

The Soul Hunters

a novel

Christopher Torockio



Black
Lawrence
Press

*For Halle
and for Giovanni*

*“No one leaves the lights on
in a house where nobody lives anymore.”*

—Ryan Adams, “When Will You Come Back Home”

Part One

The Table

Prologue: Abigail

They should have let the ExerCycle go for fifteen. It was a more-than-generous offer—Abigail knew this. But Sydney had sworn up and down to the contraption’s “nostalgic value” as a “collector’s item,” and deemed it worth twenty. (*Twenty?* Please. The thing wasn’t nostalgic, it was *archaic!* Nick and Abigail had bought it for his parents as a Christmas present back when the first rumors began circulating across the country that exercise might actually be *good* for you, when jogging was cutting-edge. The eighties, maybe? Seventies? Good lord, a *long* time ago.) In any case, Sydney had slapped a hand-scribbled \$20 sticker on the handlebars and then held firm when an elderly gentleman in coveralls and complicated-looking trifocals was willing to take it off their hands for fifteen. Unexpectedly rebuffed, the man had shrugged, slid his hands into his pockets, and sauntered off down the driveway. Before he got to the street he turned, orange sun setting behind him.

“Knew your dad,” he said, though Abigail could not place him, nor could she remember him being at the service. “Good man, Carmelo,” he added. “Tough S.O.B., that’s for sure.” He considered his own words, staring up into the telephone wires connecting to the apex of the roof, as if reminiscing on a particular incident neither fondly nor remorsefully. Abigail had an urge to call out to him as he continued on down the driveway and turned at the mailbox. But she didn’t. She’d never see him again anyway.

The ExerCycle was one of only a few remaining items scattered across the side lawn. Abigail was surprised the set of three hubcaps didn't go—they were mismatched, but perfectly usable. Some of the things, though—she wasn't even sure what they were *for*. Nick's father had a way of adapting ordinary household items to his own quirky personal use. Lidless cigar boxes had been placed in kitchen drawers to hold the silverware. They found rosemary, amazingly, planted in a Drambuie bottle, the panicked stalks somehow pushing their way out through the tiny opening at the top. A cedar trunk/coffee table had been transformed into a rather roomy doghouse for Brownie the Beagle.

(The question of Brownie herself had yet to be addressed. She bounded around the yard all afternoon like an inmate released on bail. People occasionally bent down and tapped her head, but nobody looked her in the eyes.)

In the end, though, most everything in the yard had sold. People actually stopped by looking for particular items: "Your dad still got that old weedwhacker he built from the blender motor layin' around?" (Yes, but it didn't work, and even when it *had* worked you had to plug it into an outlet, which seemed to Abigail a significant drawback for a weedwhacker. They took \$4 for it.) One neighbor bought the entire collection of snowglobes from all of the campsites and trailer parks Nick's parents had visited over the years; another bought the water-warped, two-stringed banjo. What didn't sell, Nick and his brothers were now pitching into the dumpster—for which their cousin Raymond, who worked for the Township, had arranged—off to the side of the driveway. Most everything that remained was on the smaller side—knickknacks and utensils and various bits and pieces from the bottoms of closets and drawers—and could be tossed into the dumpster from considerable distance. Soon, a contest started up—fifty-something-year-old men challenging each other to see who could throw their father's old, unwanted belongings into the dumpster from the greatest distance.

Watching them, Abigail climbed onto the ExerCycle and began pedaling. The chain stuck at first, emitted a grinding, zipper-like sound. Soon, though, the chain smoothed out and settled into a crackling rhythm. Abigail rested her elbows on the handlebars. The sun was nearly gone now; a crisp, glassy coolness had settled over the yard. Abigail peddled harder. The ExerCycle's dust-covered speedometer didn't work; she had no idea how fast she was going.

"Yo! Check this out," Lawrence, the oldest son, called from behind a birdbath in the neighbor's yard, then reared back and flung a tattered rubber welcome mat like a Frisbee, which twisted and fluttered through the air and finally slapped off the side of the dumpster and fell to the ground.

"Ha!" said Stuart, the youngest. "Watch *this!*" He turned his back to the dumpster and heaved a threadbare carry-on sized suitcase over his head. The suitcase came unclasped in mid-air and dropped like a stone, nearly plunking Nick on the head and causing him to duck frantically out of the way, arms waving. The men laughed for a moment then abruptly stopped, as if remembering themselves, and continued with their work. A minute later, though, Cousin Raymond heaved a bald blue-wall tire, Olympic hammer-throw style, across the yard, and the games resumed.

From the woods beyond the house, across the adjacent street, Abigail heard the chirrup of a hoot owl.

"You should just take it." Sydney appeared at her shoulder.

"What?"

Sydney nodded at the ExerCycle, touched her recently protruding belly with the flat of her palm. "You were right. Shoulda backed off at fifteen. My bad. You should just take it."

Abigail caught herself staring dumbly at that belly; she blinked and focused on the gas grill over Sydney's shoulder. Before anything was hauled out to the yard, the brothers had divvied up everything they

wanted from the house. There were few disagreements. Things that had once belonged to, or had been gifts from a particular brother, simply reverted back. Everything else of modest value was spread around in what Abigail thought was an amazingly judicious and friendly manner, and what remained became part of today's yard sale. As for the grill, years ago cement had been poured around its base, rendering it a permanent fixture that would transfer to the new owners of the house. (It was absolutely amazing how many people Raymond knew, from one end of the county to the other: the house was already sold, without a real estate agent, a handshake agreement.) Abigail wanted to say to Sydney that, seeing as how she and Nick bought the ExerCycle in the first place, she didn't need her ridiculously pregnant sister-in-law's permission to take it now. But Sydney had no way of knowing this; she was young, thirty-eight last month, and had only been married to Stuart for a couple of years—Stu's third wife; Abigail's second-favorite. So instead she said, "I think we're going to end up taking the dog."

Sydney nodded. A breeze swept past them and Abigail could smell the compost heap out behind the grape arbor. *A baby*, she thought. *Some people don't know when to call it quits.*

She kept pedaling, feeling her blood thicken and warm.

"Whoa-oh-oh!" Lawrence called out. "Hold up." He approached the dumpster with his arms outspread in a hold-everything gesture. Then, bad back and all, he climbed up the side of the dumpster and disappeared inside headfirst. A moment later his head popped back up; his glasses hung from one ear. "I *wanted* this," he said, and held up what looked to Abigail like a dented metal cash box.

"We *asked* you last night if you wanted it," Nick pointed out. He reached across his chest and rubbed his left shoulder; apparently he'd aggravated his old high-school football injury—an injury he rarely talked about, even to Abigail.

“The hell you did.”

“The hell we *didn't*,” Stuart said.

“Whatever,” Lawrence said and reattached his glasses. “Jag-offs. Come on and help me out of here. I think I pulled something.”