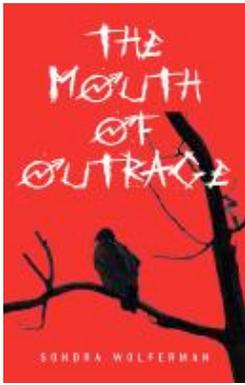


THE
MOUTH
OF
OUTRAGE



SONDRA WOLFERMAN



Retired New York City taxi driver Zachariah Higgins has just moved his family into their new home in the Pennsylvania countryside. Unbeknownst to the Higgins family, their cozy retreat in the foothills of the Endless Mountains is poised to become a regional hub for the natural gas industry. When threatened with the loss of his home through eminent domain, Zach takes matters into his own hands, with devastating consequences for himself and his family...

The Mouth of Outrage

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THE MOUTH OF OUTRAGE

Sondra Wolferman

Seal up the mouth of outrage for a while,
Till we can clear these ambiguities
And know their spring, their head, their true descent,
And then will I be general of your woes,
And lead you even to death. Meantime forbear,
And let mischance be slave to patience.—
Bring forth the parties of suspicion.

William Shakespeare (Romeo and Juliet)

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First Edition

Dedication

To those who sit in trees

PART I

ONE

The fire burned for half the night and set the pre-dawn sky aglow in a shower of sparks. Fresh explosions blew out windows and devoured the roof within minutes. Before sunrise, my home had been reduced to a pile of charred timbers, in a sea of mud and ashes left behind by the fire hoses.

A small crowd of neighbors gathered in the murky dawn to console me. *They are good people*, I thought. *Too good to have to put up with the blight that drove me to this act of desperation.*

I stood before the conflagration with my mouth hanging open, struck dumb by the destruction of my property. I wept conspicuously, which brought Gerhard Mueller and his wife, Ava, quickly to my side. Gerhard was a retired building contractor, six feet tall and built like a linebacker. He put a comforting arm around my shoulders while Ava, her hair in curlers and a parka thrown over her flannel nightgown, poured steaming cocoa into the lid of a thermos. She handed it to me along with a bologna sandwich.

“We’ll help you rebuild, Zach,” Gerhard said.

I turned my face away in shame over my unmanly tears and sobbed. “My dog...Sultan...he was in the house....”

“Oh, my God...” The Muellers were dog lovers with two Beagles of their own, and the horrified look on Ava’s face made me feel a pang of remorse. Only I knew that Sultan was safely tucked away at a boarding kennel, where I had placed him the day before.

Tears glistened in Ava’s eyes. “The poor thing...” Her voice held the trace of a German accent.

“I’ve heard of pets surviving these things,” Gerhard said with touching bravado. “There’s always a chance....”

I buried my face in my hands and moaned.

Ava took my empty cup and said, "If you need a place to stay for a few days, we've got plenty of room."

"Thanks," I said, "but...I don't want to impose. I'll check into a hotel."

"Nonsense! You need friends around you at a time like this. We have three empty bedrooms upstairs."

I had already booked a room at the Best Western in Williamsport, but I agreed to go home with the Muellers just to make my plight sound more convincing. "I guess I could stay the night," I said, "until the insurance company finds a place for me."

"*Zachariah Higgins?*" I turned at the sound of an unfamiliar voice and saw a wiry man with a gaunt face and a mustache, dressed in blue jeans and a brown leather jacket.

"Mike Nugent," the stranger said, extending a leather gloved hand, and handing me a business card with the other. "Investigator for the Northumberland County Fire Department." Despite the address on the card, his accent was pure Philadelphia.

I pumped the stubby hand and murmured, "How do you do, sir."

"I'm sorry about your property." His solicitous tone didn't quite match the intensity with which he scrutinized my face. "We got here too late to save much," he said. "The fire musta been burnin' awhile before we were called."

"I wasn't at home," I told him. "I'm just thankful no one was hurt."

"Will you be staying in the area? We might need to get in touch with you."

"He's coming home with us," Ava Mueller interrupted, looping her arm through mine in a proprietary manner. "We're the Muellers, next door. Our phone number is listed." Her

slightly defensive tone suggested she was trying to shield me from the prying questions of the investigator.

“Great. I’ll call you there if I need to.” Nugent sauntered away and slid behind the wheel of a battered Chevy Nova parked across the street.

The air was thick with lingering smoke and the odors of burned timber, wet ashes, and something vaguely reminiscent of an aluminum pot left on the stove too long. I could still taste the soot in the air as the three of us crossed the deserted private road that separated our two properties and ambled up the walkway to the front entrance of the Muellers’ home. I had always admired the couple’s three-story white colonial, with the bronze eagle over the transom, the flagstone walkway, and replicas of turn-of-the-century gas lamps on the front lawn. As they ushered me through the columned portico, I wasn’t surprised to see the early-American motif repeated inside. Simple but sturdy wood furnishings, braided throw rugs, and framed oil paintings all seemed to resemble some version of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Ava pointed the way to a bedroom on the second floor containing a four-poster bed, lots of frilly throw pillows, and a collection of antique dolls on a dresser. I felt like a heathen amid all those feminine trappings, but Ava made me feel at home.

“Try to get some sleep,” she said. The bathroom is at the end of the hall and I’ll leave some fresh towels in there for you.”

Flush with gratitude I lay down on top of the quilt for fear of soiling the linens with my sooty clothing. *It’s too bad you didn’t get to know these people better*, I told myself as I stared, sleepless, at the idle ceiling fan that hung over the bed. It wasn’t that kind of neighborhood. The residents of our development kept to themselves, and that was a good thing as far as I was concerned.

Cedar Hamlet was a rustic bedroom community beyond the easy reach of any metropolitan area, and many of its residents were refugees from big city life who had moved to Cedar Hamlet for the solitude and isolation it promised. Quite a few retirees lived among us, with empty nests and full retirement accounts, as well as a few young families who could afford to live away from the mainstream. It worked for me. A lifetime of rubbing elbows with the masses in the urban jungles of the “Big Apple” had cured me of any desire to get cozy with my new neighbors.

Buffered on three sides by state forestland and on the fourth by a protected wetland abutting the floodplain of the west branch of the Susquehanna River, the hamlet was named after the magnificent stand of Atlantic cedars surrounding the remnants of a glacial lake, fast reverting to swampland. A boreal bog teemed with herbivores and amphibious creatures, including some declining species, like the northern pine snake and bog turtles.

Currently there exists only one way in and out of the hamlet: via a picturesque causeway that spans the marshy grasses of the wetland. When the wind is right, I can hear cattails creaking on their six-foot stalks as they bend before the breeze, and catch the damp fishy odor of mudflats and freshwater mussels at low tide. Sometimes I get lucky and spot a blue heron arise dripping from some hidden pool among the reeds, with a fish in its mouth and a wingspan that makes me gasp.

Sharon and I had moved here with our family two years earlier, when the only sound that broke the afternoon silence was the occasional lazy drone of a Piper Tomahawk or another single-engine plane from the flight school at the southern end of the causeway. Frank Taylor Airfield had been reclaimed from an old military air base for the use of private recreational

planes. David, our six-year-old, loved watching those nimble machines, some of them painted in colorful hues like purple and aqua, which stood out against the pale northern sky. I swore he was going to be a pilot when he grew up. I had even thought of taking up flying as a hobby myself, but nothing ever came of it.

I had recently retired from my stressful job as a New York City taxicab driver, and we had a good year or so of bliss before things began to unravel. It started as a vague rumor, a tiny paragraph in a local newspaper announcing that Taylor Airfield had plans to build a new runway and expand its operations to provide landing space for corporate jets and commuter flights to and from metropolitan areas, like Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York. I read the announcement with a flicker of discomfort while standing in line at the Muncy Post Office, but by the time I had reached the head of the line I'd forgotten all about it as I got caught up in an errand-filled Saturday morning.

It was around that time, too, that Sharon and I began to experience the marital discord that would eventually result in our separation. She was my second wife, an Iranian born in Teheran but raised in an upscale suburb just east of the city line in Great Neck, New York. Sharon had begun to miss the turmoil of the city and was no longer content living out here in the boondocks. She complained of the long drives to shopping areas, the lack of cultural opportunities, and limited school choices for David. She missed too, of all things, the public transportation, the ethnic restaurants, the museums, theaters, and libraries of her hometown. Curiously, since I had never witnessed a single instance of religious fervor on my wife's part, Sharon suddenly claimed she missed having a mosque nearby! I, on the other hand, was becoming more and more enamored of our newfound seclusion and couldn't imagine living anywhere else but out here in the wilds.

When Sharon and I finally separated, we had reached an amicable arrangement with shared guardianship of our son. I kept the house and the dog. Sharon took David and the cats and moved back to her beloved Great Neck. I'd have David during school holidays and summer vacations. I also had a grown daughter from a previous marriage, but I'll get to that later.

TWO

I'd been living alone in Cedar Hamlet for about a year when the news about Taylor Airfield surfaced again. Driving along the causeway after a morning of bird-watching with a local chapter of the Audubon Society (which I had joined more out of loneliness than anything else), I observed a swarm of bulldozers and earthmoving equipment chewing at the forested buffer separating the airfield from the grasslands at the edge of the fen. With a knot in my stomach I parked alongside the road and, using a pair of binoculars I kept in the glove compartment for bird-watching forays, peered into the distance. The work crew had cleared a wide swath through the trees. It appeared that several acres of grassland had already been flattened, and they were in the process of draining a section of the marsh. On the ground lay several sections of industrial-grade pipeline. It was only then that I recalled the curious article I'd read in the *Dispatch* over a year ago while standing in the post office line.

When I got home I flipped through the pages of a local telephone directory, looking for someone I could call to find out what was going on. It occurred to me that I didn't even know who our so-called community leaders were—or if they even existed—so I ended up calling Vikki Lehmann, the head of the Homeowner's Association, a real-estate broker and the village gossip. If anybody could tell me what was going on, it was Vikki.

"Zach *who*?" she queried impatiently when I identified myself.

"Higgins..." I repeated. Perhaps you remember my wife...Sharon?"

"Oh! Sure. I haven't seen Sharon in a while."

"Well, actually, she's moved back to Great Neck with our son. I'm living here alone now."

“Oh...gee...I’m sorry to hear that. What can I do for you? Are you putting your house on the market?”

“No, nothing like that. I was just wondering...Do you know anything about the construction project over by Frank Taylor Field?”

“Haven’t you heard? They’re expanding the airfield to accommodate commuter flights.”

“I read something about it in the *Dispatch* a while back, but I thought that kind of thing would require years of environmental impact studies, public hearings, that sort of thing....”

“Well, as far as I know, they have all their construction permits,” Vikki said evasively, “and they do own the land.”

“Who owns the land?”

“The gas company...Tulsa Petroleum, I believe it’s called.”

“They own the wetland?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. They own the mineral rights underneath the airfield, and they’re preparing to conduct seismic tests for natural gas. They’re planning to make this area some sort of a regional hub for the industry.”

“Isn’t anybody else concerned about this?” I exclaimed somewhat petulantly. “What it’s going to do to our neighborhood? The noise...the pollution...the property values...”

There was a pause at the other end, as if Vikki were a little overwhelmed by my outburst. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to raise my voice.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mr. Higgins. Why don’t you bring it up at the board of directors meeting next month?”

That sounded pretty lame to me, but I thanked her for her time and hung up the phone.

A few weeks later I found myself in the plush, beige-carpeted living room of the Lehmanns, for the

semiannual Homeowners Association meeting. It struck me as odd at the time that none of the homeowners talked about the ongoing construction project at the airfield until I brought up the subject. “We were never properly informed of the development plans,” I said. “We have a right to be part of the review process. There are safety issues, environmental issues. It’s not too late for us to get an injunction.”

“The development will bring jobs and tax revenues into the area,” parroted Sydney Lehmann.

“Half the people in our community are retired,” I argued. “And most of the others are established professionals. We don’t need jobs. We need clean air and water. We need to be concerned about what’s going on beneath the ground under our feet.” I was referring to the “subsurface rights” Vikki had mentioned to me over the phone.

“We have a financial stake in the project,” proclaimed Ainsley Bock, a podiatrist who practiced out of his home.

“Financial stake? What do you mean?”

An awkward silence ensued, during which the host sidled up to me with a thick slice of strawberry cheesecake. “Homemade,” he said with a wink in his tone. Then he lowered his voice as if he were about to divulge the secret to the atomic bomb and said, “You’re looking at this the wrong way, Zach. We have information from reliable sources that the energy company doing the explorations will be going public within six months. We can all get in on the initial offering and make a killing.”

Of course. It was all about money. “Thanks...but, no thanks.”

While the other guests descended on the refreshments table I slipped out the back door without saying good-bye.

Word got around in the weeks following that meeting that I was “stirring up trouble,” and I began to feel the chill—nothing overt or physical, mind you, just people throwing dirty looks at me from car windows, snubbing me in town, cutting me off on the roads, that sort of thing. But after a while, the community’s lack of concern about the development had the curious effect of lulling me into a sense of complacency, as if I were overreacting to the whole thing. After all, I reminded myself, we were a good fifty miles away from the “hot spots” of the shale gas boom in the Endless Mountains. The odds of finding any meaningful deposits of natural gas in this area were slim. Maybe my neighbors knew something I didn’t know and was afraid to ask.

I awoke at daybreak several months later to a muffled boom, followed by a vague vibration like a rolling wave that rocked my bed ever so slightly. Earthquake? No way. The last time a quake strong enough to rock a house in this part of the country was somewhere around the seventeenth century. Shotgun blast? No, it was way too early for hunting season. Then it hit me. *Seismic testing*. Powerful sound waves were sent down boreholes, looking for subtle variations in the returning echoes that would indicate the presence of rock formations with the potential for natural gas deposits.

My heart went out to all the unsuspecting plants and critters that had made that glacial bog their home for eons and must now be scared out of their wits by this violent assault upon the earth. Shortly after the excavations began I witnessed a migration of displaced wildlife invading our community—nocturnal creatures terrorized by the round-the-clock noise of chainsaws and bulldozers, and the intense glare of the lights that greeted them when they emerged from their dens to hunt and feed at dusk. Frogs, toads, salamanders, turtles, and snakes---adapted to the moist, dark,

silent world of the hidden bogs and swamps---were suddenly forced into the sterility of our manicured subdivision. It was heartbreaking to watch.

The truth went far beyond my basest imaginings. The proposed airfield that was the source of my angst was only the beginning. Plans were afoot to build a jetport and a brand-new city of 250,000, connected by a spur to the northeast extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, all within a forty-square-mile tract of undisturbed land in the Endless Mountains in Montour and Northumberland counties.

The migration of wildlife was followed within a few weeks by a knock at my front door—a rarity these days, with my family gone and me holed up like a hermit, wallowing in my own anger and self-pity. I hadn't done a load of laundry in over a month, and there were days I didn't even bother to change out of my pj's (which normally consisted of shapeless sweatpants, a stained T-shirt, and dirty socks and slippers), and this just happened to be one of those days. The house smelled like a gym locker after a heavy workout.

I opened my front door to an adult male wearing a yellow hard hat and dark glasses and carrying a clipboard with a sheaf of papers. Despite the hard hat and work boots, the remainder of his attire was businesslike—pressed slacks, button-down shirt, a narrow tie, and zip-front club jacket with some sort of ID badge stuck to the front of it. I knew immediately he represented the gas company—in a supervisory capacity as opposed to a common utility worker.

With an insincere, almost demonic grin the land agent introduced himself as William something-or-other with Apex Energy Services and extended his hand to me. Out of sheer habit and gentlemanly courtesy I shook his hand and immediately wished I hadn't. This man was the enemy, or his messenger, so I drew the line at inviting him into my home and

just stood in the doorway waiting for him to state his mission from the wooden surface of my front deck.

“You’ve probably received our recent mailing,” he said, without removing his dark glasses.

“I don’t recall...” I said, lying.

“We’re conducting land surveys of the area in preparation for the laying of some new gas pipeline.”

I felt the rage build inside me as I looked him directly in the eyes—what I could see of them, that is, behind the Ray-Bans—but I restrained myself. *Don’t shoot the messenger*, I reminded myself.

The agent fidgeted a little, shifting his weight from one spanking-new tan work boot to the other, clearly put off by my rude silence. “We sent out a form to be signed by property owners, granting us permission to come onto your property for surveying purposes...?” He ended the statement with an invisible question mark, like a teenage girl.

He paused, waiting for some response, which I again denied him.

He looked down at his paperwork and said, “Our records show we didn’t receive a signed permission slip from you...which is understandable. The mail can be unreliable in these rural areas.”

I scoffed inwardly at him, enjoying his discomfort. Clearly he knew little about “these rural areas,” for our mail service was far better than anything I’d experienced in the big city. My lips remained sealed.

“So, I brought some forms along, if you wouldn’t mind. I have a survey crew working its way along the causeway. We might have to enter your property in the back, at the edge of the stream buffer...” He extended the clipboard tentatively in my direction along with a ballpoint pen.

I quietly closed my front door in his face.

Months went by, with no repercussions until the fall of that same year, when I received notice from the company's attorney that Apex Energy Services had been granted "public utility status" by the state licensing board, which gave them the authority to seize private property through eminent domain in order to "serve the public good." They were prepared to make a final offer on my property, the letter said—an offer which was not only below the market value of my property, but was well below the price I had paid for the home some two and a half years earlier. Predictably, property values had plunged throughout the region as a result of the industrial activities.

In a fit of neighborly frustration, I took the letter across the street to the Muellers, the only neighbors with whom I had had any contact within the past year or so—and minimal contact at that—to find out if they had received similar offers and what they planned to do about it. I learned that my side of the street happened to fall just inside the boundary of the proposed pipeline right-of-way, while the homes on the opposite side of the thoroughfare that bisected our subdivision were not included in the eminent domain order.

I could exhaust my savings in a lengthy court battle trying to fight the order, a course of action that, given the power of the oligarchy, was sure to end in failure. Or I could simply take the money they offered and live out the rest of my days in shame and ignominy over my own cowardice.

Like a rubber band stretched to the breaking point, something snapped inside my head. The cumulative impact of all I had suffered over the past several years, beginning with the assault and injury that took away my livelihood in New York City, the dissolution of my family, and now, the impending loss of my home, not through any fault of my own but because of a corporate giant whose claims of "serving the public good" fell far short of the actual motive for the seizure of my property: all

of it hit me with such force, I nearly staggered under the weight of it all.

Meanwhile, the surveyors continued their aerial forays with helicopters and light-duty aircraft, and there were days when the continual roar in the air made my pulse race and my ears ring, until my whole being rebelled against the cruel onslaught of the corporate greed that had invaded my paradise. The day I went out to the back of my property with a shotgun and aimed it at a Cessna was the day I knew I'd had enough. I decided to sell my house and move, only to learn from an appraiser that my three-bedroom home had lost nearly 50 percent of its value. Nobody in their right mind would pay top dollar to live next door to a drilling rig and/or a hundred-foot-wide pipeline right-of-way.

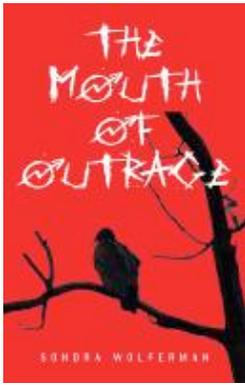
First I cried, but then I came to my senses. All was not lost—my property was, after all, insured to the hilt.

During the next several days, in a paroxysm of rage and self-pity, I embarked on the ill-conceived plan that would lead not to victory or freedom, but to my homelessness, arrest, and imprisonment. I spent a few afternoons at the local library reading up on the mechanics of house fires. Reading down a list of the ten most common causes of house fires, I eliminated those that were too foreign to my situation to look like accidents. Smoking, for example. I had kicked that habit some twenty years earlier. So I couldn't blame a fire on falling asleep with a lit cigarette in my hand. Likewise cooking accidents, which appeared to be the number-two cause of house fires these days. As a single man (temporarily at least) living alone, I did a bare minimum of food preparation involving an oven or stovetop, and so would be highly unlikely to start an accidental fire in that manner. Kids playing with fire? Out of the question. Space heater left too close to the living room drapes? That wouldn't wash either, since I had a fully functional heating

system in the home and no need for portable space heaters. Electrical problems, overloaded circuits, faulty wiring, overuse of extension cords, etc. were all possibilities, but to start an electrical fire and make it look like an accident would require an expertise I most certainly lacked. Candles left unattended? That wouldn't work either. I wasn't the romantic sort, and nobody would believe otherwise. I read on down the list. Christmas tree fires. Fireplaces with backed-up chimneys. My home had a wood-burning stove stashed in a corner of the living room, but I wasn't the sort to go out and split logs, so the woodstove, while providing a nice decorative touch, had gone unused since the day we moved in.

Finally I arrived at something that sparked my interest (pun intended). *Clothes dryers*. Poor maintenance, improper venting, and neglecting to empty lint trays and clear lint from underneath and around those appliances were, apparently, among the leading causes of house fires. Bingo. I was a man living alone, recently estranged from a wife who had done most of the household chores with little help from me. Indeed, since my family's departure I had neglected to maintain the washer and dryer or clean out the lint on a regular basis. I could pack some lint around the machine, load the tumbler with flammable materials, set them on fire, and walk away, as if I'd simply gone out to do some errands with the machine running.

The first step was to clog the exhaust ducts that vented my clothes dryer....



Retired New York City taxi driver Zachariah Higgins has just moved his family into their new home in the Pennsylvania countryside. Unbeknownst to the Higgins family, their cozy retreat in the foothills of the Endless Mountains is poised to become a regional hub for the natural gas industry. When threatened with the loss of his home through eminent domain, Zach takes matters into his own hands, with devastating consequences for himself and his family...

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