

**THE
SASQUATCH
HUNTER'S
ALMANAC**




**A
NOVEL**

SHARMA SHIELDS



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ANNA SWIR, "SHE DOES NOT REMEMBER," FROM *TALKING TO
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CONTENTS

The Handsome Guest (1943)	3
The Bottomless Pit (1945)	15
S'cwene'y'ti (1955)	35
The Funnel, the Hourglass, the Window (1959)	49
The Patchwork Cap (1970)	63
The Study Habits of Dedicated Creatures (1972)	91
Living Large in the Electric City (1974)	107
All's Well.	124
Stay Down.	146
Snare Trap (1978)	155
The Mountain (1980)	171
Release the Dogs (1982)	185
Storybook (1990)	203
People of the Street (1994)	239
That Will Teach You (2003)	257
The Glue Factories (2004)	267
Antidote (2005)	291
Removal	302
Produce the Monster (2006)	315
Ghost Story	342
Life Sickness (Afterlife)	363

1943

THE HANDSOME GUEST

ELI ROEBUCK LIVED WITH HIS PARENTS, GREG AND AGNES, IN A tiny cabin near Stateline. Greg arranged a little rock border right where the line ran so that Eli could stand with one foot in Idaho and one foot in Washington and sense through the soles of his boots the difference between the two.

Washington sap smelled sweeter. The soil was softer and less rocky. Idaho earth baked and hardened and stank like eggs. Or so Eli imagined. In reality, the environment was seamless, dry white-pine forest littered with decomposing needles and loose rock, and, above, a hawk wheeling in the beryl blue sky. In the winter, snow fell and transformed the uneven terrain into a smooth white plain. Then it melted and the world returned to him as it had always been: faded brown and faded green, jagged and inviting.

Other children hated living here. They wanted to be in Lilac City or Seattle or even Boise, where there were large toy stores and more cars than animals in the streets. Eli liked it here. He liked his house, he liked the forest, and he liked his parents. He was a happy kid.

Eli's mother was not so happy. She was a slight young woman with a delicate brow and a low, serious voice. She rarely smiled. Eli

had once heard his father say to her, “I don’t know what makes you happy, Agnes. I wish I knew. I wish you’d tell me.” Eli wished she’d tell him, too, but she ignored most of what Eli’s dad said.

Like Eli, she was happiest when outdoors. She disappeared for long walks in the forest, following the finespun deer paths to areas where Eli was forbidden. If Eli ran after her and took up her hand, hoping to accompany her, she shook him gently away. She wanted to be alone, she said, to collect her thoughts. Eli pictured her kneeling on the forest floor, gathering her thoughts—glowing amber orbs—to her breast. Too in love with her to argue, he gave her anything she wanted, even her freedom. Sometimes she left Eli alone for hours, not coming home until just before dinner.

Eli would pace the front yard, scared, near tears; he would watch the forest until she limped into view. She always returned, tired but radiant, apologetic and affectionate. She would take up Eli’s hand and hurry inside to make supper. They would work side by side, Eli giddy with relief, singing songs and chatting amiably, until Eli’s dad called to them from the foyer. Then her mood would darken, a shift as unsurprising as the sunset.

Eli wondered: What did she do in the forest? What was it there that made her so happy?

He awoke one morning and his mother washed his face and ears and combed his hair and put him in his Sunday best. She forbade him to go outside, because, she explained, she wanted him to meet someone very dear to her. Eli’s father had left for work hours ago, when it was still cool and dark. Already the day’s heat was pushing into the house.

“Who is it?” Eli said. “Is it a friend of Dad’s?”

Agnes leaned over her hand mirror, pinching her cheekbones. “It’s a stranger, darling. You’ll see. He’s very interesting. The most interesting man I’ve ever met. You’ll like him.”

Eli helped Agnes with the broom and the dustpan, careful not

to dirty his clothes. Something savory baked in the oven. The house grew hotter yet and groaned.

Finally the visitor arrived. Hearing the knock, Agnes raced to the door and swept it open.

There stood her guest, “the most interesting man.”

Eli tried not to stare. He did not see a man at all. What he saw was an enormous ape crushed into a filthy pin-striped suit. He remembered a book from school about exotic beasts, the giant apes who lived in *the savage countries of the world*, and the guest resembled those creatures: deep hooded brow, small blank eyes, thin-lipped mouth like a long pink gash. And the hair! The guest was so hairy that Eli was unsure of the color of his skin: Beneath the thick brown fur, his flesh—tough and charred, like strips of dried deer meat—appeared red in some places, purple in others. The guest even smelled of hair, badly, like a musty bearskin rug singed with a lit match.

Eli was horrified and delighted.

Remembering his manners, he stepped to the side and said politely, “Please, sir, come in.”

The guest’s small, round eyes raked over Eli. He cleared his throat and lumbered into the room, swinging his powerful arms. *Well*, Eli thought, *he walks like a man, even if he doesn’t exactly look like one*. But then Eli noticed the guest’s wide, shoeless feet, two hairy sleds that moved noiselessly over the wooden floorboards as though through a soft snow.

“Do you want some tea?” his mother asked. “It’s scalding hot, just the way you like it.”

The guest spoke. The noise startled Eli, a short sentence of senseless bleats and hoots. Agnes responded as if she understood. She handed over the teacup, and the guest handled it clumsily before dropping it, with a roar of annoyance, onto the floor. Eli hurried to clean up the mess himself. He didn’t even wince when a piece of

china stuck him in the index finger. His mom offered her guest the teapot instead, and he drank greedily from its spout. Eli watched in sick fascination.

“What’s your name?” Eli asked, gazing up at the hairy beast as he gulped and slobbered.

“Eli,” his mother said. “It’s rude to stare. This is Mr. Krantz. He’s a dear friend. What do you think of the house, Mr. Krantz?”

Mr. Krantz was about to toss the empty teapot on the floor, but Eli—always a quick boy—reached up on tiptoe to take it from him.

“Here, Mr. Krantz,” he said kindly. “Let me help you.”

Mr. Krantz released the pot. He briefly patted Eli’s head, and the impact made Eli’s teeth clatter.

“I’m happy you’ve met my son,” Eli’s mom said to Mr. Krantz. “I can tell Eli likes you. He admires strong men.”

Eli had never stated this aloud, but he supposed his mother was right; there was much to admire about Mr. Krantz. For one: his immensity. He was easily the largest person Eli had ever seen, over seven feet tall, and three or four times heavier than Eli’s own dad. Second: his hairiness. He was as furry and sleek as a grizzly bear. Last: his unpredictability. Eli found unpredictability the most alluring trait of all. Now, for instance, Mr. Krantz was fondling a houseplant. If Eli so much as sneezed in a houseplant’s direction, his mother scowled, but she watched Mr. Krantz patiently as he broke a leaf and then held it up to his nose, sniffing it.

Mr. Krantz held the ruined leaf out toward Eli, like it was a gift.

“Hydrangea,” Eli said, touching its edge.

Mr. Krantz put the leaf in his mouth.

“Poor thing!” Eli’s mom said. “You’re famished. I made biscuits. The ones I’ve brought you before, Mr. Krantz. *Drenched* in butter.”

She hurried to the kitchen, humming. Eli smiled. Here was another reason to like Mr. Krantz. He clearly made his mother very happy.

Mr. Krantz abandoned the plant and moved to the piano, where he rested one of his long bowed hands on the keys and then leapt in surprise at the tinny noise they imparted. Astonished, then curious, he leaned over the keyboard and poked at it softly with one rough yellow talon. *Plonk. Plonk. Plonk.* He bared his teeth in delight and hopped up and down for a moment, looking over at Eli for encouragement (which the boy gave by means of a friendly nod), and then he began to bang away at the keyboard enthusiastically, hooting in time with the music. Eli jumped up and down, too, clapping his hands. What a funny sort of man was Mr. Krantz! So funny, in fact, that as he waggled and spun to the music, the button of his ill-fitting pants burst open. Underneath, he wore nothing at all. No underdrawers! For one awkward moment, Eli glimpsed the lopsided bulging serpent of Mr. Krantz's penis. That, too, was impressive. It dwarfed even his father's, which Eli had always before assumed, with a sort of horrified reverence, was *the Longest Penis in the World*. Well, apparently not. Mr. Krantz put Eli's dad to shame in that category, too, and in the category of *Having Fun*.

This was something he had heard his mother say—a funny thing coming from her, as she herself was always so stern and serious. “Oh, your father,” she'd said to Eli. “He doesn't know how to *have fun*.”

Eli had gone along with her. *A stick in the mud. Right you are. Sure.*

Privately, Eli disagreed. It was true: His father was a hardworking man, juggling three jobs at a time. He worked on the weekends for the telephone companies, stringing up telephone wires. He worked as a ranch hand, too, down at old Haywood Anderson's farm. And after long days of hammering barbed wire and repairing

irrigation ditches, he walked to town most nights to bartend at a flea trap called the Tin Hut. His plan was to own the bar outright one day, and so he worked and scrimped and saved.

“One day it will be a fancy place,” he told his son. “Exclusive. You’ll have to wear silk pants to get in there.”

But when his dad wasn’t working, he was home. And those times, to Eli, were the best times. Despite his mom’s accusations, Eli loved his dad. They played cards together, rummy and black-jack and King’s Corner (which remained Eli’s favorite, despite his dad’s insistence that it was a child’s game), and they went on walks, his dad pointing out wildlife and good trees for climbing. Sometimes he came home with a tractor from the ranch or a lawn mower, and he would let Eli drive or push them. If he came home with a horse, he would let Eli ride until he could hardly walk. When they went hunting together, he let Eli hold his new rifle, let him aim and fire (he had yet to kill anything, though his dad’s shot was always dead-on). When Dad was home, Mom was absent. She was on one of her epic strolls, or she remained in the kitchen, baking or cooking soups. “Come play,” Eli would beg, but she would always refuse.

One day his father brought home a new phonograph, and Eli watched in amused disbelief as his parents threaded their limbs together and waltzed haphazardly across the living room floor, bumping into the table and chairs and sofa, laughing and singing. But that was a long time ago, a year or more. There had been little contact between his parents since, aside from the sad comments they made about each other to Eli. Things like, *He’s no fun* and *She wants fancy things*.

You’re wrong, Eli wanted to say but didn’t. *He’s fun! She doesn’t care for fancy things at all!* Eli wished they would say nice things about each other. He wished, right now, that they would speak to each other with the same easy tone his mother used with Mr. Krantz.

Mr. Krantz had noticed his burst fly and fumbled with the but-

ton hopelessly. He gave Eli an embarrassed shrug. Eli put up one finger and then went racing into his parents' bedroom. He plucked from the bureau the longest belt he could find and returned to Mr. Krantz, presenting it with a triumphant flourish.

Mr. Krantz smiled at Eli with his broad ape mouth. He held the belt to his chest for a moment and then wrapped it tautly about his waist. He had to force a new hole through the leather to fasten it, but it worked well enough, and Eli felt proud of himself. He was an excellent host. Mr. Krantz spun in a circle for Eli and grinned. Eli applauded.

It was funny to see his dad's slick, oiled belt encircling the filthy fabric of Mr. Krantz's suit. It looked as though Mr. Krantz had rolled in the mud on his way to their house. Where, Eli wondered, did Mr. Krantz buy his clothes? He looked silly in clothes. He kept pulling at the sleeves and elbows and legs, obviously uncomfortable. And those wide flat feet! Eli's gaze kept falling to them. He wished he could touch them. They would be hot against his fingers, furry and powerful and new.

Eli's mom returned to the living room, holding the good silver tray perpendicular to her chest. It bore a pile of lovely golden biscuits. Eli's mouth watered. In their hurry to prepare for Mr. Krantz, they had forgotten about Eli's breakfast. He went to grab a biscuit, but his mother shifted the tray away from him.

"These are for Mr. Krantz," she said sharply.

"I only want *one*," Eli insisted, and then flushed, embarrassed by his own rudeness.

Mr. Krantz stopped his piano-playing and his funny little dance and approached the tray. He drooled onto his dirty lapel.

"These are for Mr. *Krantz*," she said again. She placed the tray down on the coffee table with an inviting smile at her guest and took an athletic step backward, perhaps anticipating what Mr. Krantz would do next.

He lunged, batting the tray's steaming baked goods with those

monstrous yellow and purple hands of his, scattering many of the biscuits onto the floor but managing to shovel several of them into his mouth at once. How he ate! They must have been very hot, Eli guessed, listening to Mr. Krantz's loud, staccato whimpering, but how tasty they must have been, too, for he moaned happily, licking his lips with a long, menacing tongue. Eli watched sadly as Mr. Krantz devoured every morsel; he even crouched doglike on the floor and lapped up the fallen soldiers. Eli looked up at Agnes, sure that she would disapprove of Mr. Krantz's barbaric behavior, but she only gazed at her guest affectionately, as one might gaze at a favorite pet or, Eli realized, with a sudden maturity that had so far always eluded him, an adored sweetheart. This was not the look of a woman disgusted. She was transported, elevated. She was maniacally content.

"I have a piano lesson in an hour," Eli said loudly.

Agnes waved him aside. By then his dad would be home, she said, and he could walk Eli to his lesson.

Eli frowned. "But you *always* take me."

His voice was so whiny. The voice of a much smaller boy. He hated himself for it, and then he hated his mom for it, and then, very briefly, he hated Mr. Krantz.

But Mr. Krantz was back on his feet now, swiping at his chest and arms, releasing small crumbs so that they drifted snowlike onto the Oriental carpet. Eli waited for him to drop back down into a crouch and lick up every last tiny remnant, but Mr. Krantz withheld himself, staring longingly at the crumbs but seeming to remember that he was a guest, or maybe simply feeling that his immense hunger had, however temporarily, been satisfied. He looked up at Eli's face, his expression apologetic now. He gestured at the empty tray.

"It's okay, Mr. Krantz," Eli lied. "I'm not hungry, anyway."

Mr. Krantz ruffled Eli's hair and then lifted his gaze to the face of the woman watching him. Eli's mom had grown very still, stand-

ing before Mr. Krantz like a blossomed flower, her face open and shining. Seeing her, Mr. Krantz's eyes gleamed with a new hunger. Crazy so. Eli, uncomfortable, reached for his mother's skirt and tugged.

She dropped to his side. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed his face.

"Oh, my baby," she said to him. "How I'll miss you."

"Miss me? My piano lesson is only an hour. I'll be home for stew."

His mother blinked at him heavily, as if she were fighting sleep, and then she drew him fast to her breast. She smelled of Palmolive and cake batter. Eli would never forget the warmth of her smell.

"I do love you," she said. "Never doubt it, sweetheart."

Eli wavered, confused. She went to the closet and retrieved a packed suitcase. She groaned lifting it, and Mr. Krantz came forward to take it from her.

"Mr. Krantz," she said bravely, straightening and extending her hand. "I'm ready."

Mr. Krantz swallowed up her hand with his free one. They went out the door together, the woman lean and pale and barely breathing, the other hairy and dark and panting like a dog in heat. Like Mr. Krantz, Agnes was barefoot. Their feet pressed into the mud of the yard, winding toward the forest. Large prints, small prints; monstrous feet, dainty feet; heaviness, freedom.

His mother did not turn toward him again, but Mr. Krantz turned as he reached the small line of stones parting Washington State from Idaho. The guest sorrowed for him, Eli could see. It was Mr. Krantz's attempt at an apology.

Eli panicked.

"Come back," Eli called after them. "You can't leave!"

Mr. Krantz put an enormous hand on the small of Agnes's back. She lowered her head. They hastened into the woods together, extinguished by the trees.

Eli hated Mr. Krantz then. He was not a man at all but an animal. Like an animal, he took what he wanted, regardless of who suffered for it. He was just the same as a bear or a cougar or any other woodland predator.

But, then, what did that make Eli's mother? Who was she?

Woman. Mom. Animal. Wife.

Maybe just nothing, Eli thought. *Maybe she wants to be nothing*. And he wished he could make her nothing, too.

He considered following them. The sun slanted down and baked the footprints into place. He thought of his dad. He returned to the house, the door smacking shut behind him. The room smelled of biscuits, of simmering stew. Eli sat on the sofa and folded his hands in his lap. He furrowed his tiny brow.

He would wait for his dad. He would go to his piano lesson.

Most important, he would think up a better story than the one he had just witnessed.

His dad was a practical man.

He would not believe a word of it.

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