

HAPPINESS IS

😊NTAGIOUS



ALL
BETTER
NOW

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Scythe*

NEAL SHUSTERMAN

ALL
BETTER
NOW

The text 'ALL BETTER NOW' is rendered in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The words are stacked vertically, with 'ALL' on the top line, 'BETTER' in the middle, and 'NOW' at the bottom. A trail of small black dots follows the right side of the text, starting from the top right of 'ALL' and extending downwards and to the left, passing behind 'BETTER' and ending near the bottom left of 'NOW'. The dots are more densely packed in some areas, creating a sense of motion or a fading effect.



ALL
BETTER
NOW

NEAL SHUSTERMAN

WALKER
BOOKS



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*For the Kirton, Ingham, and Lewis families
and all the other relatives I never knew I had!
It's wonderful getting to know you!*

PART ONE

CROWN ROYALE





MARIEL RIDES SPACE MOUNTAIN

It was the wrong time to be living on the streets.

Not that there was ever a right time, but this new disease – it was picking up steam, threatening to be another pandemic— No. No, Mariel didn't even want to invoke the *P* word. As if just thinking it would make it so.

“It's not so bad, baby,” her mother told her. “It's not like we gotta be near people. Even out here we can find ways to isolate. We don't gotta be near anyone if we don't want to be.”

Mariel's mother lived in denial. Truly lived there. If denial were a solid piece of real estate, Gena Mudroch would have a mansion on it. Or at least a garage so they'd finally have a safe and legal place to park their beat-up Fiesta.

Right now it was parked, all right. Behind a fence at the impound. Which was why Mariel and Gena were standing on a dark street in the seediest industrial part of town, in the middle of the night, waiting on someone who was, in theory, going to help them break their car out.

Unlike her mother, Mariel did not live in a constant state of denial. She was practical. A realist. She had to be; practicality was more than a survival skill – it was her superpower. Because without it, her mom would probably be dead, and Mariel would have been swallowed whole by the foster care system years ago.

“Maybe...” began Mariel. “Maybe we *should* be with people.”

“What, and catch this thing? No way!”

“But maybe we should get it over with quick. You know – before the hospitals get full, while there are still services for us.”

Her mom brushed her straggly hair out of her eyes. “I know what you’re thinking,” she said, giving Mariel her suspicious look – the one she usually reserved for anyone and everyone else. “You can’t really believe what the nuts out there are saying?”

“I know it sounds ... *out there* ... but there’s always a chance it could be true.”

“Since when do you listen to rumors, huh? You, who’s gotta have scientific proof of everything under the sun!”

Her mother was right – rumor was the currency of ignorance. But anecdotal evidence had to count for something. “I’ve seen interviews with people who’ve had it,” Mariel told her mom. “They seem ... I don’t know ... different.”

“How can you know they’re different when you didn’t know ‘em to begin with?”

Mariel shrugged. “There’s something in their eyes, Momma. Something ... wise.”

Her mother guffawed at that. “Trust me, no one gets smart from getting sick.”

“I didn’t say ‘smart.’ I said ‘wise.’”

But “wise” wasn’t really the word for it either. “Centered” was more like it. Being at home. Even if you don’t have one.

“You’re dreaming,” her mother said. “That’s okay, you’re allowed.”

As practical as Mariel needed to be to survive life with her mother, she wasn’t immune to the occasional flight of fancy. Especially when it gave her hope. She told herself that hanging on to hope was nothing like her mother’s perpetual state of denial, but deep down, she knew hope and denial were reluctant

neighbors. They glared at each other from across the same silty river of circumstance.

Across the lonely street, a man walked with a purposeful gait, which also seemed a bit loose, like his joints were made of rubber. Although he was mostly in shadow, Mariel could tell he glanced over at them. Was this the guy? Or was this just someone who was gonna bring them trouble? Turned out he was neither; he just continued on his merry way toward whatever place a rubbery man goes at two in the morning.

“That’s not true, you know,” she said to her mom, who had already forgotten the conversation and needed to be reminded. “People do grow from being sick. What about Grandpa – he changed. He had a whole new perspective after he beat cancer.”

Her mother gave a rueful chuckle. “I wouldn’t want to go through *that* just to get some perspective. And besides, a heart attack got him not a year later, so what good did that perspective do?”

Mariel had no answer for that one. Now it was her mom sounding like the realist.

“We’ll be fine, baby,” she said. “We’ll find a place where we can park safe and legal, and then we’ll hunker down and wait it out, once we get the Grinch out of impound.” The Grinch was their green Fiesta. Mom had a thing about naming inanimate objects.

The guy who was coming to help them was late. Her mother had said “*two-ish*,” but that was from the guy who knew the guy that knew her mom. Three degrees of separation from a nameless man who already had their money.

Realism told Mariel he wasn’t coming. Hope told her that maybe something better was.

Mariel always did her best to align her need for hope with

her practical nature. In this case, both told her that maybe it was best to lean into this pandemic – and yes, she used the *P* word, because clearly that’s what it was becoming. But a different one. A *very* different one.

The previous one, of course, was devastating. Millions dead worldwide. People fighting science, grasping at absurd conspiracy theories, hearsay, and random social media posts, even as they lay dying. While people who *did* follow the science and the rules wished death upon those who didn’t. *That* pandemic exposed the very worst of human nature on all sides.

Her mom, of course, was one of the deniers, and went out partying during the worst of it. She caught it early, and although Mariel never did, it seemed her mom had it bad enough for both of them. Bad enough to land her in the hospital. They still had insurance back then, but it didn’t matter, because there were no ventilators to be had. Her mom made it through – but it took forever. She had the long syndrome – not technically sick anymore, but not actually better. She couldn’t work for months, and once she could, her job was gone. The restaurant she had worked at, like so many restaurants in San Francisco, went permanently out of business.

After that, it was Space Mountain.

That’s what Mariel called her mother’s tumultuous downward spirals – which her mom always rode with her eyes firmly closed and in the dark. And although her mom managed to get occasional work here and there when the world opened up, the damage had been done. Damage on too many levels to count.

So now they were here. On a deserted street, where nobody in their right mind should be, at an hour nobody in their right mind should be there, waiting for a guy who probably wasn’t coming.

“Wouldn’t it have been better to just use the money to pay the ticket and the impound fee, instead of paying some guy you don’t even know?”

To that, her mother just grunted.

That money, which had been demanded in advance, was basically all the money they had left. The last bit given to them by Mariel’s uncle, who said it was the last time. Which was what he always said.

“This asshole ain’t showing,” her mom finally proclaimed. Then she sighed. “Sucks to be us.” That was her favorite expression. Right up there with *“It is what it is.”*

Well, Mariel refused to accept it being what it was. And she refused to accept a sucks-to-be-me attitude. Feeling sorry for herself wouldn’t help anyone, least of all her.

But that latest interview she had seen... If what she suspected was true, it could help everything. *Change* everything. Maybe.

It was just a few days ago. They had been sitting in a bar and grill that called itself a gastropub so they could charge more, and eating a meal that her mom would pay only about a third of before bailing. Mariel respected that about her mother: she wouldn’t just dine-and-ditch; she would always leave something.

“I won’t stiff the servers,” she told Mariel. “They deserve better than what we can give.” It was her hope that the server would pocket that money as a tip, and let the restaurant write off the meal.

The gastropub had three TVs, and although two of them were showing sports, the third showed the news. A man who had been hospitalized for “Crown Royale” – which was what they were calling this new coronaform virus – was being interviewed. For a man who had just been at death’s door, he looked pretty happy – and it wasn’t just relief at being alive.

“How do you feel now?” the reporter asked. A dumb but obligatory question.

The man smiled a genuine smile and seemed to focus on the reporter as if seeing something wonderful in her eyes.

“I feel better than ever!” he said. “Really – better than *ever!*” And then he laughed. He actually laughed. As if all his cares and worries had lifted with his fever, never to return.

Mariel could definitely use some of that.



SHARK ON THE DARK SIDE

“Hi, I’m Rón, with a pretentious accent above the *O*. You must be the Hogan family.”

Although the door was open, the four members of the Hogan family seemed afraid to step inside. Like everyone else who booked a stay here, they were guarded – convinced that it must be some mistake, or maybe even a practical joke. Like maybe they were on hidden camera.

Rón didn’t have patience for it today. “Or we could ride the elevator again if you like. It’s the fastest express elevator in the city!” Rón said. That motivated them to step in the front door.

“Don’t forget to put on masks,” Rón reminded. “They’re mandatory during the walk-through.”

The family, as befuddled as they were, were even more so now. “Oh,” said the woman. “But we don’t have any. We didn’t think—”

“On the table, in the bowl.” Rón said, pointing to a Waterford Crystal bowl just inside the entryway.

They grabbed a few, still cautious; still worried that the elaborate nature of this place was an elaborate trick.

“Mom,” said one of the kids – a boy, maybe about ten, “these are those digital masks! I read about them.”

The masks were a filament fiber screen that projected an approximate image of your face, making it look like you weren’t

wearing a second-generation N95 mask at all. Of course, it didn't get your facial expressions quite right, so at best it was a little creepy.

"Aren't these expensive?" Mrs. Hogan asked.

"They're included in the rental fee," Rón told her with a smile that never completely left his own masked face – because he had tweaked the output on his own mask to be a little more cheerful than he actually felt.

Finally, Mr. Hogan voiced what they all must have been thinking. "I'm ... I'm afraid there must be some mistake. I don't think we're supposed to be here..."

"Trust me, you are. C'mon, I'll show you around." Rón swung his arm, beckoning them to follow him into the expansive penthouse. "We're on the sixty-first floor, facing west. From the living room you can see the Golden Gate Bridge. And there's a bedroom and bath to the left, but since there's just four of you, you won't need it. The main bedrooms are upstairs."

"There's an *upstairs*?" breathed out the girl, who seemed the same age as the boy. Maybe twins.

"It's this way. Follow me."

Upstairs were three more bedrooms, including a primary suite that was as large as most people's homes. "The bathroom floors are all heated," Rón told them. "Blinds are controlled by your phone – just connect by Bluetooth. And if you're worried at all about earthquakes, don't be; the building's on rollers, like the ones in Japan."

The family was breathless. Speechless. The two kids were oohing and aahing, pulling out their phones to play with the blinds, and already posturing for their bedrooms of choice.

The father, who didn't seem like a timid man, was pretty timid right now. "But ... but we're only paying one hundred dollars a night."

“Yeah, I know. For four nights.”

Still, they just stood there, looking around like they had popped into an alternate dimension and were about to explode. Rón sighed and took it upon himself to explain. “My father believes everyone should have a chance to experience this level of luxury. So he rents this penthouse out on Airbnb way below market price.”

“Who is your father?” Mrs. Hogan asked.

Rón chose not to answer. They’d figure it out. And if they didn’t, it didn’t really matter, did it? “Enjoy your stay. This is the west penthouse – but I’m just across the hall, in the east penthouse – so if there’s anything you need, you can call me anytime.” Then he left them to their own devices – of which there were many.

When your father is the third-richest man in the world, it’s hard not to be defined by him. Hard not to define *yourself* by him. No matter how hard you try. Especially when he sees you as an extension of himself.

“You are overwhelmed by my notoriety, I know. The only remedy is to climb your way out of it and establish a stronghold of your own above it.”

His father loved to give advice, but his advice often felt more like cheerleading than anything useful. Although Rón had to reluctantly admit that being forced to be the host of his father’s jackpot-surprise Airbnb was good for him. His illustrious father insisted that Rón be more sociable and interact with strangers on a regular basis. Vetted strangers, perhaps, but strangers nonetheless.

“In this world you must learn how to conduct yourself with all types of people from all types of backgrounds, and in the most awkward

of situations. Developing social skills is like learning to drive. With enough practice it becomes second nature.”

Yeah, well, maybe until there’s a crash and burn – and there’s no insurance for a social fail.

To be a top-notch host in an international city like San Francisco, Rón was required to memorize his Airbnb spiel in seven languages, which was even more of a chore than he thought it would be.

Leona, the kindest and least superficial of his siblings, had the most useful take on it all.

“Think of being his son as a part-time job. You get to live your life, but for a few hours a week, you have to be what he needs you to be.”

“So why don’t you do it?” Rón had asked.

Leona had shrugged like it was nothing, even though Rón knew it must have hurt her in a way he could never understand. “I would, but he didn’t choose me.” Then she had flown off to Paris.

He never imagined that greeting starry-eyed strangers would become a highlight of his day. The thing he liked most was the look of wonder on their faces as they stepped into the penthouse. It was nice to live vicariously through their amazement. It had been a very long time since he had experienced that kind of wonder, and it reminded him that his life was anything but mundane, even when it felt that way. Besides, renting the penthouse out on Airbnb violated the building association rules in a major way and pissed off the other owners, a fact that Rón liked as much as his father did.

“Don’t go anywhere,” said Kavita, his father’s current girlfriend, calling to him from the living room as soon as he stepped inside. “He wants to talk to you.”

Where would I go? Rón wanted to say, but instead just said, “I’ll be here.”

He went up to his room, peeling the smile off his face – literally – and threw himself on his bed.

Rón’s father invented the digital N95 mask. Rón’s father invented a lot of things – or, more accurately, came up with the concepts and paid other people to invent them. Blas Escobedo was past the age of invention – he was an idea man now, because he could afford to be.

“Intelligence can only get you so far. True genius isn’t in merely being smart; it’s knowing how to wield your own intelligence, and that of others.”

His father was prone to pontification on any subject he was an expert on. Which was everything. He was even writing an inspirational book filled with aphorisms and uplifting advice. Or rather, he was paying someone else to listen to him talk, and write the book. Even before publication, it had already presold nearly a million copies. Because everyone wanted a piece of Blas Escobedo. Either a torn chunk of his flesh, a slice of his fortune, or just his attention – which is what Rón’s dad loved more than anything. Negative attention, positive, it didn’t matter as long as a sizeable number of the world’s spotlights were turned toward him.

And the brighter the light on his father, the darker the shadow for Rón to hide in. Or, more accurately, get lost in – because even in the rare moments he didn’t feel like hiding, he was stuck in his father’s shadow anyway; a territory as vast as the dark side of the moon.

There were times that Rón had tried to escape it. Forever. Only once seriously, though.

Rón was not short for Ronald, or Ronaldo, or anything

remotely typical. His full name was Tiburón Tigre Escobedo – Tiger Shark – because that was his father’s favorite apex ocean predator. All his siblings were named for apex predators. It was his father’s little joke that they all had to live with. (Of course, it turned on him ironically – as Rón’s brothers and sisters were increasingly predatory against their father.)

While his father had called him TeTe ever since he was small, it was far too diminutive for a sixteen-year-old who was already taller than him. He preferred Rón. It was simple and straightforward – but he kept the accent mark, which was entirely unnecessary in a single-syllable name; however, he wanted to give a nod to his actual name. While also being ironically pretentious.

Rón was the youngest of six siblings and half siblings, and the only one living with their father. For some reason, above all his other siblings, Blas Escobedo chose Rón as his mini-me, keeping him close at hand. While all the others spent their time and money partying in the Maldives and Ibiza, Rón stayed home in San Francisco to learn how to be rich and famous in a world that would rather he wasn’t.

“There are many people who don’t want to see someone with a name like Escobedo be the third-richest man in the world. And many more who think someone with a name like Escobedo must have gotten there through illegal means, instead of through education, inspiration, and hard work. Let them eat their sour grapes as we prove them all wrong.”

It was another quote from his father’s book. By “we,” he meant himself and Tiburón. He often included Rón in statements about himself, and always did his best to never let Rón feel left out, although he invariably did, because the world wasn’t interested in the young man in Blas Escobedo’s shadow. Not when his siblings were so much more flamboyant, photogenic,

and badly behaved. Which was the reason why his father wasn't grooming any of them to take over his various businesses. He'd made it clear that Rón was to be his successor in the world of high-stakes tech.

"It used to be that inheritance went to the eldest. The old ways are fine and good when they make sense. In this case they do not. Your brothers and sisters would squander, and bicker, and tear each other apart. Better to just give them a stipend enough to satisfy their appetites and send them on their way."

That particular morsel wasn't going into the book, but he had spoken it to Rón as if it was. Any potential inheritance, of course, was too far off the horizon to see. His father was still relatively young, and besides, he had a good portion of Silicon Valley working on ways to live forever.

"The way I see it, there's big money in longevity. Because human greed for money is only surpassed by human greed for time. Someone has already come up with a pill that can add several years to a person's life. I think we can do better."

His father wasn't a terrible person. Far from it. But the world loved to paint the filthy rich as filthy in every way. As for the money, Rón knew the truth. What people don't understand is that money doesn't change you. Instead, it constrains you. It limits who you are allowed to be in the eyes of the world, in the eyes of your friends, and even in the eyes of your family. When you have as much money as the Escobedos, it becomes a Victorian corset. Wear your wealth long enough and it cuts off your circulation, until you can barely breathe.

And so sometimes you don't even want to breathe anymore.

Because although Blas Escobedo could buy his youngest son anything under the sun, he couldn't buy him the one thing he wanted. A reason to be here.

They called Rón's first two attempts cries for help. Perhaps they were. But he got help. All sorts of help. His mother came back to live with him for a while – because divorce suddenly seems insignificant when your child's life is at stake. His father put his entire tech empire on hold to be there for Rón.

Medication, therapy, support. And it all helped for a time. But the black hole always came back.

Rón's third attempt was the serious one. He lost more blood than a person should and still be alive. But like his father, he was a fighter. A survivor, even if survival hadn't been his goal. And the fact that he lived through it made him think that maybe his body knew better than he did. That leaving was not the answer.

His father sat by his bedside the whole time he was in the hospital, praying over Rosaries Rón didn't know he had, and then in Hebrew, which Rón didn't even know he knew. Old Testament God, New Testament God. Yahweh, Jesus, Allah, Vishnu – it didn't matter as long as one of them answered.

Tiburón had never seen his father so humbled. So human. He remembered many of the things his father said to him when he was too weak to respond. He didn't orate or pontificate; he spoke in whispers from the heart. And sometimes he still did.

"You don't know this – only your grandparents do. But when I was your age, TeTe, I had similar thoughts of leaving this life. And like you, I tried, but luckily it was one of many things I wasn't very good at."

"Neither was I," Rón had croaked, which had made his father smile.

"*Was,*" repeated his father. "I hope that means you're starting to see it as something in the past."

His father had taken his hand then. Gently, so as not to disturb the bandages. "I found my passion in technology

and invention. It answered the *why* of my life. You know ... destruction and creation are two sides of the same coin. And self-destruction? It can become an act of self-creation given time and perspective. You will see. I promise you will see.”

Everyone at the hospital was paid handsomely to keep his attempted exit quiet, so Tiburón Tigre Escobedo did not become a banner headline, and the subject of media attention. Surprisingly, they all kept their silence. Not even a single tabloid exposé. It was the one time Rón was truly grateful for being invisible.

That was more than a year ago. And although the black hole was still there, he had become better at skating around its event horizon. But that didn't mean there weren't bad days.

“TeTe, are you home yet? Come downstairs and let's talk a bit.”

Rón hauled himself up and went down to his father's home office. It was a corner of the penthouse where the glass walls came together, kind of like a fish tank. His desk was turned at forty-five degrees. A lot of their furniture was cornered like that; damn the feng shui, Rón's father loved angles.

“All good?” his father asked. It was a catch-all question – like the set of five red-to-green emoji buttons they have outside restrooms to let management know your general impression of their hygiene. Today Rón gave him the second green button. Good but not great. Which was a respectable place to be.

“New family's in. They want to know who to worship.”

His father chuckled. “Whoever they want, as long as it isn't me.” A call came through on his phone, and he dismissed it. One thing about his father: he never let work interfere when he was having a conversation with Rón.

Through the fishbowl corner of the room, Rón could see

across the mouth of the bay to the picturesque communities of Sausalito and Tiburon. When he was very little and thought the world revolved around him, he used to think Tiburon was named for him. Then, when he got older and realized that the world revolved around his father, he accepted there was no connection between himself and the place across the bay.

“Some sad news, TeTe. Bennett, the evening doorman.”

“Oh no...” Rón knew what was coming before his father said it.

“He died of Crown Royale this morning.”

Rón had spoken to Bennett, couldn't have been two weeks ago. Talked about the Giants, and their prospects for the season. Now he'd never see another game. “Is there anything we can do?”

“I've offered to help his family ... but when someone goes like that, nothing you do will ever be enough. But there's something I'd like *you* to do, TeTe. It's too late to help Bennett, but maybe it will help others.” He cleared his throat, and hesitated. That's how Rón knew it was the kind of ask that would hurl Rón way out of his comfort zone. “I'd like you to record a speech to help galvanize young people to fight Crown Royale.”

“A speech...”

His father waved his hand. “Speeches are easy. If you don't want to write them, they can be written for you. The important thing is to mobilize people early. Prevention matters when facing a contagion this serious. You could make a difference and save lives.”

Maybe ... but would a speech given by Blas Escobedo's shadow matter to anyone? And if people did care, Rón didn't know how he'd fare as the center of attention. He had seen how some of his older siblings had suffered when the spotlight

flicked from their father to them. Pitón's drug problem, Jag's anger issues, Pantera's nude photo shoot. While his father was both loved and hated, Rón's siblings were universally reviled by the press, even when they weren't doing anything particularly obnoxious. The world simply hated the offspring of the rich and famous. Which was why Rón's father had tried so hard to shelter him from that world. Until now.

"Leona should do it. People will listen to her more than they'll listen to me. I'm fine just hosting the west penthouse."

"I'm winding that down," his father told him. "Crown Royale is getting worse – we shouldn't be renting anymore. The CDC now says there's a four percent mortality rate – one in twenty-five people who catch it will die. And there's reason to believe you might be at greater risk, Tiburón. It is best to limit your close interactions. Perhaps isolate entirely."

Rón suppressed a sigh. His "greater risk" was still only hearsay, but when it came to Rón, his father approached things with an abundance of caution.

"I'm not worried," Rón said. "Your masks work."

"Yes, but they're not one hundred percent. Nothing is. And besides, we'll soon be leaving the city, because you know how the city gets during these things."

"But what about school?"

"So you'll be remote when the school year starts."

"And my friends..."

"If they're true friends, they'll stay in touch. And if not, best to know now, so you can make others."

Rón took a moment to gauge his father. There was something in his eyes Rón didn't like. A certain rare kind of fear. Like the kind when he was by Rón's bedside in the hospital last year. Over his career, Blas Escobedo had watched his rockets explode.

He'd seen his stock take nosedives. He'd even had an attempt on his life. But those things hadn't rattled him. Rockets get rebuilt. Stocks rebound. Attackers get put away. This look was different. And Rón thought he knew why.

"Is it true what they're saying about Jarrick Javins?" Rón asked.

His father shifted in his seat. Rón could practically feel the man's blood pressure go up. "The news will report it tomorrow. The moment Javins recovered from Crown Royale, he gave all his money to charity, resigned from all of his companies, and vanished."

How does the richest person in the world vanish? Rón wondered.

"No one's seen him for days. Rumor has it he's walking the world with nothing but the clothes on his back."

Rón didn't know what to say, except, "I guess that makes you the second-richest man in the world now."

His father pursed his lips. "That's not how I wanted to get there." Then that look again. That look of secret terror. "This disease ... if it doesn't kill you, it steals your agency. Your ambition. It turns you into someone you're not and ruins you."

Rón tried to shrug it off. "You've always been charitable."

"If I give my money to charity, it's because I *choose* to – not because I've lost my mind. That's what's happening, TeTe – people are losing their minds." He tapped his fingers on his desk for a moment. "Have you ever heard of Howard Hughes, TeTe?"

Rón nodded. "Airplane guy, right? Richest in the world, like, what, fifty years ago?"

"On top of the world, then he disappeared. He lost it up here," his father said, tapping his temple. "I'm not going to become that."

"If you get Crown Royale, you'll deal," Rón said. It was

weird being the one to talk his father in from the ledge like this.
“You always deal.”

“If I go the way of Javins, there’ll be nothing left for you.
You know that, don’t you?”

“Who says I care all that much?”

“You’d care if it happened. It’s easy to imagine yourself happy without money, TeTe, but the reality is very different. It’s true that money can’t make you happy – but lack of it can’t make you happy either.”

They both let it sit for a while, allowing all the simmering fears to stew. Then something occurred to Rón.

“Didn’t Howard Hughes go into hiding because he was afraid of germs, too?”

His father grunted and tried to wave that off, but it still hung heavy in the air.

Looking back, Tiburón Tigre Escobedo would mark this as the moment he realized he was stronger than his father.