

LIONEL SHRIVER

The Motion of the
Body Through Space



A NOVEL

The book cover features a stylized, layered landscape. The top half is a textured golden-yellow sky. Below it are layers of brown, red, and blue hills. A large, white, oval-shaped area is nestled between the red and blue hills. The middle section is a wide, flat, light green field. At the bottom, a person in a white shirt and dark shorts is running across a golden-brown field, casting a shadow. The overall style is minimalist and painterly.

LIONEL SHRIVER

The Motion of the
Body Through Space

A NOVEL

THE
MOTION
OF
THE
BODY
THROUGH
SPACE

A Novel

LIONEL SHRIVER



HARPER

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

*To Jeff—whose luxurious lassitude has spared me the plot of this novel.
Added together and divided by two, we make a perfectly balanced person.*

Epigraph

“The glory of suffering might be humankind’s biggest, ever-recyclable con trick.”

—MELANIE REID, *The World I Fell Out Of*

“Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation.”

—CHINUA ACHEBE, *Things Fall Apart*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Afterword

About the Author

Also by Lionel Shriver

Copyright

About the Publisher

One

“I’ve decided to run a marathon.”

In a second-rate sitcom, she’d have spewed coffee across her breakfast. Yet Serenata was an understated person, and between sips. “What?” Her tone was a little arch, but polite.

“You heard me.” Back to the stove, Remington studied her with a discomfiting level gaze. “I have my eye on the race in Saratoga Springs in April.”

She had the sense, rare in her marriage, that she should watch what she said. “This is serious. You’re not pulling my leg.”

“Do I often make statements of intent, and then pull the rug out: just foolin’? I’m not sure how to take your disbelief as anything but an insult.”

“My ‘disbelief’ might have something to do with the fact that I’ve never seen you run from here to the living room.”

“Why would I run to the living room?”

The literalism had precedent. They called each other out in this nitpicking manner as a matter of course. It was a game. “For the last thirty-two years, you’ve not once trotted out for a run around the block. And now you tell me with a straight face that you want to run a marathon. You must have assumed I’d be a bit surprised.”

“Go ahead, then. Be surprised.”

“It doesn’t bother you . . .” Serenata continued to feel careful. She didn’t care for the carefulness, not one bit. “. . . That your ambition is hopelessly trite?”

“Not in the least,” he said affably. “That’s the sort of thing that bothers you. Besides, if I decline to run a marathon because so many other people

also want to run one, my actions would still be dictated by the multitude.”

“What is this, some ‘bucket list’ notion? You’ve been listening to your old Beatles records and suddenly realized that *when I’m sixty-four* refers to you? *Bucket list*,” she repeated, backing off. “Where did I get that?”

Indeed, incessant citation of the now commonplace idiom was exactly the sort of lemming-like behavior that drove her wild. (That allusion did a grave injustice to lemmings. In the documentary that propagated the mass-suicide myth, the filmmakers had flung the poor creatures over the cliff. Thus the popular but fallacious metaphor for mass conformity was itself an example of mass conformity.) Okay, there was nothing wrong with adopting a new expression. What galled was the way everyone suddenly started referring to their “bucket list” in a breezy, familiar spirit that conveyed they had *always said it*.

Serenata began to push up from her chair, having lost interest in the news from Albany on her tablet. It had only been four months since they’d moved to Hudson, and she wondered how much longer she’d keep up the pretense of a connection with their old hometown by reading the *Times Union* online.

She herself was only sixty, though hers was the first generation to append “only” to such a sobering milestone. Having remained in the same position for half an hour, her knees had stiffened, and extending the right one was tricky. Once it had seized, you had to straighten it *very slowly*. She never knew, either, when one of the knees would do something creepy and unexpected—suddenly go *pong*, seeming to slip slightly out of joint and then pop back in again. This was what old people thought about, and talked about. She wished she could issue a retroactive apology to her late grandparents, whose medical kvetching she’d found so trying as a child. Underestimating the pitiless self-involvement of their nearest and dearest, old folks detailed their ailments because they assumed that anyone who cared about them would necessarily care about their pain. But no one had cared about her grandparents’ pain, and now no one would care about the pain of the granddaughter who’d once been so unfeeling. Rough justice.

The segue to a stand was a success. My, what miserable achievements might pass for triumph in a few years’ time. Remembering the word *blender*. Taking a sip of water without breaking the glass. “Have you considered the timing of this announcement?” She plugged in the tablet—busywork; the battery was still at 64 percent.