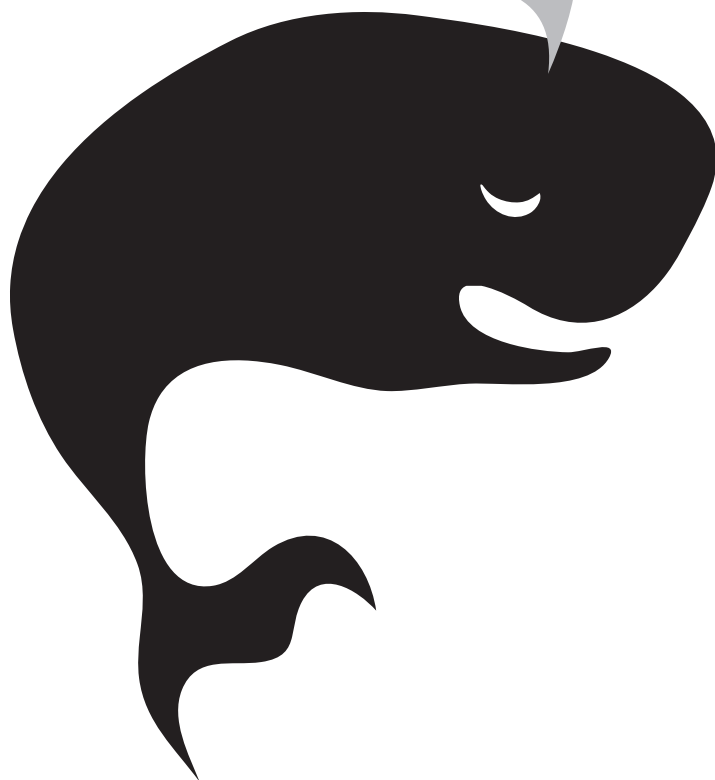


WHALE MAN

a novel



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The Tomb of the
Unknown Mother



ONE

IN THE DREAM, through the window of his late mother's house, Avi Heyer watched an older man, someone familiar and yet changed, pick up a hammer. The workman wore a tool belt, heavy-soled brown shoes, and jeans torn at the right knee. Even from here, at a distance of more than forty feet, the man seemed to be shining, deep in some kind of happiness, his gaze focused on nothing but the hammer and the nail and the board, his body synchronized with the rhythmic and musical pounding of the work. He struck, paused, wiped his forehead with the back of his forearm.

In the dream, the moment changed. The weather in the dream changed, the air abandoned to its powerful scents, the scene lined with memories like a book read once before. The workman laid his hammer on a table and climbed an enormous standing ladder—maybe thirty rungs in all—to the penultimate rung, leaned into the ladder for balance, and then reached upward, with first the left hand and then the right, to grasp one of the curved wooden beams. Once hanging fully, he kicked away the ladder, which fell like something mythic, slowly and without a sound.

There in the unfinished building, the older man hung from a rib—a beam that now looked very much like a rib—and swung. He swung just a little, as though stirred only by an imperceptible breeze.

Slowly the swinging man increased his motion, pointing the tips of his worn boots forward and then bending at the knees to curl backward, pitched maybe fifteen or twenty degrees each way from his plumb-lined weight.

As Avi the dreamer watched, he felt his emotions sway with the movement of the man swinging—and beset by a kind of anxiety that seemed too like envy, Avi the dreamer wanted desperately to feel with his body what the other man felt, pendulous, aloft and at risk.

Gravity softened. From the swinging man, his pockets turned out, floated a hammer, a handsaw. An electric screwdriver, its colors distinctive, bit whirring. More tools, a rasp, a file, and an awl deeply oiled with use. Then a diaphanous

chamois, too light and so fluttery. Still, he swung. Other objects appeared—the man’s pockets were bountiful—but these weren’t all tools, and they seemed not to fall but to rise and to float into the rafters. A cricket cage missing its door. Loosed swatches of patterned cloth, a quilt undone. An old brown valise, peppered with travel stickers and tied with string, the holidays of a previous generation, the memories in black-and-white. A bulbous copper lamp, its cord stretched out like a kite’s tail. A knobby bag of oranges—which burst, the oranges tumbling out and up into the air. Still the older man swung, and the oranges floated around his body like new planets.

Avi the dreamer could smell the oranges. It was a small smell, a piquant bite of citrus in which was caught a whiff of the Jersey shore and his own real childhood. He wanted one. He lifted one foot up, straddled the open window-sill, climbed through, and touched down gingerly and then fully upon a raw wooden sub-floor, the planks freshly laid.

Above him, the arched and vaulted ribs of the building curved. The ladder was gone, but a ladder could be found. The other man was gone. Buried in shadow at the edge of the scene stood someone else, another person Avi the dreamer knew, someone the wrong age or just wrong—she shouldn’t have been here.

He felt a rush of feeling, too much.

Mom.

His feet set firmly upon the wooden floor that throbbed with breathing. Avi the dreamer spread his arms and reached into the emptiness and up toward the ceiling of the structure where he couldn’t reach. He was standing inside an enormous living thing—somehow wooden and alive—inside the belly of a beast. His mom was there; his mom was dead. His mom was there.

• • •

Can a person choose to dream, to re-dream? Somewhere in the house, but certainly not nearby, a cell phone chirped, and Avi’s thoughts rose to meet the sound, his dream sinking slowly back into its ocean, Mom and whale and oranges bubbling down into un-memory, inaccessible for now. He was awake enough to consider finding the offending phone, not to recognize the little *chirrup*, to want to have back the dream, and to choose to lie still. “Dolly, get the phone,” Avi muttered almost aloud to his dog, camped across the foot of the bed where she wasn’t allowed, her bulk dominion.

“Crap,” he said to himself.

The phone stopped ringing. Dolly gave a little sleep-woof. “Okay,” she said

in Doggish, although she clearly wasn't going to comply.

• • •

In his new dream, when he sat down upon the chair, Avi Heyer knew that the chair was unhappy, and not only the chair. The scarred table, the blue vase of lilies, the lovely meal steaming under its silver serving lid, all the things of the material world had feelings—some happier than others. And he himself had none.

Across the room, angled away from the table, and hung too high to look into, the mirror might have something to add.

But inside and outside were different; a hammering could be heard out there, someone fixing a roof.

The dreaming man stood ready to investigate, and began to search his pockets—now where had he put it? He had lost it. What was it? His hands went into his breast pocket, his pants pockets, and then his shirt, against his skin—and then his hands were rooting around inside his own chest.

His reached in and felt through his skin.

Avi handled his own bones, his stringy arteries and spongy lungs.

The hammering: his heart. He touched it, tough and somehow both meaty and gelatinous, and drew back, surprised and ashamed.

Above the sink the open window filled with a stupendous animal eye, looming, wise and gentle. Would the animal forgive him? In that moment the dreamer wanted nothing else.

Avi's hands were out of his body again, and now he was walking toward the window and the enormous intelligence of the animal. It was a sympathy for which he yearned, some good grace from that profound being. He glanced to the side, cut his gaze to check how he looked in the mirror. He was there, but he could see through himself. He was gone.

• • •

“Wakie, wakie!”

“He's awake,” said someone. “You woke him, Sister.”

“You told me to, Sister,” said the first voice.

“I did,” said the second.

“Oh, Sister,” said the first voice.

Avi opened his eyes. There were two young women in the bedroom, identical twins.

“We've got your dog,” said one of the twins.

No, not identical, just similar: the two women were blond, pig-tailed, and

dressed bizarrely in matching yellow sundresses festooned with large poppies. The twins might have been Avi's age.

"What?" he said. "What are you doing here? Get out of my house!" Avi shook his head slightly, *buhhh*, and sat up—and then pulled up the sheet to cover himself.

"We've got your dog!" The other woman held up Dolly's empty collar. "See."

"I like you, Sister," said the first woman.

"What? Where's my dog? Dolly—" Avi said. "Get out of here!"

"Woof! Woof, woof, woof, woof!" Dolly jumped onto the bed.

"Told you. We've got your dog."

"Gimme that," Avi grabbed for Dolly's undone collar.

"No!" said the woman holding the collar.

"You don't have my dog. She's right here!" The conversation was unbelievable, he thought. "You're an idiot," Avi said. Dolly was right here.

SMACK! Before he could react, one of the women slapped him. Damn, his face stung. "What did—"

SMACK! She hit him across the other cheek.

"Oh, Sister," cooed the other woman. "My turn! My turn!"

"You can bust him up later," the assailant said as she turned and patted her sister's shoulder. "Next time." And then she returned to Avi. "Calling us names will hurt you."

"Who are you?" Avi insisted. "Stop hitting me," he said. Wow, his face hurt.

"We're going." The woman tossed Dolly's collar onto Avi's lap. "Put this on. The Camel wants to see you."

"What?" Avi said. He needed to pee. "The Camel? What the hell is wrong with you people?"

The violent one raised her hand as if to strike—

"Okay! Okay!" Avi didn't want to be hit again. "Okay already." He threw off the sheet and damasked blanket, and swung his legs out of bed—his dead mother's bed, the linens decent, the mattress pretty comfy. Naked guy, he stood and walked to the bathroom, half-erect and half-aswing, woozy and ringing from being cuffed. He would play along, then call the cops.

"Ewwwwwwww!" One of the women shrieked.

"NO! That's disgusting!" The other woman pointed and squealed. "Don't!"

Cool, he had freaked out his home invaders; he left the door ajar, then called over his shoulder as he peed. "Hey! Who the hell's The Camel?"

There was whimpering and whispering back in the bedroom.

He washed up. "So?" Avi said as he returned.

“Eww.” One of the women scrunched up her face. “I don’t want to see it. Help me, Sister.” She looked, and tried not to, and looked again.

“Sister . . .” the other sister cooed. “It’s okay. It will go away. Just cover . . . it.”

“Gotcha,” Avi said with a wink. He arrived at the dresser by the window, rummaged for clean underwear, reached for jeans and a T-shirt, thought about which color of socks. “But it might show. You two better be careful,” he winked again and began to get dressed.

“Ewww,” said a twin.

“I know,” said another twin. And then: “Sister, that was gross. . . . Let’s go,” she added. “The Camel wants to see you.”

“No,” said Avi, pulling up his jeans and wiggling them on.

“He said no! I heard him!” The one woman began to bop a bit in place, bouncy. “I love when they say no. It’s my turn, it’s my turn—”

“Right,” said Avi. “No.”

“Right? No?” the calmer woman said. “Make up your mind!” She pointed two fingers at her own eyes and then at his: *I’m watching you.*

“Oh, crap,” said Avi. These women were morons. Violent, too. And then he made a decision. “Look, you dopes—don’t hit me, don’t hit me!—I’m going to make coffee and feed my dog. Then I’ll go with you to see your camel. But you have to wait outside; you’re not allowed in my house.”

“Sister? He called us dopes.”

“I know . . . and he’s the victim! Let me kick him!”

And before he could reply, *BAM!* She kicked him in the shin.

Back down onto the bed Avi fell. “JESUS!” Avi said. “No kicking!”

“No coffee, no names. Let’s go now: The Camel wants to see you.”

“Not if you’re going to hurt me.” Avi crawled away on the bed, out of reach.

A glare-off: the twins and Avi glowered at each other.

“Okay! We’ll hurt you later,” a twin decided all by herself.

“Fine,” Avi agreed, lying his way out. “Then I’ll go with you now, and leave before you hurt me. But I need to feed my dog first.”

“I don’t understand,” said the dumber of the twins.

“It’s okay, Sister, we’re winning.”

“What about my dog?” Avi couldn’t believe he was negotiating. The twins clearly shared a brain, but probably not a whole one.

“Don’t worry, Victim.” The woman turned away to check her make-up in the vanity, and blew herself a kiss. “I’m pretty,” she said.

“You’re pretty,” her sister said.

“It’s only a dog,” the first sister said. Then she and her sister held hands.

“Who are you people?”

Both women laughed. “Let’s see . . . I’m Snow White,” said one.

“Oh, goody!” said the other. “I love this game. I’m Rose Red!” She jumped up and down, once, twice. “Sister, Sister, you’re my favorite! Now can I punch him? Now can I hold the gun?”

“Woof!” said Dolly, fed up with not having peed or eaten.

A gun? Avi looked at the two women; one’s nose might be a little slimmer than the other’s. Skinny Nose nodded at him meaningfully and then turned to leave. The other one’s eye might be higher. Fat Nose/High Eye.

“Okay,” Avi said to Dolly. “Let’s go. . . . Woof,” he said to his dog, which meant *be careful*.

Dolly joyfully and doggily led a little parade downstairs: pooch, twin, Avi, twin. The twins had apparently stopped speaking to him, but the one in front was humming something. The one behind didn’t need to hum; she was carrying a gun. He had lost track again of which twin was which.

“A gun,” he said to himself, fear the new day’s caffeine. “A dream,” he said to himself even more softly. If he closed his eyes, he could still see through the window of the dream: Mom, the ladder, the oranges. He had felt his own heart. If he closed his eyes, he might walk into something and hurt himself.

Avi let Dolly out the back door, put her water and kibble bowls on the stoop—the latter her favorite, the one emblazoned with screaming cats. If he were a cat, now would be a good time to scream. He was sweating. “Okay,” he said to the freaky twins. He grabbed his keys. They had a gun.

. . .

The twins made him drive, one twin un-seatbelted in his little Toyota and another leading in a Lincoln. Out of his mom’s neighborhood, two useless U-turns later, they headed down 53 to Samson Parkway and then made a left. Avi hadn’t been in this part of Elsbeth, North Carolina, before—he had not visited his mother in the years she had lived here, their estrangement facilitated by distance. A mile or two further down the road, as the morning light settled upon the strip malls, the Lincoln pulled into the crowded lot of a bowling alley and parked, and Avi followed suit. All was peaceable so long as he cooperated. He patted the cell phone in his left pocket; he would call the cops as soon as he was alone.

Once out of the car the twins took up positions on either side of Avi. They marched three abreast up the wide walk until they reached the front door and couldn’t squeeze through, which caused a momentary quandary until the pha-

lanx could be reconstituted as a procession.

The crowded bowling alley almost shook with league fun, the early racket cacophonous: balls in lanes and gutters, pins clattering, machines purring, Bloody Marys sloshing, happy bowlers in happy shirts, victors shouting. Onward the snarly and tense twins urged Avi, as they wove through the 1950s. And then there she was, waving cheerily as she stood alone on a lane before turning back to her game.

The person named “The Camel” had two bright orange bowling balls and bright orange shoes to match. She was small, five feet and change, dressed in loose-fitting blue pants and a green sweatshirt that said *Foxy!*, the garment a disco relic. She alone occupied Lanes 21 and 22, bowling almost nonstop, an orange ball down 21 then 22 then 21 then 22. She seemed not to care about her electronically kept score. Maybe she was fifty; Avi couldn’t tell. Her hair was brown, frosted or highlighted.

She made him wait. A strike on 22, from which she turned to greet her guests with a sweep of her hand, her wrist trussed in some kind of bowling brace; she ushered him to a seat and smiled. “Hello, girls. *Herr Visitor*. What size?” she asked, pointing to his feet.

“I’m an 11 and ½,” Avi answered. “I have big feet,” he said for no reason.

She nodded. “Please remove your shoes.”

Her power, that’s what struck Avi. The request was polite. So he did as he was told, for now, and handed his shoes to the twins, who scampered away. What a relief to see them go.

“Did they hurt you more than necessary? You look a bit Raggedy in the Andy Department.”

“What?” said Avi.

“Your cheeks. They’re a little red. And you’re limping.”

“They have a gun.”

“I think not,” she said. “Guns are too complicated for the poor dears.” She spun away neatly. “*Segue!*” she called out. “So . . . don’t you loathe middle class America?” The Camel asked, glancing back at Avi as she prepared to fling the garish polyurethane ball pin-ward. “Such banality. I throw this”—which she did with a series of stutter-steps and then a nifty toe point, quite adroitly, really—“to knock down those. How quintessentially American. Rage and disaster; the more disaster, the higher my score.” The pins clattered, a strike, and a large X flashed on the hanging scoreboard. “It’s a foreign policy,” she added.

The Camel turned and sighed and then stepped to the curvy pre-fab banquettes where Avi sat. “And it makes me proud to know Americans every-

where,” she said, her narrowed eyes blazing. “Just look.” She swept her arm grandly, a flourish to take in all the other bowlers here in Elsbeth, North Carolina, bowlers all over the country. “What makes you proud, Susan Junior?”

Who? Avi didn’t know what to say, so he let his silence abide. The Camel bowled another strike and then a spare, a seven on the spare, the third frame open. She had called him Susan Junior: if he were Susan Junior, who was Susan? His mom? What the hell was going on? His mother’s name had been Maureen.

Before long the twins returned with his rented shoes: each girl handed him one black-and-red shoe, their actions clearly the result of some contested negotiation. Each had a bottle of root beer into which a long straw had been inserted. One of the twins was Rose Red, Skinny Nose, Lower Eye.

“Your mother was Susan, yes?” The Camel had intuited his confusion.

“Yes,” Avi lied as he tied his laces. Susan, he told himself. By agreeing, he hoped to flee sooner, a tactic that usually worked with his girlfriend, Mimou.

Sllurrrrrpppp, the twins drank noisily, in concert.

“So you have what she had,” The Camel concluded. “And you’re selling,” The Camel instructed him.

Sllurrrrrpppp.

Avi waited a moment. “Yes,” he said.

“Yes?” The Camel narrowed her already narrowed gaze. “Why, that’s the spirit,” she offered, in the most pleasantly menacing timbre Avi had ever heard. “We knew you were still in her house for a reason.”

He could not resist: he pointed at Snow White. “She slapped me twice,” Avi said. “Then the other one kicked me. If anyone does it again, I’m not selling.” He rubbed his face. “Still hurts.”

Snow White punched Rose Red on the shoulder. “Told ya’,” she said.

“Didn’t.”

“Did.”

“Ladies,” The Camel intervened. “Go outside and play Chicken.”

“Oh, fun!” piped Rose Red.

“You’re meat now, Sister,” squeaked Snow White. “Chicken meat!”

They put down their sodas, hooked arms happily and skipped away. Avi exhaled.

“Henchwomen,” said The Camel, rolling her eyes. “*Oy gevalt*.” She sat down on the bench across from Avi, leaned toward him, and rested her chin on her fist art-historically. “Let me think about this,” she said, and winked.

Avi didn’t know what to say or do, so he crossed his legs, which made his

shin bark. He tried to rub the pain away. Say nothing, he told himself. Dolly was at the house, the twins were gone, Mom wasn't named Susan and was still dead, and no one had a gun.

"Susan, Susan . . . I'm sorry for your loss, you know. She was perfect."

"What do you mean?" he asked, unable to help himself.

"Mean? I mean more than I say. Always. It's my bane." The Camel squinched her mouth into a grimace. "Do you realize your disadvantage? Studies show that more people will be unwilling to leave a room if their shoes have been taken—as opposed to the removal of any other garment, that is, including their underwear." With this last point she gestured schoolmarmishly, one finger raised. "I'm less sure about the dainties, but I'm willing to try confiscating yours. . . . So, are you feeling discomfited egoistically? That's one of my goals. Unless, of course, you're going commando, which would embarrass us both."

Avi shrugged, no, yes, whatever.

"Susan. And now Susan Junior. You don't look like her, you know, but may well as you age. The long hair's appealing, if kept clean. Very Quattrocento. . . . Care to bowl a frame? It might be therapeutic."

"No, thanks," he said. His shin hurt.

"Can't say I blame you," The Camel chuckled. "My own obsession with indigenous American sports must seem a little pathetic. *Pathétique*," she added, amusing herself. "Do you mind?" She rose, took hold of her bowling ball, and stepped to lane 21, settled into motionless focus upon the pins. "Fooling myself into fitness helps me think."

Again The Camel bowled, her form elegant, her small frame contained, ergonomic and athletic. She left one wobbly pin standing—and again she seemed not to notice the result as she returned to Avi.

He sympathized with the pin.

"We knew you were here . . . but we didn't know—that is, I didn't know—you would sell. Not to mention The Lima Bean, of course." The Camel smiled, her teeth a little sharp. "I would hope, and not gratuitously, that you understand the wisdom of suspecting The Lima Bean's motives at all times, not to mention her affected spiritualism. Granted, she and I are rivals," she added, adjusting her sweatshirt with a series of little tugs. "But you and I, we are *simpatico*, compatriots. Friends?" She extended her trussed hand, the wrist-and-finger guard like some sort of arcane battle device rather than a bowling aid.

He hesitated. Someone was named The Lima Bean? Holy crap. Someone named The Camel was talking about someone named The Lima Bean? Should he capitalize the "T" in The Camel when he called the cops? Avi suspected so.

But shaking her hand wouldn't mean a thing, not if he didn't mean anything by it—which he wouldn't, since he was too confused—and besides, Avi had to get out of here, fix his headache, call all the cops in Elsbeth to report that an orphaned adult son of a re-named mother had been twice-slapped and then kicked—a mother whose circle of friends included a bizarrely chatty little psycho and twin attack bimbos.

The Camel thrust her hand ever so slightly forward, impatient. “*Vamonos!*” What could this woman do to him anyway? He could take her.

No, wait: that was a stupid thought. He was in cooking school and she was clearly some kind of criminal. She had henchwomen.

He pulled back his hair from across his face. Her hand still hung expectantly mid-air. Then, as ever, full of shit and always at risk, Avi met The Camel's gesture, pressed the flesh with her flesh-and-Velcro-and-nylon.

Idiot, he told himself. It was just like Barcelona. It was just like Warrensburg. It was just like Warszawa. It was just like Schenectady—or maybe not like Schenectady, since he had left there on purpose. But it was just like Avi Heyer to agree to something he didn't understand.

“Friends? I don't think so,” Avi said to The Camel. “I sell and you buy.”

“Of course.” The Camel smiled, a smiling camel, a camel who would certainly spit and bite. “We shall further the work of your late mother.” She continued to shake his hand heartily, not letting go.

Susan Junior had apparently entered the family business.

“But you don't know what I'm talking about, do you?” She eyed him with one Camel eye as she let go of his hand.

“Not exactly,” Avi said.

“Aha! And yet you hold that inter-personal violence requires civic redress?”

“Um . . . yes, if you're asking if I'm going to call the police.”

“You have accepted my hand, Susan Junior. Keep your bond. We all live by a code, each to each, notwithstanding that the irritations of our daily lives remain at odds with our values. No police.”

A woman on lane 24 bowled a strike; a bevy of beehived women squealed gleefully. Avi admired them all.

“I don't understand,” Avi admitted, although he kind of did.

“Your injuries are nothing. Your body is nothing. You sell, I buy, and thus you shall return to your little life—your dog safe, your friends unbothered by my nationwide organization and accomplices, the twins once more recalled to the shop for minor adjustment, and you no wiser but far, far richer.” She brushed an invisible something off of her blouse, even the flick of her hand imperious.

“I am not a violent person . . . unless provoked,” The Camel said. “Si? We are as one. And, oh—that nice young police officer?” She pointed to a long-legged policeman perched akimbo at the bowling alley’s burger bar. “He works for me. So find the list and set a price.”