The Shape Shifter

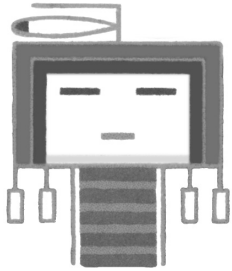
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Extract

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1

Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, retired, stopped his pickup about a hundred yards short of where he had intended to park, turned off the ignition, stared at Sergeant Jim Chee's trailer home, and reconsidered his tactics. The problem was making sure he knew what he could tell them, and what he shouldn't, and how to handle it without offending either Bernie or Jim. First he would hand to whomever opened the door the big woven basket of fruit, flowers, and candies that Professor Louisa Bourbonette had arranged as their wedding gift, and then keep the conversation focused on what they had thought of Hawaii on their honeymoon trip, and apologize for the duties that had forced both Louisa and him to miss the wedding itself. Then he would pound them with questions about their future plans, whether Bernie still intended to return to her job with the Navajo Tribal Police. She would know he already knew the answer to that one, but the longer he

could keep them from pressing him with their own questions, the better. Maybe he could avoid that completely. It wasn't likely. His answering machine had been full of calls from one or the other of them. Full of questions. Why hadn't he called them back with the details of that Totter obituary he wanted them to look into? Why was he interested? Hadn't he retired as he'd planned? Was this some old cold case he wanted to clear up as a going away present to the Navajo Tribal Police? And so forth.

Louisa had provided him with a choice of two solutions. Just go ahead and swear them both to secrecy and tell them the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Or just say he simply couldn't talk about it because it was all totally confidential.

"Don't forget, Joe," Louisa had said, "they're both in the awful gossiping circuit you police people operate. They're going to be hearing about the murders, and the shooting, and all the rest of it, and by the time it gets passed along second-, third-, and fourth-hand, it's all going to seem a lot more horrible than what you told me." With that, Louisa had paused, shaken her head, and added: "If that's possible."

Both of Louisa's suggestions were tempting, but neither was practical. Chee and Bernie were both sworn-in officers of the law (or Bernie would be again as soon as the papers were signed) and telling them everything he knew would put them in an awful ethical position. Sort of the same position he had landed in himself, which he really didn't want to think about right now.

Instead he'd think about Chee and Bernie, starting with how Bernie had already seemed to have a civilizing influence on Jim, judging from the nice white curtains

Leaphorn could see in the trailer's windows, and—even more dramatic—the attractive blue-and-white mailbox with a floral design substituted for the rusty old tin box that had always before received Chee's mail. Not, Leaphorn guessed, that many people had been writing to Jim.

Leaphorn restarted his engine and began the slow drive toward the house. Just as he did, the door opened. And there was Bernie, waving to him, and Chee right behind her, big grin on his face. Quit worrying, Leaphorn told himself. I'm going to enjoy this. And he did.

Chee took the basket, looking as if he had no idea what to do with it. Bernie rescued it, declaring it was just what they needed and how thoughtful it was of him and Louisa, and how the basket was beautifully woven, neatly waterproofed with pinyon sap, and would long be treasured. Then came the hand shaking, and the hugs, and inside for coffee and conversation. Leaphorn kept it on the Hawaii trip as long as he could, listening to Bernie's report on her arrangements to rejoin the tribal police and her chances of being assigned to Captain Largo's command and being posted at Teec Nos Pos, which would be convenient, presuming that Chee would still be working out of Shiprock.

And so it went, coffee sipped, cookies nibbled, lots of smiling and laughing, exuberant descriptions of swimming in the cold, cold Pacific surf, a silly scene in which an overenthusiastic Homeland Security man at the Honolulu Airport had been slapped by an elderly woman he was frisking, had seized her, and had been whacked again by her husband, who turned out to be a retired, oft-decorated Marine Corps colonel. This resulted in the Homeland Se-

curity supervisor wanting the colonel arrested, and an airport official, who turned out to be an army survivor of the Korean War, apologizing to the colonel's wife and giving the Homeland Security pair a loud public lecture on American history. All happy, easy, and good-natured.

But then Sergeant Jim Chee said: "By the way, Lieutenant, Bernie and I have been wondering what got you interested in the Totter obituary. And why you never called us again. We would have been willing to do some more checking on it for you."

"Well, thanks," Leaphorn said. "I knew you would do it, but I knew of a fellow living right there in Oklahoma City who sort of volunteered for the job. No use bothering you honeymooners again. By the looks of things, you've decided to settle in right here. Right? Great place, here, right on the bank of the San Juan River."

But that effort to change the subject didn't work.

"What did he find out for you?" Bernie asked.

Leaphorn shrugged. Drained his coffee cup, extended it toward Bernie, suggesting the need for a refill. "Didn't amount to anything," he said. "Great coffee you're making, Bernie. I bet you didn't follow Chee's old formula of 'too little grounds, boiled too long.'"

Chee was grinning at Leaphorn, ignoring the jibe.

"Come on, Lieutenant, quit the stalling. What'd you find out? And what got you so interested in the first place?"

"You're a married man now," Leaphorn said, and handed his empty cup to Chee. "Time to learn how to be a good host."

"No more coffee until you quit stalling," Chee said.

Leaphorn sighed, thought a bit. "Well," he said, "it

turned out the obituary was a fake. Mr. Totter hadn't died in that Oklahoma City hospital, and hadn't been buried in that Veterans Administration cemetery." He paused, shrugged.

"Well, go on," Chee said. "Why the obituary? What's the story?"

Bernie took the cup from Leaphorn's hand.

"But don't tell it until I get back with the refill," she said. "I want to hear this."

"Why the fake being dead?" Chee asked. "What happened to Totter?"

Leaphorn pondered. How much of this could he tell? He imagined Chee and Bernie, under oath on the witness stand, the U.S. District Attorney's prosecutor reminding them they were under oath, or the penalty of perjury. "When did you first hear this? Who told you? When did he tell you? After his Navajo Tribal Police retirement, then? But wasn't he still a deputized law enforcement officer for about three Arizona and New Mexico counties?"

"Well?" Chee asked.

"I'm waiting for your wife to get back with the coffee," Leaphorn said. "Being polite. You should learn about that."

"I'm back," Bernie said, and handed him his cup. "I'm curious, too. What happened to Mr. Totter?"

"To tell the truth, we don't really know," Leaphorn said. And paused. "Not for sure, anyway." Another thoughtful pause. "Let me rephrase that. To tell the truth, we think we know what happened to Totter, but we never could have proved it."

Chee, who had been standing, pulled up a chair and sat down. "Hey," he said. "I'll bet this is going to be interesting."

"Let me get some more cookies," Bernie said, hopping out of her chair. "Don't start until I get back."

That gave Leaphorn about two minutes to decide how to handle this.

"Long and complicated story," he said, "and it may cause you both to think I've gone senile. I've got to start it way back by reminding you both of our origin stories, about there being so much meanness, greed, and evil in those first three worlds that the Creator destroyed them, and how our First Man brought all that evil up to this fourth world of ours."

Chee looked puzzled. And impatient. "How can that connect with Totter's obituary?"

Leaphorn chuckled. "You'll probably still be wondering about that when I finish this. But while I'm telling you about it, I want you to think about how our Hero Twins killed the evil monster on the Turquoise Mountain, and how they tried to rid this fourth world of ours of all the other evils and also about that name we sometime use for our worst kind of witches. One version translates into English as *skinwalkers*. Another version comes out as *shape shifters*."

"Fits better sometimes," Chee said. "The last time someone told me about seeing a skinwalker bothering her sheep, she said when she went into the hogan to get her rifle to shoot it, it saw her coming and turned into an owl. Flew away."

"My mother told me about one," Bernie said. "It changed from a wolf into some sort of bird."

"Well, keep that in mind when I tell you about Totter, and so forth," Leaphorn said.

Chee was grinning.

"Okay," he said. "I promise."

"Me, too," said Bernie, who seemed to be taking this a little more seriously. "On with the story."

Leaphorn took a cookie, sampled the fresh coffee.

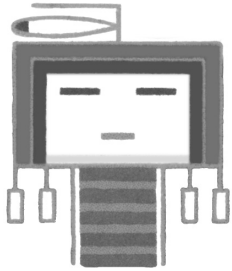
"For me it started just about the time you two were enjoying yourselves in Hawaii. I had a call telling me I had mail down at the office, so I went down to see what it was. That's what pulled me into it."

He took a bite of cookie, remembering he'd had to park in the visitors' parking lot. It was just starting to rain. "Big lightning bolt just as I parked there," he said. "If I was as well tutored in our Navajo mythology as your husband is, Bernie, I would have recognized right away that the spirit world wasn't happy. I'd have seen that as a bad omen."

Chee had never got quite used to Leaphorn kidding him about his goal of being both a tribal policeman and a certified shaman, conducting Navajo curing ceremonials. Chee was frowning.

"Come on, Lieutenant," he said. "You're saying it was beginning to rain. Lightning flashes. Now tell us what happened next."

"Big lightning bolt just as I got there," he said, smiling at Chee. "And I think when I'm finished with this, with as much as I can tell you anyway, you're going to agree it was a very bad omen."



2

Eleven days earlier . . .

The boom of the lightning bolt caused Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, retired, to hesitate a moment before he climbed out of his pickup in the visitors' parking lot. He took a serious look at the clouds building up in the western sky as he walked into the Navajo Tribal Police building. End of autumn, he was thinking. Monsoon season pretty much over. Handsome clouds of fog over the Lukachukai range this morning, but nothing promising a really good female rain. Just a noisy male thunderstorm. It would be hunting season soon, he thought, which normally would have meant a lot of work for him. This year he could just kick back, sit by the fire. He'd let younger cops try to keep track of the poachers and go hunting for the city folks who always seemed to be losing themselves in the mountains.

Leaphorn sighed as he walked through the entrance.

He should have been enjoying that sort of thinking, but he wasn't. He felt . . . well . . . retired.

Nobody in the police department hall. Good. He hurried into the reception office. Good again. Nobody there except the pretty young Hopi woman manning the desk, and she was ignoring him, chatting on the telephone.

He took off his hat and waited.

She said: "Just a moment," into the telephone, glanced at him, said: "Yes, sir. Can I help you?"

"I had a message from Captain Pinto. Pinto said I should come in and pick up my mail."

"Mail?" She looked puzzled. "And you are?"

"I'm Joe Leaphorn."

"Leaphorn. Oh, yes," she said. "The captain said you might be in." She fumbled in a desk drawer, pulled out a manila envelope, looked at the address on it. Then at him.

"Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn," she said. "Is that you?"

"That was me," Leaphorn said. "Once." He thanked her, took the envelope back to his truck, and climbed in, feeling even more obsolete than he had as he'd driven by the police-parking-only spaces and stopped in visitors' parking.

The return address looked sort of promising. Why Worry Security, with a Flagstaff, Arizona, street address. The name penned under that was Mel Bork. Bork? Well, at least it wasn't just more of the junk mail he'd been receiving.

"Bork?" Leaphorn said it aloud, suddenly remembering. Smiling. Ah yes. A skinny young man named Bork had been his fellow semi-greenhorn westerner friend from way, way back when both of them were young country-boy cops sent back East to learn some law enforcement

rules at the FBI Academy. And his first name, by golly, had been Melvin.

Leaphorn opened his Swiss army knife, slit the envelope, slid out the contents. A page of slick paper from a magazine with a letter clipped to it. He took off the clip and put the letter aside.

The page was from *Luxury Living,* and a color photograph dominated it. It showed a grand high-ceilinged room with a huge fireplace, a trophy-sized rack of elk antlers mounted above it, a tall wall of shelved books on one side, and a sliding-glass door on the other. The glass door offered a view into a walled garden and, above the wall, snow-capped mountains. Leaphorn recognized the mountains. The San Francisco Peaks, with Humphreys Peak lording over them. That told him this *Luxury Living* home was somewhere on the north edge of Flagstaff. The assorted furniture looked plush and expensive. But Leaphorn's attention was drawn away from this by an arrow inked on the photograph. It pointed to a weaving that was hanging beside the fireplace, and under the shank of the arrow were the words:

Hey, Joe, Ain't this that rug you kept telling me about? And if it is, what does that do to that arson case of ours? Remember? The one that the wise men ruled was just a careless smoker. And take a look at those antlers! Folks who know this guy tell me he's a hunting fool.

See attached letter.

Leaphorn let the letter wait while he stared at the photograph. It did remind him of the rug he had described

to Bork—a great rectangle of black, gray, red tones, blues, and yellows all partially encircled by the figure of Rainbow Man. It seemed to be just as his memory told him. He noticed a symbol for Maii'—the Coyote spirit—at his work of turning order into chaos and others representing the weapons that Monster Slayer and Born for Water had stolen from the sun to wage their campaign to make the Dineh safe from the evils that had followed them up from the underworld. But the photograph was printed much too small to show other details that had impressed Leaphorn when he'd seen the original in Totter's trading post gallery before it burned. He remembered seeing faint suggestions of soldiers with rifles, for example, and tiny white dots scattered in clusters here and there, which someone at the gallery had told him the weaver had formed from parts of feathers. They represented big silver peso coins, the currencies in the mountain west in the mid-1860s. And thus they represented greed, the root of all evil in the Navajo value system.

That, of course, was the theme of the famous old rug. And that theme made it a sort of bitter violation of the Navajo tradition. The Dineh taught its people to live in the peace and harmony of *hozho,* they must learn to forgive—a variation of the policy that *belagaana* Christians preached in their Lord's Prayer but all too often didn't seem to practice. And the rug certainly didn't practice forgetting old transgressions. It memorialized the worst cruelty ever imposed on the Navajo. The Long Walk—the captivity, misery, and the terrible death toll imposed on the Navajo by the white culture's fierce hunger for gold and silver—and the final solution they tried to apply to get the Dineh out of the way.

But could this picture torn from the magazine be of that same rug? It looked like it. But it didn't seem likely. Leaphorn remembered standing there examining the rug framed on the gallery wall behind its dusty glass. Remembered someone there telling him of its antiquity and its historical value. If this was a pre-fire photo, then how had it gone from the wall of this lavish house at the edge of Flagstaff to Totter's gallery. The other possibility was that it had been taken from the gallery before the fire. Furniture and other items in the room suggested the photo was recent. So did a distinctly modern painting on another wall.

Leaphorn put the magazine page back on the car seat, and considered another old and unpleasant memory the photo provoked from the day after the fire. The angry face of Grandma Peshlakai glowering at him through the window of his patrol car while he tried to explain why he had to leave—had to drive over to meet Captain Desbah, who had called him from Totter's place.

"It's a federal case," he'd told her. "They had a fire over at Totter's Trading Post Saturday. Burned up a man, and now the FBI thinks the dead man is a murderer they've been after for years. Very dangerous man. The federals are all excited."

"He's dead?"

Leaphorn agreed.

"He can't run then," Grandma said, scowling at him. "This man I want you to catch is running away with my buckets of pinyon sap."

Leaphorn had tried to explain. But Grandma Peshlakai was one of the important old women in her Kin Litsonii (Yellow House) clan. She felt her family was being

slighted. Leaphorn had been young then, and he'd agreed that the problem of live Navajos should be just as important as learning the name of a dead *belagaana*. Remembering it now, much older, he still agreed with her.

Her case involved the theft of two economy-sized lard buckets filled with pinyon sap. They had been stolen from the weaving shed beside her hogan. She'd explained that the loss was much more significant than it might sound to a young policeman who had never endured the weary days of onerous labor collecting that sap.

"And now it's gone, so how do we waterproof our baskets? How do we make them so they hold water and have that pretty color so tourists will buy them? And now, it is too late for sap to drip. We can't get more. Not until next summer."

Grandma had bitten back her anger and listened, with traditional Navajo courtesy, while he tried to explain that this dead fellow was probably one of the top people on the FBI's most wanted list. A very bad and dangerous man. When he'd finished, rather lamely as he remembered, Grandma nodded.

"But he's dead. Can't hurt nobody now. Our thief is alive. He has our sap. Two full buckets. Elandra there"—she nodded to her granddaughter, who was standing behind her, smiling at Leaphorn—"Elandra saw him driving away. Big blue car. Drove that direction—back toward the highway. You policemen get paid to catch thieves. You could find him, I think, and get our sap back. But if you mess around with the dead man, maybe his *chindi* will get after you. And if he was as bad as you say, it would be very, very bad *chindi*."

Leaphorn sighed. Grandma was right, of course.

And the sort of mass murderer that was high on the FBI's Most Wanted list would, based on Leaphorn's memory of his maternal grandfather's hogan stories, be a formidable *chindi*. Since that version of ghost represented all of the unharmonious and evil characteristics that couldn't follow the dead person into his last great adventure, they were the sort any traditional Navajo would prefer to avoid. But, *chindi* or not, duty had called. He drove away, leaving Grandma staring resentfully after him. Remembering, too, the last theory she had offered. When he'd asked Grandma Peshlakai if she had any idea who would want to steal her pinyon sap, she stood silent a long moment, hesitating, looking around, making sure Elandra was out of hearing range.

"They say that sometimes witches need it for something. That sometimes a skinwalker might want it," Grandma had said. That was a version of the witchcraft legend he had never heard before. Leaphorn remembered telling Grandma Peshlakai that he doubted if this very worst tribal version of witchcraft evil would be driving a car. She had frowned at him a moment, shook her head, and said: "Why you think that?"

It was a question he couldn't think of any answer for. And now, all these years later, he still couldn't.

He sighed, picked up the letter:

Dear Joe,

If I remember you correctly, by now you've stared at that picture and examined the rug and you're trying to figure out when the photo was taken. Well, old Jason Delos didn't buy that mansion of his on that mountain slope outside

of Flagstaff until just a few years ago. As I remember your story, that famous old "cursed" rug you told me about was reduced to ashes in that trading-post fire long before that. Yet there it is, good as new, posing for the camera. You remember we agreed there was more going on in that crime, and that maybe it really was a crime, and not just a careless drunk accident and a lot of witchcraft talk.

Anyway, I thought you'd be interested in seeing this. I'm going to look into it myself. See if I can find out where old man Delos got the rug, etc. If you're interested, give me a call and I'll let you know if I learn anything. And if you ever get as far south and west as Flagstaff, I'll buy you lunch, and we can tell each other how we survived that FBI Academy stuff.

Meanwhile, stay well,

Mel

Below the signature was an address in Flagstaff, and a telephone number.

Oh, well, Leaphorn thought. Why not?