

Chad Taylor / HARD BOP (2000)

Renny is deaf in one ear. The doctors say it was an infection. Sasha says it's from the birth. Chance in a million. I don't know. It's not so bad. It's the other ear we should be worrying about. Don't get me wrong: he's all right.

Days I work wet plastering, nights washing dishes. Sasha says I'm biding my time but she never says for what. There's nothing wrong with being a builder. My grandfather was a builder. His first job as an apprentice was to fashion his own tools. He used a drill to make a drill, a hammer to make a hammer. I always liked that.

My father was an aeronautical engineer. Once when he was working he cut himself on a cooling unit vane and the gash got infected. He ran a fever and his arm swelled up.

When I was nine, he flew the family to Surfers' Paradise. We stayed in a clinker-brick motel. I remember one evening, waking up alone. They had left me to doze. Everything was quiet. The lounge chairs were empty. Later my father came back and took me down to the beach. They've caught a big shark, he said.

The fish was strung up on the jetty, blood dripping from the hook and the gaff holes punched in its flesh, Its eyes were black. Its jaws were wide open. I wanted to touch its teeth but the fisherman pulled me back: it's still alive, he said. He slapped the fish and it twisted on the hook, snapping. It only looked dead.

I thought I'd be in trouble for that but my father didn't say anything. He was watching with a glazed expression. He had forgotten for a second what he was looking at, maybe even where he was. He had woken up in his own empty room.

After he came to, we walked along the beach and counted the waves as they broke. I dragged a stick to make a trail in the sand.

His condition worsened over the years. When he was admitted to the home the nurse asked him for his details and typed them out on the form as he spoke, a letter at a time. Everything fitted in less than four lines.

Some things bring him back: jazz songs, old photographs, the smell of a beach towel. It's harder for my mother and everyone than for me.

He's able. He opens the door when you knock.

I have to introduce myself every time now. Tonight he shook my hand. He smiled and straightened his overalls and went back to his work bench. He keeps himself busy.

I asked about the music that was playing. He showed no interest in it. He was working.

He has the oldest radio in the western world. Ten transistors, the brown case speckled with house paint. Every place we had is splashed on the leather. The dial is the colour of smokers' teeth.

It stands by a photograph of him with the other engineers, dated in ball-point. Above that is a photocopy of a spiral staircase, and above that is a zeppelin, freshly doped.

I pointed to it.

'What's this one, Dad?'

'That is the Shenandoah,' he said.

I looked around. 'Don't you have other models of the Shenandoah?'

His cataracts blinked, haloes, like a milk stain around the rim of a plate.

'I don't think so.'

'I'm sure you've made the Shenandoah before, you know.'

He had a faint smile.

'The Shenandoah was a lovely craft,' he said.

It was always the Shenandoah.

It was the only craft he had ever made. He had modelled more than a dozen. They hung silver and white around the room, twisting on threads from the ceiling.

'How've you been, Dad?'

'Good.'

'It's me.'

'I know.'

'I'm sorry I haven't visited for a while, Dad. I had a lot of work on.'

'I know you're busy.'

'I was thinking about you, though.'

'Don't worry about me.'

'I always think about you.'

'You're a good boy.'

He set a blueprint of the Shenandoah underneath a piece of greaseproof paper and taped it to the work bench. The plasters on his fingertips were stiff with modelling cement. A breeze came through the window and dusted balsa wood shavings across the plan. He wiped them away and started sticking pins along the outline of the vessel, patiently mapping its

curves.

‘The Shenandoah crashed in 1925,’ he said.

‘Where did it crash?’

‘It was flying above Ohio.’

‘Did it crash during the day?’

‘It crashed at four o’clock in the morning.’

‘That’s some time to be in the air.’

‘Airships flew around the clock in those days. They floated. Because the air currents never stop up there. If you’re lighter than the air, you don’t need to come down. The ships floated on bags filled with helium. The bags were made from animal gut - gold beater’s skin.’

I nodded. ‘That’s amazing. So the Shenandoah was flying early in the morning? Should be pretty safe, then’

‘Oh no.’ He shook his head. ‘A lot of people might think that. But in fact, there was a storm approaching.’

‘The Shenandoah got caught in the storm?’

‘It was caught in the rising air current from the storm as it approached.’

‘A thousand feet a minute.’

‘Eh?’ he said.

I caught myself. ‘Sorry?’

He looked suspicious. ‘You know this story?’

‘No, no. Not at all. You said just now: it was caught in the rising air current, and rose at a thousand feet a minute.’

He stood saying nothing.

‘Dad?’

He was staring at the work bench, the paper.

‘Dad? You were saying - ?’

His head was down.

‘Tell me the story, Dad. I’d really love to hear the story.’

His mouth moved slowly. Almost imperceptibly. He was coming round.

Hold on to the movement. Don’t drop the movement.

‘Dad? You were saying about the Shenandoah. You said it was caught in the rising air, from the storm. Ohio in 1925. It was four in the morning.’

Looking down, moving his lips. Working up courage.

'What happened, Dad?'

'It was four in the morning,' he said.

'And what happened, Dad? Tell me what happened.'

'The air currents...'

'What about the air currents?'

'The air currents from an approaching storm lifted the Shenandoah to its pressure height of three thousand six hundred feet.'

'Really? Wow.'

'The ship levelled off. But then it rose again - this time to six thousand feet.'

'That must have placed a tremendous strain on the structure.'

'This placed a tremendous strain on the structure, of course.'

'What happened to the helium?'

'The expanding helium threatened to burst its bags.'

'My God. Surely that was the end of the Shenandoah.'

'But no. Automatic valves released the gas and reduced the pressure. But this made the Shenandoah heavier. Much heavier. By the time it reached cool air it began to fall like a rock.'

'Like a rock.'

'And the ship fell into a fresh current of air. The air hit the bow and raised it a third time, and the Shenandoah's structure gave way.'

'My God.'

'The bow just snapped off.'

'The whole bow. It just snapped off?'

'It snapped off. The stern section fell and the bow rose. Men standing in the midsection watched as the cables broke and the bow lifted away. The stern section broke in two and fell to the ground. The bow continued to rise - to ten thousand feet.'

'Where was the captain, Dad?'

'Well, the captain was in the bow. He ordered the men to steer the bow section like a hot air balloon.'

'How do you do that?'

'You bleed gas and release ballast. The bow of the Shenandoah floated down like a feather and landed in a field. The men just stepped off.'

'It's so dangerous.'

‘The key to lighter-than-air craft is not to argue with the elements. Keep your calm. And the engineers, they made mistakes - the designs were faulty. But that doesn’t need to happen again. Just when we’d figured it out, we gave up.’

He has long blue veins on the backs of his hands.

‘Do I remind you of what you were like at my age, Dad?’

A pin made a little popping noise as he stuck it through the greaseproof.

‘It didn’t burn like the Hindenburg,’ he said. ‘The Shenandoah was the first rigid airship to be filled with helium. That was what saved it from burning.’

Broken metal and goldbeaters’s skin, the crew roped together like falling mountaineers.

Driving home to the same station, Art Blakey filling in.

Renny is sleeping by the time I get back, lying with his mouth open. Sasha doesn’t move when I get into the bed. I set the alarm and pull her close and wait to fall asleep listening to the traffic.

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Chad Taylor’s new novel is THE CHURCH OF JOHN COLTRANE.

