

# The Shape

Jen Currin

She sips and rocks and thinks. A glass, encrusted with the silty residue of weeks of red wine, clutched in her hand. Her thick white hair has been thinning these last few weeks; wisps of hair cover the shoulders of her black sweater, as if a fluffy white cat had perched there and then departed, leaving its snowy fur.

The days are very short now. The windows suddenly black, then pink with dawn. She closes her eyes to nap and opens them to blue light seeping into the room. Her chair is by the window, so she can see out, but a gnarled old fig tree blocks her view of the street. She can hear children yelling at play and her neighbours arguing about real estate on their front porch. She hears people trying to be surreptitious as they steal her figs, although one time a young man's loud voice abruptly wakes her: "Bring the ladder over here!"

The figs are ripe. The birds devour them. The fruit fall to the ground, split open, releasing a sweet smell that turns to rot. They smear the stairs, the walk, with seedy muck. She hates figs. Their gooey insides, their too strong, too sweet taste. Yet she used to love eating them. Now she can't imagine eating anything.

The figs are ripe. That means it's summer. She is certain now. Summer. Summer again.

Something glimmers in the corner of the room. A light-shape in a dress-like garment. A robe?

She is not afraid or surprised. The starvation diet and the wine keep her from being afraid of anything.

She might be hallucinating. Like the time her eldest son—long dead from a motorcycle crash—visited her. He held his helmet under one arm and brushed his long brown hair back from his face before leaning in to kiss her cheek. He smelled like cigarettes and motorcycle grease and some woody soap. She knew he had come to talk to her about *Open Secrets*, the book of stories she had sent him, and she hoped she remembered enough about the plots and characters to engage in a worthwhile discussion. She did not want to waste his time with her forgetfulness.

It could be a hallucination. There was the time she fell and couldn't get up from the floor for ten hours and finally saw a gentle, masculine hand reaching out from the arm of a blue robe to help her—Jesus? Although she didn't believe in him.

One of her daughters had found her the next day and hadn't believed her when she shared her vision.

The light-shape shimmers, as if this shimmering is a form of speech. The old woman takes another sip of her wine and blinks.

Now the shape appears to be a big white fluffy cat. It purrs, then arches its back and hisses, its eyes a cold black. Even through the dulling wine, the old woman feels something akin to fear. Her hands, which always shake now, clench like frozen claws.

"What are you?" she croaks.

The shape throbs with light and returns to its original form, a humanish blur in an incandescent robe or dress.

"I'm the hospital," the shape says.

"The what?"

"The hospital."

"You're a ghost!" the old woman says angrily, as if she has just found out something that was being hidden from her. She thumps her glass down on the table. "That's what you are."

The shape sighs. A thousand tremulous lights shuddering. Then silence.

The old woman takes a different tack. She dusts off her most polite voice.

"What I meant to ask was, who are you? I mean, my dead son visited me once so I know that's possible, and more recently a hand reached out..."

She stops because the shape is shaking again, this time quite vehemently. It is laughing! She is being laughed at by a ghost!

"What's so funny?" she snaps.

There is a shifting of light in the area of what might be the face. Is the shape smiling?

"Isn't it time for you to go to the hospital?" the kindly voice asks. "Your children are worried. You haven't been answering their calls."

The old woman feels something flutter in her stomach, a sort of muffled panic. Does she have any children? She remembers most clearly the dead son. But were there others?

"Your daughter stopped by with groceries and you hid behind the curtains," the shape calmly tells her.

Now the old woman remembers. She heard the neighbours talking on their porch. They said she had twelve children. Or was it thirteen? But were they children, or just unlucky numbers, one after another? Their births—one with an umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, blue-skinned like a saint, and always so sensitive after that, the quickest to tears. The colicky one who wouldn't stop screaming. And

the quiet ones who laid so still in their cribs, staring at the ceiling with impassive brown eyes.

But those were all nightmares! Not her real children, the ones who never visit her, never call. All twelve of them. Or thirteen?

The shape throbs again, sympathetically, it seems to her. She feels it reaching across the room to her in a sort of embrace. Then it lightens, disappears.

She is alone again. She looks around the room, at the peeling paint, the dust piled in the corners. She sips her wine. She rocks. The chair's creaking is a comfort because it is not silence. Outside it is still summer, she thinks. She is sure there are figs on the tree. She would like to get up from her chair now and go pick one. But it is too far. She sleeps.

When she wakes, it is still daylight. Morning, she thinks. Morning again. She vaguely remembers talking to someone. Who? Had someone visited her?

The light is fresh. It brightens the smears on her wineglass. She sees her hands shake as she lifts it from the table. It is normal for hands to shake. She is old. She knows this but it has been some time since she could bear to look in the mirror. Her skin is cracked, a ghostly red-veined paper loosely covering the face of a skeleton.

The last time she was in the hospital they gave her bigger and bigger pills, and only a few sips of water. Some of the pills she choked on. The physical therapists, the speech therapists, the nurses—perky, young, convinced of her ability to heal—urged her to clomp up and down the hall with her walker, to practice sitting up, rolling to her side, and getting out of bed. She hated these exercises, but complied.

No one visited her and she had to let these smiling strangers help her in the bathroom. She had no privacy. She would lie in bed, breathing in the scents of floor wax and medicine, listening to the squeak of food carts and nurses' shoes in the hall, and she would silently curse them.

She shared the room with four others, and during the week she stayed there, two of them died. The two who lived had clogs of visitors, friends with daisies, oranges, fat shiny gift shop novels; relatives who sang songs and stayed until two or three in the morning, whispering to each other. There was always an old sister or adult grandchild to hold their hands, spoon-feed them homemade applesauce or yogurt from the hospital tray.

At first an annoyance, their murmurs, after a time, soothed her—this was the code of people who understood each other, who shared an intimacy.

Late at night, she would lay on her back and imagine turning over on her side, using the bars to hoist herself up. She did the exercises over and over in her mind. She knew she must keep doing them. She must get stronger; she would get stronger. And once she was strong enough, she would be released.