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TONY HILLERMAN THE SHAPE SHIFTER



THE SHAPE SHIFTER

TONY
HILLERMAN

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THE SHAPE SHIFTER

ALSO BY TONY HILLERMAN

Fiction

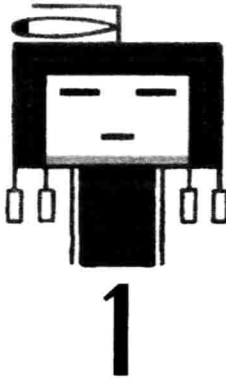
Skeleton Man
The Sinister Pig
The Wailing Wind
Hunting Badger
The First Eagle
The Fallen Man
Finding Moon
Sacred Clowns
Coyote Waits
Talking God
A Thief of Time
Skinwalkers
The Ghostway
The Dark Wind
People of Darkness
Listening Woman
Dance Hall of the Dead
The Fly on the Wall
The Blessing Way
The Boy Who Made Dragonfly (for children)
Buster Mesquite's Cowboy Band

Nonfiction

Seldom Disappointed
Hillerman Country (photos by Barney Hillerman)
The Great Taos Bank Robbery
Rio Grande
New Mexico
The Spell of New Mexico
Talking Mysteries (with Ernie Bulow)
Words, Weather and Wolfmen (with Ernie Bulow)
Indian Country (photos by Bela Kalman)
Kilroy Was There (photos by Frank Kessler)
A New Omnibus of Crime (with Rosemary Herbert)

This book is dedicated to Anne Margaret, Janet Marie, Anthony Grove, Jr., Steven August, Monica Mary, and Daniel Bernard listed in order of the date they arrived to brighten our lives.

THE SHAPE SHIFTER



Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, retired, stopped his pickup about a hundred yards short of where he had intended to park, turned off the ignition, stared at Sergeant Jim Chee's trailer home, and reconsidered his tactics. The problem was making sure he knew what he could tell them, and what he shouldn't, and how to handle it without offending either Bernie or Jim. First he would hand to whomever opened the door the big woven basket of fruit, flowers, and candies that Professor Louisa Bourbonette had arranged as their wedding gift, and then keep the conversation focused on what they had thought of Hawaii on their honeymoon trip, and apologize for the duties that had forced both Louisa and him to miss the wedding itself. Then he would pound them with questions about their future plans, whether Bernie still intended to return to her job with the Navajo Tribal Police. She would know he already knew the answer to that one, but the longer he

could keep them from pressing him with their own questions, the better. Maybe he could avoid that completely. It wasn't likely. His answering machine had been full of calls from one or the other of them. Full of questions. Why hadn't he called them back with the details of that Totter obituary he wanted them to look into? Why was he interested? Hadn't he retired as he'd planned? Was this some old cold case he wanted to clear up as a going away present to the Navajo Tribal Police? And so forth.

Louisa had provided him with a choice of two solutions. Just go ahead and swear them both to secrecy and tell them the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Or just say he simply couldn't talk about it because it was all totally confidential.

"Don't forget, Joe," Louisa had said, "they're both in the awful gossiping circuit you police people operate. They're going to be hearing about the murders, and the shooting, and all the rest of it, and by the time it gets passed along second-, third-, and fourth-hand, it's all going to seem a lot more horrible than what you told me." With that, Louisa had paused, shaken her head, and added: "If that's possible."

Both of Louisa's suggestions were tempting, but neither was practical. Chee and Bernie were both sworn-in officers of the law (or Bernie would be again as soon as the papers were signed) and telling them everything he knew would put them in an awful ethical position. Sort of the same position he had landed in himself, which he really didn't want to think about right now.

Instead he'd think about Chee and Bernie, starting with how Bernie had already seemed to have a civilizing influence on Jim, judging from the nice white curtains

Leaphorn could see in the trailer's windows, and—even more dramatic—the attractive blue-and-white mailbox with a floral design substituted for the rusty old tin box that had always before received Chee's mail. Not, Leaphorn guessed, that many people had been writing to Jim.

Leaphorn restarted his engine and began the slow drive toward the house. Just as he did, the door opened. And there was Bernie, waving to him, and Chee right behind her, big grin on his face. Quit worrying, Leaphorn told himself. I'm going to enjoy this. And he did.

Chee took the basket, looking as if he had no idea what to do with it. Bernie rescued it, declaring it was just what they needed and how thoughtful it was of him and Louisa, and how the basket was beautifully woven, neatly waterproofed with pinyon sap, and would long be treasured. Then came the hand shaking, and the hugs, and inside for coffee and conversation. Leaphorn kept it on the Hawaii trip as long as he could, listening to Bernie's report on her arrangements to rejoin the tribal police and her chances of being assigned to Captain Largo's command and being posted at Teec Nos Pos, which would be convenient, presuming that Chee would still be working out of Shiprock.

And so it went, coffee sipped, cookies nibbled, lots of smiling and laughing, exuberant descriptions of swimming in the cold, cold Pacific surf, a silly scene in which an overenthusiastic Homeland Security man at the Honolulu Airport had been slapped by an elderly woman he was frisking, had seized her, and had been whacked again by her husband, who turned out to be a retired, oft-decorated Marine Corps colonel. This resulted in the Homeland Se-

curity supervisor wanting the colonel arrested, and an airport official, who turned out to be an army survivor of the Korean War, apologizing to the colonel's wife and giving the Homeland Security pair a loud public lecture on American history. All happy, easy, and good-natured.

But then Sergeant Jim Chee said: "By the way, Lieutenant, Bernie and I have been wondering what got you interested in the Totter obituary. And why you never called us again. We would have been willing to do some more checking on it for you."

"Well, thanks," Leaphorn said. "I knew you would do it, but I knew of a fellow living right there in Oklahoma City who sort of volunteered for the job. No use bothering you honeymooners again. By the looks of things, you've decided to settle in right here. Right? Great place, here, right on the bank of the San Juan River."

But that effort to change the subject didn't work.

"What did he find out for you?" Bernie asked.

Leaphorn shrugged. Drained his coffee cup, extended it toward Bernie, suggesting the need for a refill. "Didn't amount to anything," he said. "Great coffee you're making, Bernie. I bet you didn't follow Chee's old formula of 'too little grounds, boiled too long.'"

Chee was grinning at Leaphorn, ignoring the jibe.

"Come on, Lieutenant, quit the stalling. What'd you find out? And what got you so interested in the first place?"

"You're a married man now," Leaphorn said, and handed his empty cup to Chee. "Time to learn how to be a good host."

"No more coffee until you quit stalling," Chee said.

Leaphorn sighed, thought a bit. "Well," he said, "it

turned out the obituary was a fake. Mr. Totter hadn't died in that Oklahoma City hospital, and hadn't been buried in that Veterans Administration cemetery." He paused, shrugged.

"Well, go on," Chee said. "Why the obituary? What's the story?"

Bernie took the cup from Leaphorn's hand.

"But don't tell it until I get back with the refill," she said. "I want to hear this."

"Why the fake being dead?" Chee asked. "What happened to Totter?"

Leaphorn pondered. How much of this could he tell? He imagined Chee and Bernie, under oath on the witness stand, the U.S. District Attorney's prosecutor reminding them they were under oath, or the penalty of perjury. "When did you first hear this? Who told you? When did he tell you? After his Navajo Tribal Police retirement, then? But wasn't he still a deputized law enforcement officer for about three Arizona and New Mexico counties?"

"Well?" Chee asked.

"I'm waiting for your wife to get back with the coffee," Leaphorn said. "Being polite. You should learn about that."

"I'm back," Bernie said, and handed him his cup. "I'm curious, too. What happened to Mr. Totter?"

"To tell the truth, we don't really know," Leaphorn said. And paused. "Not for sure, anyway." Another thoughtful pause. "Let me rephrase that. To tell the truth, we think we know what happened to Totter, but we never could have proved it."

Chee, who had been standing, pulled up a chair and sat down. "Hey," he said. "I'll bet this is going to be interesting."

"Let me get some more cookies," Bernie said, hopping out of her chair. "Don't start until I get back."

That gave Leaphorn about two minutes to decide how to handle this.

"Long and complicated story," he said, "and it may cause you both to think I've gone senile. I've got to start it way back by reminding you both of our origin stories, about there being so much meanness, greed, and evil in those first three worlds that the Creator destroyed them, and how our First Man brought all that evil up to this fourth world of ours."

Chee looked puzzled. And impatient. "How can that connect with Totter's obituary?"

Leaphorn chuckled. "You'll probably still be wondering about that when I finish this. But while I'm telling you about it, I want you to think about how our Hero Twins killed the evil monster on the Turquoise Mountain, and how they tried to rid this fourth world of ours of all the other evils and also about that name we sometime use for our worst kind of witches. One version translates into English as *skinwalkers*. Another version comes out as *shape shifters*."

"Fits better sometimes," Chee said. "The last time someone told me about seeing a skinwalker bothering her sheep, she said when she went into the hogan to get her rifle to shoot it, it saw her coming and turned into an owl. Flew away."

"My mother told me about one," Bernie said. "It changed from a wolf into some sort of bird."

"Well, keep that in mind when I tell you about Totter, and so forth," Leaphorn said.

Chee was grinning.

"Okay," he said. "I promise."

"Me, too," said Bernie, who seemed to be taking this a little more seriously. "On with the story."

Leaphorn took a cookie, sampled the fresh coffee.

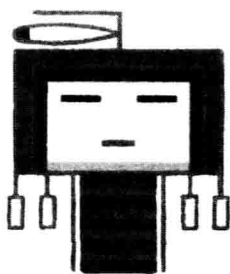
"For me it started just about the time you two were enjoying yourselves in Hawaii. I had a call telling me I had mail down at the office, so I went down to see what it was. That's what pulled me into it."

He took a bite of cookie, remembering he'd had to park in the visitors' parking lot. It was just starting to rain. "Big lightning bolt just as I parked there," he said. "If I was as well tutored in our Navajo mythology as your husband is, Bernie, I would have recognized right away that the spirit world wasn't happy. I'd have seen that as a bad omen."

Chee had never got quite used to Leaphorn kidding him about his goal of being both a tribal policeman and a certified shaman, conducting Navajo curing ceremonials. Chee was frowning.

"Come on, Lieutenant," he said. "You're saying it was beginning to rain. Lightning flashes. Now tell us what happened next."

"Big lightning bolt just as I got there," he said, smiling at Chee. "And I think when I'm finished with this, with as much as I can tell you anyway, you're going to agree it was a very bad omen."



2

Eleven days earlier . . .

The boom of the lightning bolt caused Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, retired, to hesitate a moment before he climbed out of his pickup in the visitors' parking lot. He took a serious look at the clouds building up in the western sky as he walked into the Navajo Tribal Police building. End of autumn, he was thinking. Monsoon season pretty much over. Handsome clouds of fog over the Lukachukai range this morning, but nothing promising a really good female rain. Just a noisy male thunderstorm. It would be hunting season soon, he thought, which normally would have meant a lot of work for him. This year he could just kick back, sit by the fire. He'd let younger cops try to keep track of the poachers and go hunting for the city folks who always seemed to be losing themselves in the mountains.

Leaphorn sighed as he walked through the entrance.

He should have been enjoying that sort of thinking, but he wasn't. He felt . . . well . . . retired.

Nobody in the police department hall. Good. He hurried into the reception office. Good again. Nobody there except the pretty young Hopi woman manning the desk, and she was ignoring him, chatting on the telephone.

He took off his hat and waited.

She said: "Just a moment," into the telephone, glanced at him, said: "Yes, sir. Can I help you?"

"I had a message from Captain Pinto. Pinto said I should come in and pick up my mail."

"Mail?" She looked puzzled. "And you are?"

"I'm Joe Leaphorn."

"Leaphorn. Oh, yes," she said. "The captain said you might be in." She fumbled in a desk drawer, pulled out a manila envelope, looked at the address on it. Then at him.

"Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn," she said. "Is that you?"

"That was me," Leaphorn said. "Once." He thanked her, took the envelope back to his truck, and climbed in, feeling even more obsolete than he had as he'd driven by the police-parking-only spaces and stopped in visitors' parking.

The return address looked sort of promising. Why Worry Security, with a Flagstaff, Arizona, street address. The name penned under that was Mel Bork. Bork? Well, at least it wasn't just more of the junk mail he'd been receiving.

"Bork?" Leaphorn said it aloud, suddenly remembering. Smiling. Ah yes. A skinny young man named Bork had been his fellow semi-greenhorn westerner friend from way, way back when both of them were young country-boy cops sent back East to learn some law enforcement