

The Mysterious Composition of Tears
The Further Adventures of Fleur, Book 1

A novel

by

Sharon Heath

Copyright © 2022 Sharon Heath

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the publisher, with the exception of brief quotations in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. While some of the place names may be real, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to events or persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Author photograph by Marcella Kerwin

Cover art by Jeanie Tomanek, www.jeanietomanek.com

“Eureka,” Edgar Allan Poe, 1848 (Public Domain)

“Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” Walt Whitman, 1859 (Public Domain)

Scriptures taken from the *World English Bible*, Public Domain.

“The Vampire,” Rudyard Kipling, 1900 (Public Domain)

“What Will You Do?” Rainer Maria Rilke, 1922 (Public Domain)

XVI revelations of divine love shewed to a devout servant of our Lord called Mother Juliana, an anchorete of Norwich, who lived in the dayes of King Edward the Third. R.F.S. Cressy. Julian, of Norwich, b. 1343., Cressy, Serenus, 1605-1674. [London], MDCLXX [1670]

What will you do, God, when I die?

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake...

—Walt Whitman

For Chris and Claire, lights of my life. The universe blessed me with you.

Table of Contents

Prologue
One
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve
Thirteen
Fourteen
Fifteen
Sixteen
Seventeen
Eighteen
Nineteen
Twenty
Twenty-one
Twenty-two
Twenty-three
Twenty-four
Twenty-five
Twenty-six
Twenty-seven
Twenty-eight
Twenty-nine
Thirty
Thirty-one
Thirty-two
Thirty-three
Thirty-four
Thirty-five
Thirty-six
Thirty-seven
Thirty-eight
Thirty-nine
Forty
Forty-one
Forty-two

[Forty-three](#)

[Forty-four](#)

[Forty-five](#)

[Forty-six](#)

[Forty-seven](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[More Books by Sharon Heath](#)

Prologue

IT'S AS IF I'm watching a webcam, viewing a vast array of species crossing a log bridge in the darkest night. Or strategically positioned at one end of a wormhole, seeing how the other side lives.

It's the best ticket in the house, observing the busyness of a planet, each life form an intricate fractal of something larger than itself, of which it suspects nothing. Except for humans, who sometimes sense it.

My gaze aims itself intently, as if my hungry vision could take me there in the flesh. At any one moment, I could be monitoring the Rice Terraces of Longji, exquisite layers of verdant dumpling dough snaking up from the river to the mountain top. Or viewing rainbow-winged flies in Zimbabwe circling piles of elephant dung used by midwives to hasten the progress of a woman's labor. Or even studying a chemical plant spewing toxic black smoke over the medieval city of Rouen.

But more typically it's the relatively sedate environs of SoCal I'm drawn to, its human denizens making intricate patterns as they travel from Westwood Village to Venice, Santa Monica to Pasadena, San Fernando to San Diego, like birds hopping from branch to branch, like dancing filaments of vibrating energy. With the intentionality of a researcher at the Large Hadron Collider, I seek a unifying theme in what I see.

Observing those I feel compelled to watch, I'm stricken with wonder. Surprise slays me. I feel a longing so profound it's like a cosmic flu. I note all the idiosyncrasies of these creatures, witness the evidence of how their minds tick. How they struggle to get a handle on what vexes them, strive relentlessly to resolve their contradicting desires, prickle at insults real or imagined, cover their confusions, bemoan their inadequacies, push past obstacles of every description, seek the sweet solace of love. I see how each of their moments is colored by their attachments to the past, their imaginings of a future that in these dangling-on-a-thin-thread times is just as apt to be marked by terror as by glee. It's a sinister moment in the life of the species. To paraphrase the Clash, will they stay or will they go?

Since my current state of suspension can't stop me from caring, I tremble right along with them, grieve with them, chime in with their laughter, and against all odds align with them in their hope. And sometimes, making a formless visit, a Shimmer comes upon me. I weep a kaleidoscope of tears. Are they theirs, or are they mine?

One

AT FIRST IT was only the young people. Teenagers, mostly, though there were a few toddlers who seemed to indicate by gesture that they, too, could see them. Oh, and cats. To be fair, there were a few spaniels and retrievers and even cockapoos here and there that seemed to be in on the secret, but outside of humans it mostly seemed to be cats. You'd see them staring up at the ceiling or sky for minutes at a time, their pupils reduced to vertical black slits, their unenlightened humans frequently dismissing the objects of their pets' interest as dust motes, a hummingbird, or perhaps a common fly.

Some people called them angels. Or God. Or some miniature version of the aurora borealis. Those who were honest were reluctant to give a familiar name to the phenomena, choosing instead to try to describe each visitation as how it appeared to them: a quality of light and color, but also seeming to have substance, though when they reached out their hands, it disappeared. Like a wild creature that would not be tamed.

The descriptions were confusing, as the visitations rarely appeared in the same way more than once: now as curtains of vivid color, each panel a different hue; another time, floating boxes within boxes containing squares of varying Crayola-smudged pigment; occasionally, one would pop up bold and bright, its tones proudly displayed side-by-side like the SMPTE color bars once displayed on TVs. Boys and girls in the first bloom of puberty often reported seeing slender slats, like vertical or horizontal window blinds tinted the bright green of rye grass, orange so rich you could taste it, a turquoise more stunning than the Blue Lagoon.

The rarer visitations were translucent, like shimmering silvery drapes suspended to the ground from the sky, through which most people heedlessly passed. But the gifted few stopped for a moment to exchange glances with another startled soul who *saw*, as if to affirm that they weren't going crazy and weren't alone in their suspicions of inhabiting one particular universe in a spacetime continuum that actually contained many.

Wolf first met Finn in just that way. Wolf had been on his way to visit his godfather and godmother Stanley and Gwennie, biking at top speed as he liked to do and hurtling round the corner from Allen Avenue onto Rose Villa Street, when a giant screen appeared right before him with abstract pastel prints splashed across a fabric that looked to have the translucent texture of a Shoji screen. He veered sharply, nearly colliding with a mop-haired boy with eyes as spookily beautiful as moonstone.

"Gawwwd, did you see it?"

Only later did Wolf learn that the boy pronounced the word in such an overdrawn way because he'd been raised by a neo-evangelist, one of the thousands who'd sprung up after the Great Humbling, each preaching his or her own version of the end of times.

"I did," replied Wolf, climbing off his bike to reach out an elbow for a virus-free bump, then—reminding himself that they'd been freed, at least from that particular plague—holding out a hand.

"Phineas Thomas," said the boy who took it, his face flushing just a little. "But everyone calls me Finn." He hesitated, fingering with his other hand the initiation chain around his neck. Wolf was unfamiliar with its emblem. "It was like some kind of screen for me. What about you?"

"Same," said Wolf, removing his hand from Finn's as gently as possible, since the other boy's skin felt as delicate as rice paper. Wolf had a sturdy build and knew that his grip could be rather rough. He grinned with pleasure. It wasn't often that two people saw a visitation the same way.

“I’m Wolf,” he said. And he gave a lusty laugh. “Born Wolfgang, after the physicist, but I’ll give you a fight if you ever call me by it.”

With a nod, Finn acknowledged, “Don’t blame you. Pauli’s a hard one to live up to.” And then he glanced over toward the site of the disappeared screen. He blinked a few times. The long dark lashes brushing toward his pale, slightly olive-tinged, sculpted cheeks presented a sharp contrast to his almost iridescent, just slightly epicanthic blue eyes. “Not Manus, is it?”

Wolf sighed. He really didn’t want to get into that topic now, not so soon after the visitation. He liked to reflect on them afterwards on his own. If he had the time, he’d cycle over to the Huntington Gardens, park his bike hurriedly before flashing his membership card, and race toward the massive Ombú tree in the leaf-canopied Jungle Garden. Tucking his thick body inside one of the wide grooves created by the fat fingers of the tree’s many massive, grayish-brown trunks, he was like an elephant calf curling in to its mother. Inside that cocoon, he might absent-mindedly gnaw at his slightly scarred upper lip—the sole physical evidence (save his initiation emblem) of his first encounter with a bobcat. Just as often, he’d pensively stroke the dark soul patch he’d grown on a dare from his best friend Medr. And he’d replay the Shimmer over and over again. He took these post-visitation retreats, not so much trying to understand them—he’d given up on that ages ago—but to let them “soak,” as Stanley liked to say.

Once Wolf confirmed with a brief nod his connection to two of the most famous people in the world, he was relieved that Finn said nothing. Instead, his new acquaintance settled abruptly onto the curb and sat there, his tan trouser legs bent toward each other like a cricket’s jointed jumping limbs.

Wolf looked around at the neighbors’ sustainably landscaped front yards, as if seeking another screen. Or some new form of the phenomenon. But everything on Rose Villa was normal. An elderly couple, arm in arm and stooped to the same height, shuffled past as if they were wearing loose slippers rather than their sturdy Nikes. A calico cat stalked a monarch butterfly, and Wolf said a silent prayer of gratitude that the creatures his sister Callay liked to call “the genus *Danaidae*” had been saved, at least for now. A red-faced, white-haired man—Wolf thought his name might be Fidel—emerged from a home a few doors down from the Fiskes’ and began hand-watering his oddly shaped succulents with the barest of trickles escaping his garden hose.

Settling down onto the curb beside his companion, Wolf couldn’t stop himself from staring at him, he hoped unobtrusively. The boy was almost pretty, with his slim build, finely sculpted features, shoulder-length tangle of shiny black hair, and those startling moonstone eyes of his. In another era, he might have been called fey.

Wolf felt clunky and awkward. Yet he knew he was neither. Hadn’t he been the one chosen to give the speech at his group’s initiation ceremony because he was the fleetest runner, finest dancer, most eloquent speaker—and not to just humans? He’d felt positively puffed up being named as the one who could best communicate with the local coyotes, bobcats, deer, and, yes, wolves.

Wolf wondered what the qualities were that had earned Finn *his* initiation emblem. And what school he’d come from, one of the traditional public schools, or one—like Wolf’s own Resurrection Academy—formed by enlightened families for their young See-ers?

But Wolf wasn’t about to pry. He sensed his new friend would prefer to reveal his particulars in his own time. Instead, Wolf pushed himself up to stand a moment, watching the backs of the elderly couple round the corner after their sad eyes had moved curiously from the two abandoned bikes to the boys themselves.

He turned his own eyes back and smiled at Finn, who'd risen, too. It dawned on Wolf that the boy, who must be about half a foot shorter than he, was looking up at him with expectation, almost as if he knew what Wolf was about to say. Despite the uncanny sensation, Wolf spoke. "My godparents Stanley and Gwennie live just up the street. I was on my way to visit them. Gwennie's a grand baker. Wanna come?"

Finn laughed. "Stanley H. Fiske, right? I thought you'd never ask."

Two

THE OBJECT OF Finn's interest was struggling with gnarled arthritic fingers to open a new jar of peanut butter and was just beginning to feel a hint of traction when the doorbell rang. Intent on his task, he nearly jumped, cursing the aging process and cursing his sister's refusal to let a McDonald's Hybrid Burger into the house. She'd gotten it into her head that any product that was half seitan and half cow was a commercial gimmick, and a non-nutritional one at that. When the bell rang again, he cried out, "Coming," bemoaning the fact that he was the only one to answer the bell, since he was the only one able to hear it.

He flung open a creaky, red front door that was in want of a new coat of paint, fully prepared to grouse at whomever had dared to delay the consumption of his PB&J sandwich, but instead smiled back at the young man grinning down at him. How had Wolf (and his sister Callay, for that matter) managed to surpass his own considerable height? The shrinkage of aging, of course, he complained to himself, then brushed his mood aside and instead grabbed his godson to him, shocked a bit at the startling eyes of the strange boy standing behind Wolf on the porch.

"Ahh," he sighed, nuzzling Wolf's silken chestnut hair, just slightly moist with sweat. Announcing, "Was there ever such a sight for sore eyes?" he pulled back to get a good look at the sturdier-than-ever Wolf and was surprised when the other boy stretched a forthright hand around Wolf, prompting Stanley to let go of his godson to accept the handshake.

"Hello, Professor Fiske. Finn Thomas. Actually, my father would hate me for introducing myself so casually, when he and my mom took the trouble to name me Phineas. But please just call me Finn." The boy was positively pumping his hand up and down with enthusiasm. "I'm a big fan of yours. Your recent paper on light, color, and Shimmers was amazing."

Stanley stared. Just like that, the word was out there. He'd felt sad that so few people, even young people, spoke of it outright, when it was clearly the most interesting thing going on these days. And the one, Stanley conjectured, that afforded their flagging species the most hope. So he pumped back, until Wolf broke in with an edgy laugh, "So is this mutual admiration society going to pause long enough to let us come in?"

Stanley realized that he and Finn were effectively blocking the doorway. He relinquished Finn's hand and beamed as the boys crossed the threshold. As they did, Gwennie approached in a slow shuffle from the den. She'd clearly been napping, and she was adjusting her hearing aids as she walked. One of them screeched until she got it right.

Stanley was struck by how his younger sister's face had collapsed into an elderly version of how she'd looked as a wrinkly newborn. Nonetheless, her smile was still warmly appealing. She was wearing one of the amply sized housecoats she tended to live in these days. This particular one had been a handmade gift from one of the Shimmer See-ers, with wriggly lines of alternating shades of blue silk-screened onto the cotton fabric so that it created a moiré effect. The sides and top of her curly gray hair were aimed in the same direction.

Stanley laughed, "Bet you slept on your left side. The boat looks like it's listing to the right."

She shot him an exasperated look—it was a frequent joke of his—and exclaimed, "Wolf! I've been waiting for you all morning!"

Stanley couldn't help himself. "You've been sleeping most of the morning."

Wolf jumped in, grabbing Gwen in a tight hug, and spoke up on her behalf, “But I’ll bet not until she made her favorite blueberry scones for her boy! No better way to celebrate the beginning of summer vacation!”

Gwennie grinned in delight. “At least somebody knows the real me.”

Stanley retorted, “Well, maybe that somebody can help me get my peanut butter jar open.”

As if on cue, Wolf led the group to the enticingly aromatic kitchen, Finn hesitating at the doorway as Wolf twisted off the lid with one quick thrust, followed by a gesture for Finn to join them.

Only then did Gwennie seem to notice the stranger. “Oh.”

Wolf, always protective of her, quickly stepped in. “This is my new friend Finn, Auntie Gwen. We literally bumped into each other at the end of the street.”

She raised an eyebrow, and he nodded reassuringly. Stanley sensed she was holding back her wish to ask for more details. Instead, she offered a warm, “What a delight to meet you, Finn. I hope you have a sweet tooth.”

Little did any of them know how hungry young Phineas was for sweetness. It was only after the four of them had eaten nearly half a score of scones—some of them dunked into the variety of teas Gwennie had poured (ginger spice for Wolf; chamomile for Finn and herself; Morning Thunder for Stanley, who’d happily shoved his peanut butter jar into the cupboard)—that Finn revealed his odd circumstances.

His father, he told them, once a high school biology teacher, had renounced the science that failed to save Finn’s mother from the novel coronavirus, leaping into a calling that Stanley privately deemed less than useless: preaching the gospel of the End of Times.

The boy held up his middle finger. “I had to cut school for a whole day to finally get myself an Insertion. My dad nearly killed me when my first call came in.” He looked up shyly at Stanley, his eyes moist with admiration. “You got the Prize for inventing them, didn’t you?”

Stanley felt a wave of embarrassment wash over him. He’d never gotten over his discomfort at receiving a Nobel twice when there were so many worthy scientists across the globe tirelessly and brilliantly contributing to the common good. “No, son. I didn’t invent them. And don’t forget that I shared that prize with several teams who collaborated on the final design. I just made sure they’d be safe.”

What Stanley didn’t share was how thrilled he’d been that the scientific community had responded so creatively to the collective panic engendered by a mind-boggling series of crises. Like many people, he tended to tick them off on his fingers, as if listing them could neutralize their emotional wallop. While others might select different events (and, indeed, perspectives), for him it pretty much boiled down to a dangerous strain of authoritarianism seeping into the world’s body politic; the baffling politicizing of masks and vaccines setting back efforts to halt the pandemic; climate catastrophes fanning out across the globe; huge sun storms crashing the World Wide Web. Not to mention the loss of millions of diverse species of flora and fauna due to human activity; nearly as many climate refugees seeking shelter with few countries willing to welcome them; and the sharp rise of cancers, lung disease, and infertility resulting from the poisoning of land, sky, and sea.

He could go on and on (and many did). The only thing that gave him pause was the lack of more fingers. Which didn’t stop him from starting all over again with his personal diatribe against the media’s coining of the phrase “the Great Humbling” for the human species’ response to the pile-on of disasters. As far as he was concerned, humans had not been humbled enough. Too few saw themselves as part of a web of life of which *Homo sapiens* was but one thread.

Stanley's hand involuntarily lifted to his chest in response to a surge of acid reflux. It was something he'd grown accustomed to these past years. He surreptitiously fished around in his pocket to retrieve a Tums, which he stuck it into his mouth under the guise of a cough. If Gwennie got even a hint of his discomfort, she'd insist on shepherding him to a whole slew of unnecessary doctor's appointments.

He knew the reflux was due to unrelenting stress. He wasn't alone. Sales of antacids and antidepressants had skyrocketed. No doubt about it, the past fifteen years had been an absolute shit show. The most unmoored amongst them had taken to looking for a savior to lead them from their hell to some sort of promised land. And America? Stanley liked to put it this way, though he had the good sense not to say it aloud with the new young face at his table: "Our country has never been short of false prophets, has it?" And this time around, the jokers had all joined together to wage a holy war against anything with a screen.

The good news—and this was where Finn's enthusiasm over his Insertion came in—was that this more recent epidemic of throwing the baby out with the bathwater had led to scientific ingenuity making one of its greatest, and necessarily speediest, strides, leading to the sophisticated nanoparticle VDDs (Volumetric Display Devices) used by virtually everyone today but the End of Timers.

Stanley stared unseeingly at the papered wall above the stove, its purple pansies, yellow daisies, and arching ferns fading over time to make of this humble kitchen a shaded dell. His mind was far away, recalling the victory of scientific innovation over fear. Thanks to a worldwide collaboration between the IT and scientific communities, babies born these days received just moments after birth their flexible, tip-of-the-middle finger implants, which kids of Wolf and Callay's age predictably liked to call FU's. Adult insertion proved to be barely more painful than a pinprick, countering the initial outcry of the anti-science crowd that it would be the equivalent of circumcisions for adults.

By the late 2020s, almost everyone had had the Insertion, and just as in "the old days," when it was hard to pass a person on the street without a cell phone in hand, now it was as if human society was composed solely of musical conductors, sidewalks strewn with scenes of gracefully waving and punctuating hands as people called up holographic images of individuals with whom they conversed and programs they watched with a flick of the micro-audio-visual systems embedded in their fingertips.

The fact that—outside of group VDDs—only each viewer could see their personal holograms had led to what Stanley knew to be the erroneous belief by some that what young See-ers described as Shimmers were but an advanced form of the stereographic technology to which Stanley himself had contributed.

Stanley was quick to point out, and he did so now, that his own contribution to VDD technology was thanks to a TED talk he'd watched some years before by environmental leader Carolyn Raffensperger on the Precautionary Principle—something he came to see as the broader scientific equivalent of medicine's "first do no harm."

"She's still one very persuasive woman," Stanley told Finn. "I've met her at a conference or two. But back then, her talk convinced me how critical it was to ensure the safety of new technologies." He nodded in appreciation.

"This one was less of a stretch than critics claimed. We already had millions of people walking around with various gizmos inside their bodies, among them pacemakers and defibrillators, cochlear implants, and artificial eye lenses. But this most recent innovation had an additional

selling point: its potential to halt the non-biodegradable waste and toxic leakage into ground and water from the digital devices they replaced.”

Gwennie chimed in then, with no little pride in her voice, “What he’s not telling you is that when he takes on a project, he goes at it with a vengeance. The poor man didn’t sleep for months on end.” She made a face. “Frankly, he made such a racket pacing around the house at all hours, I barely slept myself.”

Stanley fell silent then. She wasn’t wrong. He’d taken it as his personal mission to design and oversee rigorous testing to make sure that no neurological or other biological damage was associated with the Insertions. He’d come up with a technological instruction to pause the implants at a too-close approach of another person or object while in motion, and he’d built into their design an automatic de-activating feature when its wearers entered the electric vehicles that had by now entirely replaced internal combustion engines. He did take some small pride that it was estimated that his efforts saved roughly 500,000 lives a year from what could have become the holographic equivalent of texting-while-driving injuries.

Stanley plucked the last hunk of scone from his plate, scooped it carefully across a small mound of Gwennie’s homemade whipped cream, then pointed it at Wolf and Finn as he added, “You know, the Shimmers didn’t start up until the Insertions were underway. The timing didn’t help the End of Timers’...”— he slid an apologetic look toward Finn—“inclination to blame the Shimmers on Insertions. Either that or see them as hallucinations of people whose brains were warped by too much screen time.”

Wolf and Finn shouted in unison, “But what about the cats?”

Stanley grinned, stuffing the scone into his mouth before replying in a rather muffled voice, “That’s what they all say.”