sky. It’s a moving charcoal surface with white glitter winking here and there. The moon is nowhere in sight.

She asks him as she continues to stare out the window, “Where are we?”

“I thought we’d take a shortcut.”

“Meaning you don’t know,” she laughs. He smiles faintly as he continues to stare straight ahead, his hands resting in the ten to two position on the leather grey steering wheel of their car. The amber glow of the dashboard lights up the front of his face like some sort of eerie jack-o-lantern. She watches him for a moment.

“Well, I guess we’re somewhere in the country. Traffic must’ve been bad, eh?”

He shrugs one shoulder. She sighs. She’s fully awake now and sharing space with a statue.

“I guess it wasn’t so bad for you that I dozed off, eh? Silence is golden and all that,” she grins. “Well, I can be silent ... sometimes.” She chuckles and then stretches again. “That nap did me good. I feel so awake now and refreshed. I’m raring to go, and I can’t wait till tomorrow, I mean today. I have all these song ideas bouncing around in my head. This was a great idea of yours, going on this road trip, it’s got me going again, and I love visiting those cute Ontario towns.” She twists round to the left to check out the back seat, to make sure all the goodies they bought are still there. Pies and jugs of maple syrup sit side by side with pints of fresh Bing cherries, her favourite. She untwists herself and settles back in her seat. She watches the hypnotic yellow line as it snakes ahead.

“I can’t wait to dive into those cherries. They were my favourite fruit growing up. Did I ever tell you that? I used to look forward to the end of school because that’s when Grandmother would buy them. And I’d make a big mess, and she’d get so mad.” She laughs at the memory. “Now I can make as big a mess as I want.” She falls silent for a moment. “I was thinking: they’re too good to make pies with. I’d rather eat them fresh like that, but it’s almost strawberry season. Maybe we can go up to Andrew’s Scenic Acres and pick some berries. I’m in the mood for making strawberry rhubarb pies or maybe mixed berry pies if the blueberries and raspberries are out too. We have enough room in that chest freezer, I’m sure. I gave it a big cleanout the other day. What do you think?” she asks rhetorically. She savours the thought of a strawberry rhubarb pie with crumble topping. Those are always a hit. And they freeze so well. She can almost smell them baking and taste their sweet tartness. She smiles; her eyes focus on the road again.

She looks past the yellow line, past the boundaries of light the car beams create, into the darkness coming toward them, a forest on the right. The hairs on the back of her neck lift up; her stomach flutters.

“Uh, where are we really?” she asks as she sits up straight, tensing her body. He stays silent.

Her nerves feel taut. She urges, “We need to stop and turn around. Now, if you don’t mind.”

The car doesn’t slow down. His eyes don’t flick up to the rear-view mirror or down to the speedometer.

Her chest starts to contract. “Look, I know you’re all into exploring the side roads, but this doesn’t feel safe, and it’s really really late. Let’s drive home on a faster road. Let’s turn around and go to Highway 10.”

He says nothing.

“Could you please just stop the car, turn around, and go back to Highway 10.”

“We’re fine.” He stretches the word out. “Stop being so paranoid.”

“I’m not being paranoid.”

“You are,” he replies. The slight put-down in his voice works. She feels silly. They’re just trees.

Those trees are beside them; ahead their mates on the left loom. They fill the front windshield more and more. It’s 12:56 a.m. She wants to be the one in the driver’s seat badly; instead she’s being driven inexorably toward the forest, where starlight cannot penetrate. She shifts her gaze back down to the road, to the familiar yellow ribbon and the dusty edges of the asphalt where road meets grass. But then the edges vanish into the shadows cast by the trees standing shoulder to shoulder, leafy branch merging into leafy branch, creating a light-sucking toothy maw. She feels the air hold its breath. Her breathing speeds up. His body remains still.

The trees close in on the other side, only a sliver of rectangular sky between the two forests breaks their starless black.

She leans toward him, her thick, shingled hair falling against her cheek, trying to get away from the trees on her right, jostling his arm.

“What are you doing?” he snaps at her.

“Can’t you move closer to the yellow line?”

In response, he steers toward the right.

“Stop it!” She struggles to breathe evenly.

“I’ll stop it when you stop being silly.”

She leans forward to look up through the windshield, her hair gleaming in the reflected dashboard light, searching for that sliver of glittering sky, looking for the one opening in the lightless claustrophobia without.

“Would you get a hold of yourself. We’re fine. Don’t worry.” He tries to nudge her away with his elbow, but she resists.

She cannot move back to the upright position; she just cannot separate herself from him. She looks ahead, focusing on the end of the forest, even though she cannot see it, where the fields re-emerge beyond the headlights, willing them to arrive there as fast as possible. But their speed drops to 70 kilometres per hour. She begins to see the individual trees, the shrubs sticking up among them, the rocks laying among their bases. The sky is morphing, undulating, changing degrees of grey-black shades. Clouds are rolling in.

“Why are you slowing down?”

He doesn’t answer. “Of course not, why need he?” she thinks angrily. He’s proving his point. He doesn’t usually treat her this contemptuously. Her anger fades into loneliness as memories arise of how he used to always treat her with consideration and respect and love. She remembers the first time they shopped together, how he had insisted on carrying the grocery bags. Or how when she had lost her keys for the umpteenth time and was becoming mighty annoyed about it, he’d used his carefully modulated voice to calm her and focus her memory on those keys. Within minutes she’d found them. But lately, ever since his annual spring camping trip up near the Bruce Trail with his buddies, he’s become moody. Grim. Many, many days, he has been his old cheerful self, making her laugh so hard that she snorts water out her nose, or he has run errands by himself instead of interrupting one of her songwriting sessions. But on this weekend’s road trip, he’d once again become serious, become watchful of her as darkness inhabited his face. She doesn’t understand this change in him and towards her. It’s like he’s decided that she has to prove her worth over and over again.

She wants to grab that wheel and take back control. But she can’t. She’s in his hands.

Sinking down into the shadow of her seat, still leaning on him, her eyes reach the level of the clock. It flips to 12:57 a.m.

The landscape flashes sickly neon green. The car heels to the left as a wind screams out of the forest like a ghastly, whirling Northern light, and slams into its right side then dances up on to the hood, on to the roof,

down beside them. The car's back fishtails out. She squeezes her eyes and senses the car turn one way then the other. Even through her closed eyelids, she senses the chartreuse-yellow lightning inside the whirlwind. She squeezes her eyes tighter until they hurt. They're speeding up; they're driving to the left; they slow. She opens her eyes to see him manhandling the steering wheel until they're aiming straight down the road again, but the wind, with its ever-changing neon-green-bottom border, with its dancing gold-green veins, streaks alongside and in front of them. They can't outrun it. He presses the accelerator, trying anyway, as she clings to his right arm, as she puts her head between her own arms. Glass cracks in front of her. The cracks glow green. She scoots closer to him and squeezes her eyes so tight, she sees red. Cracks fracture her side window, and she can't help opening her eyes to look toward the sound. Air moves all around her, pushing at her, raising the hair on her arms, throwing up the hair on her head, fluttering her T-shirt, turning her skin sickly green. Suddenly she sees nothing. She closes and opens her eyes and still sees nothing. Panic attacks her. And then they shoot out of the trees and are between open fields. She sees again. Sobs rack her, and she can't stop them.

"There's a patrol up ahead. I have to pull over," he says.

Her sobs quit suddenly. She sits up, wipes her eyes, smoothes her hair off her face, straightens her Black Sabbath T-shirt. The car rumbles off the road to the gravel shoulder and crunches to a stop. He pushes the window button and his window hums down. A policeman with a bright wand in his right hand and a reflective vest walks toward them; the officer leans in, his eyes keen on them. She returns his look emotionless.

"Good evening sir, ma'am. How are you this morning?"

"We're fine officer. I wasn't speeding."

"No, you weren't sir. That's not why I pulled you over. We're the Akaesman patrol."

"The what?"

"Will you step out of the car sir, ma'am. We need to ask you a few questions."

She obeys. Or tries to. All her muscles seem to have seized up; she looks down puzzled, feeling old. Using her hands and her arms as leverage, she turns herself towards the open door, puts her feet on the ground, stands up, and leans on the open car door, apperceiving her balance, before straightening her flared black jeans and walking over to where the

policeman has joined a woman standing a metre or so in front of what looks like the back of a white ambulance sitting next to the black and white police car.

“Did you drive through the forest sir?” the policeman asks him.

“Yes.”

“Did anything happen?”

“Like what?”

“You tell me sir.”

Slowly he shakes his head.

The policeman stares at him for a few seconds, and then turns to her.

“You ma’am. How are you feeling?”

She considers that for a moment. Shocked maybe.

The woman who had been standing there watching them walks over to her, while snapping on blue nitrile gloves. She takes a penlight out of her pocket and flashes it in her eyes. She flinches. The woman is unfazed. She reaches round and lightly squeezes her neck muscles, moving down to feel the top of her shoulders.

“Follow me.”

She obeys.

“Please sit here,” she gestures to the step at the back of the ambulance. From there, she can see the reflective letters on the side of the police car: “Akaesman Patrol. To Guard and Save.” Weird.

She feels a cuff being fastened around her left arm, and then the rhythmic pump, pump as the woman inflates it. Air hisses out before the cuff is ripped off. A stethoscope is pressed against her chest and then her back. She finally looks at the woman as she straightens up and speaks to the policeman: “It’s mild, but definitely.”

He nods and faces her fiancé again.

“Sir, you did experience something back there, didn’t you?”

She watches her fiancé stare back nonchalantly, but he’s no match for an officer of the Akaesman Patrol.

“We might’ve.”

“You did sir. I want to know what it was.”

He told him all, even how she was whining about turning back.

“You should’ve listened to her sir. Stay here.” He walks over to the patrol car, the gravel crunching under his dusty black boots. He opens the driver’s door, gets in, and slams it shut.

They wait.

He gets out with a clipboard and walks over to her.

“OK ma’am, I’m sorry to have to tell you that you probably had a run-in with Akaesman. Now it doesn’t look too serious, some sprains, but I must ask you to read this form and sign it. Then go see your GP tomorrow.” He looks at his watch. “Today.” He writes, his pen scratching the paper on the clipboard. Then he hands the clipboard over to her. The woman aims a flashlight at it, but it’s too much to read. She must be tired, and so she pretends to read it. His finger extends into her view, pointing to where she should sign. She signs. He flips the page up and asks her to sign the copy. She signs and hands it back to him. He presses down on the clip handle and releases the top piece of paper. He hands it to her. She takes it, but he doesn’t let go until she looks up at him.

“Go see your GP ma’am.”

She nods.

He still doesn’t let go. “See your GP, your family physician.”

She looks up into his face and says, “I will.”

He lets go. She carries the paper back to the car, where her door is still open. She gets in awkwardly and drops the paper on her lap, wondering why she has to see her family physician. She reaches back for the seat belt, and pain ratchets up her neck. She pauses and then turns her entire body right to get at the seat belt, pulls it toward herself, turns her entire body to the left, and stiffly aims for the seat belt clip. Click. She sits back, sighing. And waits, staring at her fiancé, yet not seeing him as he strides back to the car. She hears his door open, his booted foot twisting on the gravel, his jeans sliding against leather; she hears the slam of the door, the feel of the car softly rocking in response, the slither of the belt as it’s pulled, the click of it going home, the key being turned, and the engine roaring excessively to life. They accelerate onto the asphalt, the wheels spitting small stones out, and drive for home.