



SLOW MOTION

A True Story



DANIEL SHAPIRO

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RANDOM HOUSE  NEW YORK

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Certain names in this book have been changed. The altered names are Lenny Klein, Jess Marcus, John Feeny, and Special Agent Anderson.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shapiro, Dani.

Slow motion / Dani Shapiro. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-307-82800-2

1. Shapiro, Dani—Family. 2. Women novelists, American—20th century—Family relationships. 3. Parents—Death—Psychological aspects. I. Title.

PS3569.H3387Z47 1998

818'.5403—dc21

[B]

97-32667

Random House website address: www.randomhouse.com

v3.1

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About the Author

Our story is of moments when even slow motion moved too fast for the shutter of the camera: words that blew our lives apart, like so, eyes that cut and caught each other, mime of the operating room where gas and knives quote each other moments before the telephone starts ringing: our story is how still we stood, how fast.

—Adrienne Rich
“For an Album”

CHAPTER ONE

The night before I receive the phone call that divides my life into before and after, my face swells in an allergic reaction to a skin cream, then blisters and chaps. I am at a health spa in Southern California, a place where wealthy older women go to rest and rejuvenate, where young matrons snap their bodies back into shape after pregnancies, where movie stars stretch out on massage tables in private Japanese gardens, offering their smooth backs to the sun.

I am none of the above, and for the past three days, since arriving at the Golden Door, I have often paused amid cacti and rock gardens to wonder what, exactly, I'm doing here. I am twenty-three years old, and my life has become unrecognizable to me. I have slid slowly into this state the way one might wade into an icy lake, dipping a toe in at first, then wincing, pushing past all resistance until the body is submerged, numb to the cold.

When the phone interrupts my post-hike breakfast of a half-grapefruit sweetened with honey, I am sitting cross-legged on my bed, listlessly flipping through the pages of the *San Diego Herald*, staring out the sliding glass doors at my private patio. I am upset about my face, which is itching and beginning to blister. My eyes are slits. I have never been allergic to anything before, and am worried that this rash might spread down my neck and across my chest, causing me to swell inside, my body choking on itself.

"Hello?"

"Dani, it's Aunt Roz, darling."

"Hi, Roz," I respond, confused. This aunt, who lives in suburban

New Jersey, is not someone to whom I'm particularly close, and she would have no reason to know that I am at this health spa, much less track me down here at the crack of dawn. Though it doesn't occur to me to be frightened, though no alarm bells ring in my mind, I watch as my thighs begin to shake for no apparent reason.

"Dani, I'm calling because—"

She pauses, speaking very slowly, as if to an imbecile.

"The first thing you should know is that everything's all right," she says. And then, "Mother and Dad were in an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"In their car, they—"

"Where were they? Where are they? Why are *you* calling me?"

"Now, Dani, if you'll just slow down—"

She keeps repeating my name, and she says it the way I hate, the way my mother's family has always said it, with a sort of pseudo-classy soft "a," as if we're from England, not New Jersey. There is an edge to her voice, as if she's somehow holding me accountable for being on the other side of the country at a moment like this. She thinks I'm a fuckup, a college dropout, a high-class drifter.

"They're both in intensive care," she says.

"Where?"

"Overlook Hospital, in Summit. They were driving home from your mother's office last night—"

"Last *night*?"

"It was late—there was nothing you could have done—"

I file this away somewhere, under miscellaneous family insanity. I am my mother's only child. My father has a daughter from his first marriage, my older half sister, Susie, who lives in New York City.

"Has someone called Susie?"

"No."

Jesus.

"How did you find me?"

"Your mother gave me the name of the place you're staying."

"So she's conscious—"

Aunt Roz snorts, actually snorts into the phone.

“Dani, your mother has two badly broken legs. Her tibia, her femur —”

Roz is a doctor’s wife—the kind who thinks her marriage license includes a medical degree. Her husband, my uncle Hy, is a surgeon, and my favorite family member. I may be speaking to the wrong person.

“Where’s Hy? I want to talk to Hy,” I say. My voice has begun to shake along with my legs. Hy will tell me the truth. His hoarse, pipe-smoking voice will soothe me, tell me this isn’t as bad as it sounds. I look wildly around my room at the sliding Japanese screens, the elegant, lacquered breakfast table upon which a fan has been set, detailing my day’s activities: 9 A.M. aerobics, 10:30 stretch ‘n’ tone, 12:00 massage.

“Uncle Hy is with the doctors.”

“How’s my father?”

“He’ll be fine—” Roz says flatly. “Not a scratch on him—and he wasn’t even wearing a seat belt. It’s your mother you should be worried about.”

I don’t stop to wonder why, if my father is fine, he isn’t the one calling me in Southern California. My brain has gone numb, my instincts taking over. I will find out what has happened to my parents one small, manageable blow at a time.

“I’ll get the next flight home,” I say, calculating how long it will take to get to the San Diego airport.

“Good idea, Dan,” says Roz.

I sit on the edge of the bed and dial a number in New York. There is a high-pitched buzz in my head: sounds, thoughts, language itself distilled into a single note of terror. I float out of my body and watch myself from a corner of the ceiling; this is something I do often—watch myself as if my life were a movie, as if I were only acting a role in this moment, as if it can be played back, cut, edited later.

His office phone rings once, twice, then is answered by his secretary, Marie, a woman who knows me—and my role in his life—

well.

“Mr. Klein’s office—”

Her voice is low and sexy, modulated within an inch of its life.

“Marie, it’s Dani.”

“Dani, how are you? How’s California?”

I have often wondered how she keeps it all straight: wife, daughters, girlfriend.

“Is he there? It’s an emergency.”

She puts me on hold and I close my eyes, try to quiet the buzzing in my head. My heart is skipping beats, thumping irregularly in my chest. Years from now, when this happens, I’ll wonder if I’m having a heart attack. But at this moment in my life, at twenty-three, I think I’m indestructible. I figure I have until I’m thirty. At thirty I’ll expire, like a bright flame burning itself out.

“Hello, cupcake.”

Lenny’s voice pours through the phone lines, across the country, into my ear. The last time I spoke to Lenny was three days ago, when we were staying in Los Angeles at the Bel-Air Hotel, and we had such an ugly fight that I asked him to leave me alone for a few days—and he actually did.

“Lenny, something bad’s happened.”

“What?”

I can almost hear his head clicking off the possibilities. Something bad could mean virtually anything at this point: police, drug bust, vehicular manslaughter, God knows what.

“My parents—were in a car crash—it sounds pretty serious—”

The words are coming in gulps of breath. Saying it out loud, saying *parents* and *car crash* in the same sentence, saying it to Lenny Klein—it’s all too much. My system is shorting out, and suddenly I’m panting.

“Honey, do you have any kind of bag,” Lenny says gently. “A paper bag, a plastic bag—”

“What for—”

“Just do what I tell you. Do you have the bag? Hold it over your nose, and take some slow, deep breaths. In and out ... in and out.

Good girl.”

I hold a piece of Saran wrap with bits of grapefruit still clinging to it over my nose and mouth, improvising a bag, and try to do as I’m told. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror above the bureau: I’m in gray sweatpants and a sweatshirt, my hair pulled back in a ponytail, my face red and swollen.

“I’ve got to get back,” I say. “Could you have Marie get me on the next flight out of San Diego to Newark?”

“Easier said than done.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a fucking blizzard in New York,” says Lenny. “They’ve closed the airports.”

I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home, a home where Sabbath was observed, my father wore a yarmulke, and we kept meat and dairy separate, according to religious dietary laws. Though I’ve strayed far from that home, in moments of pain, or shock, Hebrew words fly into my mind like a flock of blackbirds, foreign and unintelligible. They ride the crest of memory—these words and prayers—a whole other language I once spoke so fluently I even thought in it, and now no longer understand. Sometimes I think I have locked it deep inside myself and thrown away the key. Other times, I think it’s accessible if only I know where to look: a language within my language, a heart within my heart.

So when I get off the phone with Lenny and dial my half sister’s office number in New York, there is a tune drifting through my head, a prayer sung at the beginning of Sabbath services. *Avinu Malkenu, Harenu v’anenu* ... I have not attended shul since leaving for college six years ago, at seventeen, but no matter. I can identify the song, sing every syllable the way, as a teenager in the 1970s, I knew every Springsteen lyric.

Susie, a psychoanalyst, is in session. Her machine picks up, and for a split second I almost blurt it out—*Dad and Irene were in a car crash*—but then I think of my half sister sitting in her office in Greenwich