

The Membrane, Book One

Cocoon

D. Rose

Reading Sample

The People in This Book

Jude Malek, 33, midwife at Brookdale Hospital, Brownsville. Grew up in the Spring Creek Towers, East New York. Lives alone in Greenpoint, on Calyer Street, back building, third floor. Rode her bike to work every day until the right-turning trucks. Her shoulder still tells the story when the weather changes. Jude works at the only border that must never be allowed to close.

Miguel Torres, 41, bus operator for the MTA, the B41. Born in Brooklyn, raised five people deep in small rooms, now living in the Pink Houses, East New York: two bedrooms, about 730 square feet, five people. The friendliest man on his route. Never had a room of his own and wants nothing in this world so much as one quiet hour.

Shannon Kelly, 38, born Kelly, geriatric aide on the evening shift. From Staten Island. Married to Miguel since 2017. Has walked home with her keys between her fingers for fifteen years. Her job only works with open hands.

The kids: Flynn, 13, signs everything “F. Kelly” and can prove statistically why. Iris, 10, keeps tally sheets on family life and gives class reports on Governor Laura Kelly. Mateo, 3, likes to knock on things.

Dr. Meredith Voss, 47, physicist, founder of Aegis Systems at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Mother of Riley, who died in a crowd on the last night of 2026. Afterward, Meredith built something. She wears a child’s braided bracelet under her sleeve and her

own field set to zero.

Walt Sokolowski, 64, locksmith, retired, Greenpoint, the workshop shed in the shared yard. Widower. Opened doors for this city for forty years. His week is a calendar of substitute contacts. Jude's neighbor. Oils bike locks nobody asked him to oil.

Detective Erin Marten, 43, NYPD Homicide. From Buffalo, and you can hear it when she's tired. Divorced because the job always rang first. On good terms with her ex, polite with his new wife, in a standing feud with the empty apartment in Sunnyside. Her son Jonah lives with his father in Philadelphia. Her tools are people.

Tom Sadler, 45, building-systems electrician, maintenance tech under contract to Aegis. From Dayton, Ohio. Very smart, very neat, very polite, in a way that leaves you feeling smaller. Nobody knows anything about his private life. That is not an accident.

Dr. Simin Arasteh, 36, firmware engineer at Aegis. Born in Tehran, raised in Boston, MIT. Writes tickets that are better left open.

August Van Reeden, 59, heir to a Hudson Valley shipping fortune, investor. A charming man who never again wants to wait, smell, be jostled, be asked, or be touched. He buys things that do not exist yet.

Curate Luke Behrend, 31, an Episcopal parish in Fort Greene. Believes you come before God without armor. Will matter later.

And New York. Eight and a half million people promising each other every morning not to see each other. It's called courtesy. It is the oldest contract in the city, and nobody has ever signed it.

Prologue: New Year's Eve

You have to know more about Riley Voss than her death, or in the end she'll belong to the people who only know her death. So: Riley Voss, seventeen, listens to music her mother calls "structureless," which Riley has repurposed as a compliment. She wants to study marine biology or set design, depending on the day of the week. She can do impressions, accurate to the second, her English teacher, the evening news anchor, her mother on the phone with the patent office, and she uses this gift strictly in the service of good, she says, grinning like somebody who interprets the borders of good generously. She braids bracelets, has since fifth grade, out of habit, watching TV, talking, her fingers do it on their own. Half of Pittsburgh wore her bracelets once. Later, half the Navy Yard.

And she has a deal with her mother, has had it for years, it dates back to the playground era: Meredith doesn't have to come in. Not into any bounce house, any school fair, any crowd. Meredith stands at the edge, that is her place, she has never been able to do it any other way, in a crowd everything tightens, it was like that back in Pittsburgh, in the department stores, whenever they filled up. The deal goes: Riley goes in, Meredith waits at the edge, and when Riley comes out she raises her hand, briefly, like a swimmer. That's all. For seventeen years the deal held, at every street fair, every concert, and it would have held on the last night of 2026 too, if the world kept to its probabilities.

The concert hall on the Williamsburg waterfront is sold out, and in front of it there's a festival, cider stands, food trucks, a Ferris wheel turning against the cold night. Riley is there with three girlfriends; Meredith drove them, because the trains are packed and because driving is her way of being there without being there. She parks far out and walks the little group as far as the barricade at the edge of the fairground, her post, a cup of hot cider in her hand that she doesn't drink. It's there to be held.

"One o'clock at the Ferris wheel," Riley says, already half in the crowd.

"One o'clock at the Ferris wheel."

"Mom." Riley comes back once more, two steps against the current, and this is the part Meredith will replay a thousand times in the years that follow, forward, backward, in slow motion: Riley comes back, pulls off her glove, takes Meredith's wrist, and slides something over her hand, braided, red and yellow and violet. "Finished it today. Came out a little small. Just take it off if it pinches."

"It pinches already."

"Then you'll know it's there." Riley grins her borders-of-good grin, raises her hand, briefly, like a swimmer, and the crowd takes her.

What happens next has been investigated many times, and Meredith has read every report, and none of them tells it right, because reports start with causes and never with the standing.

Meredith stands at the barricade. It is eleven forty. The fairground is supposed to empty into the hall at midnight, for the big concert, but the hall opens late, two of the six doors jam, and the fairground keeps filling from behind, from the trains, nobody counts, it's New Year's Eve, who counts on New Year's Eve. The passage between the fairground and the forecourt of the hall is twenty-six feet wide, and two barricades narrow it to fifteen; why, two courts will try to establish and won't. Toward midnight there begins, in the passage, what the expert reports will call "retrograde densification" and what the language of the people before that never needed a word for: the crowd backs up, wave upon wave, compacted by its own supply, five bodies to the square yard, six, seven.

Meredith sees it from the barricade. That's the part nobody understands who wasn't standing there: you see it, and you don't. A full crowd and a dying crowd look almost the same from the outside; the difference is a frequency, a tipping of the motion, the arms that are up instead of down, and Meredith, the physicist, who has spent her life reading interfaces, reads it earlier than most. At four minutes past midnight she texts Riley: "where are you." At five past: "Riley." At six past she goes over the barricade.

She makes it sixty feet.

Sixty feet: she paced it off later, one gray afternoon in February, when the fairground was empty and the passage was just a stretch of asphalt. Sixty feet is what rage will carry you; after that the medium takes over. A crowd is not an obstacle, it is a

condition: yielding, warm, well-meaning, unbeatable. People make room for her as best they can; nobody can, there is no room to make. She screams Riley's name, and around her a hundred others scream a hundred other names, and that is the sound of that night, the one she will never get out of her ears: a crowd calling itself by name and not hearing.

At some point the crowd presses her back against the barricade, gently, finally, the way the sea returns a swimmer, and there she stands, with the mute phone in her hand, and waits, and the Ferris wheel keeps turning above it all, because nobody thought to stop it, and from its gondolas people are filming the fireworks over the river.

Fourteen people die in the passage, standing, upright, leaned into one another like books. Thirteen strangers and Riley Voss, seventeen, marine biology or set design, depending on the day of the week.

Meredith learns of it at four in the morning in a school gym serving as a family assistance center, from a police officer who was trained for this and trembles anyway. She is asked whether there's anyone for her, anyone they can call. She says yes, so the woman can stop asking. Nobody comes; there is nobody; since Riley's father, who disappeared early and thoroughly, there have only ever been the two of them, one at the edge, one in the crowd, connected by a raised hand.

What remains of that night sorts itself, in the weeks after, into three things.

The first is the bracelet, which pinches. She does not take it off. The EMT saw it and wanted to loosen it, out of kindness, and Meredith, for the first time in her life, slapped a stranger's hand away.

The second is a sentence from the final report, page 212, a footnote, technical, offhand: "At densities above six persons per square yard, the individual is passively exposed to the pressure forces of the collective; individual protective reactions are ineffective." Meredith reads the footnote at a kitchen table in Clinton Hill, in February, at night, and reads it again, and again, and at some point she gets up, finds a legal pad, and starts to calculate, not in order to forget, she has never claimed that, but in order to contradict the sentence. Individual protective reactions are ineffective. There would have to be, she writes, in her straight hand, a reaction that comes neither from the individual nor from the collective. A third instance. A boundary that does not negotiate, because it cannot negotiate. If you could stop matter above a threshold velocity, selectively, in a thin layer.

By six in the morning the pad is full, and the vow has an equation.

And the third is the deal, which lives on, transformed, the way contracts live on when one party is missing: ever since, Meredith stands at the edge again. At the edge of every conference, every factory floor, every company of her own. She waits; nobody watching her work would call it that, but she knows it precisely, she has just never told anyone: that all these

years, in every full room, at every test rig, she watches the crowd with half an eye, in case somewhere, between the heads, briefly, like a swimmer's, a hand comes up after all.

You don't build a company with something like that at your back. That is exactly what you build one with.

Part One: The Contracts

Chapter 1: Broadway Junction, 5:42 a.m.

There's a rule on a packed L train that isn't posted anywhere and that everybody knows anyway: you're allowed to touch everything except with your eyes.

I'm standing in the third car, my face about eight inches from the shoulder of a man who smells like cold smoke and strawberry gum, and both of us are pretending, with great care, that the other one is air. He looks at his phone. I look at the spot between his ear and the window where Brooklyn slides by, black and orange, with the first lit kitchens. Behind me, somebody is breathing on my neck. I don't know who it is, I never will, and that is exactly the arrangement.

Five forty-two, Broadway Junction. The doors open and the platform pushes a fresh load of people in, though by the laws of physics nothing more fits in here. At this hour, physics is off the clock in this city. A backpack catches me in the ribs, a woman murmurs "sorry" without looking at me, and I shift two inches to the left that I do not have. The man with the strawberry gum lifts his phone higher, like a snorkel.

I'm a midwife, Jude Malek, Labor and Delivery at Brookdale. I say that up front because it explains everything that comes after. My job consists of getting closer to total strangers than their own families ever will, and in precisely the three or four hours of their lives when they have the least courtesy left. I hold women who scream at me. I wipe foreheads that are not mine. We are the last profession in this city that still works with both

hands, says my colleague Roz, and then she laughs her smoker's laugh, which sounds like a lawnmower catching on the third pull.

Maybe that's why I can describe what actually happens on this train. Other people take this for crowding. I take it for a masterpiece. Two hundred and fifty people in one car, every one of them within reach of ten strange hands, and nothing happens. Nobody screams. Nobody bites. Everybody carries invisible walls, built out of gazes, out of earbuds, out of a backpack held on a lap, and everybody maintains everybody else's walls by not looking at them. This is not crowding. This is a contract with eight and a half million signatures, not one of which exists.

My shoulder reports in when the train lurches. The shoulder is my barometer. It forecasts weather, and it tells a story if you let it: for two years I rode my bike to work every day, back when the job was in Coney Island, thirteen miles out, thirteen miles home, Williamsburg, Bed-Stuy, Flatbush, and down to the water, a gift in summer, a character test in January. Two years, two accidents. Both times a truck turning right, both times the same physics: a driver checks his mirror, and in that mirror I do not appear. The second time it was the shoulder's turn, the joint, the whole mechanism. When I could work again I transferred to Brookdale, six miles instead of thirteen, and Dr. Brennan, my new chief, called me into her office my first week, set a cup of tea in front of me and said: "Malek, I read your file. I'm going to say this once and never again. No more bike. We

need you.” She was looking at my shoulder while she said it, the way you look at a colleague who has given notice.

Since then I ride the train. My bike stands in the yard, and I use it maybe three times a year, on Sundays, when the city sleeps and the trucks sleep too. You could put it this way: I traded freedom for statistics. The statistics run more on time, but they smell like strawberry gum.

At my stop I get out, and the car exhales behind me like a thing that is alive. Outside, the morning is cold and quiet, and for a good ten minutes, on the walk to the hospital, the world belongs to me. That is my daily ration of solitude: ten minutes, two crosswalks, one bakery breathing yeast into the street. I have colleagues who drive to work just to stretch that ration. Roz says her car is the only room in the world where she can sing, curse, and talk to her dead mother, all three at once, and I believe every word.

At 6:30 I take over Delivery Room Two from the night shift. At 7:04 a woman named Katie grips my hand so hard my ring finger goes numb.

Katie is thirty-two, first baby, eleven hours into labor, and she has arrived at the point I call the tipping point: the moment when a human being stops caring about everything that mattered to her all her life. Dignity. Hair. Word choice. The robe has been lying somewhere for hours, so has the crossword her husband brought, and Katie hangs vertically off my neck like a drowning woman and bellows into my ear that she wants to go home.

"I know," I say. "We'll do that in a minute. Baby first."

Her husband stands by and does what men in delivery rooms do when they're good at it: he is present and he does not interfere. He holds her water bottle like a relay baton. At 8:06 he moves the bottle to his left hand because Katie has crushed his right. Nobody ever tells that part afterward: that the women in here press men's hands to pulp, the small women too, the small women especially. I've seen fathers on the arms of five-foot-two wives wear a blue hand for days like a service medal. One of them said at least now he knew what a contraction felt like. His wife laughed so hard the monitor spiked. In between, the husband looks at me with that look I've known for years and still like, the look of somebody understanding for the first time that closeness is not a feeling. It's work.

At 8:19 the child is there. A girl, seven pounds one ounce, furious as a small senator. I lay her on Katie's chest, skin to skin, and Katie, who ten minutes ago was cursing her entire existence, makes that sound no language on earth can spell, half laughter, half its opposite. The husband cries into the water bottle. I stand there with gloves full of life and think what I always think in these moments: this is the only place in the city where the contract does not apply. In here people look, touch, scream, smell, and nobody apologizes. The delivery room is the exception that proves the rule is an invention.

At the two o'clock handoff, Roz brings up a story she read online. Some outfit at the Navy Yard, she says, is working on a device that does your distance for you. "A field, if you can

picture it. Like a bubble. Nobody can get at you anymore."

"At who?"

"At you. At anybody wearing the thing."

I strip off my gloves and drop them in the bin. "And who holds the Katies?"

Roz shrugs. "Didn't say."

On the ride home the train is emptier, half full, which in New York means: you get to choose who you don't want to sit next to. I play the game everybody plays and everybody believes only they play. The single seat? Taken. The seat next to the sleeping woman: good. The seat next to the guy on speakerphone: that one stays empty all the way to Canarsie, the whole city knows it. I sit down next to the sleeper, she smells like cinnamon, and for twenty minutes we are the perfect couple: two people who want nothing from each other.

At home, back building, third floor, Walt is in the yard. Walt is my neighbor, sixty-four, retired locksmith, and he has the habit of repairing things nobody asked him to repair. Today he's kneeling next to my bike, which has been leaning against the wall since spring like a guilty conscience, and oiling the lock.

"It squeaks," he says without looking up.

"I barely use it, Walt."

"Exactly. What you don't use, you have to take care of. What you use takes care of itself." He straightens up, knees cracking,

and wipes his fingers on a rag he always carries, presumably in his sleep. "Your derailleur I'll do Thursday."

"You don't have to do that."

"Don't have to," he says, satisfied, and heads for his door, slow, with that walk of men who spent forty years kneeling in front of other people's doors. At the door he turns around. "Jude. If you ever make that babka again."

"Saturday," I say.

"Just saying." The door falls shut.

Upstairs in my kitchen I eat standing up whatever the refrigerator will give, and the apartment is as quiet as I wished it would be at six this morning on the L. That's the joke of my life, and I've known the punch line a long time: for twelve hours I am there for everyone, hands, ears, everything, and when I finally don't have to stand anyone anymore, there is no one left to stand. I have earned one hour of being unreachable and I receive, instead, an evening of being alone. The dosage never comes out right. Not for anyone I know.

Outside a plane drags itself across the yard toward LaGuardia, and somewhere below me an old man is oiling things nobody uses so that tomorrow somebody will ring his bell and complain, and I think about Roz's bubble, about that device from the Navy Yard that does your distance for you.

Automatically. As if distance had ever been the problem, and not the dosage.

I rinse the plate, set it to dry, and my shoulder says: rain tomorrow.

It's right.

Chapter 2: The B41

Miguel Torres knows his bus better than his apartment, which is partly because the bus is bigger.

Sixty feet of articulated coach, built the decade before last, a driver's seat he has shaped to himself over nine years so thoroughly that the morning-shift guys curse when they inherit it. The B41 runs from downtown Brooklyn to Kings Plaza, straight down Flatbush, through everything the borough has to offer: courthouses, brownstones, the park, the churches, the malls, and if you drive this route long enough, Miguel says, you don't need a newspaper anymore. You just watch who gets on, who gets off where, and who won't sit next to whom.

Six fifteen, the first stop after the depot pull-out. The early shift boards: two men in painter's pants, a nurse with a thermos, a kid with a gym bag who looks like he's been up all night and is now riding home on parole. Miguel nods to each of them. Most nod back. There are drivers who stare straight ahead on principle, and there is Miguel, who holds that a bus driver is the last doorman this city has. Somebody ought to know who's coming in.

In the mirror he watches the show he has watched every morning for nine years and that still entertains him: seat selection. The bus is humanity's most honest laboratory. First the single seats fill, all of them, always, no exceptions. Then the doubles, according to a ranking that is written nowhere and that everyone carries in their head: first next to the tiny old

lady, then next to the woman with headphones, then next to the tidy man with the briefcase. The seat next to the guy talking to himself stays free until the bus bursts. And the window seat is a trap, everybody knows it: whoever sits there will have to petition for release later, "excuse me, this is mine," that half rise, that rotation of the knees into the aisle, that whole small diplomacy.

At the Junction stretch the bus overflows. Now the second rule applies: everyone squeezes together and no one squeezes together. The backpacks stay on shoulders, where they work like shields. A woman presses her purse to her chest like an infant. Two teenagers hang in the back corner where the young have hung since buses existed, and up front by Miguel collect the old people, because up front is the driver, and the driver is the government. Miguel once calculated that on a rush-hour morning he transports about twelve hundred people, not one of whom would voluntarily touch another, and that they all touch anyway, constantly, at poles, at grab handles, at shoulders, and that this works only because everyone pretends it is not happening.

"Don't look, don't talk, don't smell," his brother Rafael said once, visiting. "Your transit system is like a very bad marriage." Rafael lives in Santo Domingo and drives a taxi and talks to every fare whether the fare likes it or not. Miguel has sent him voice memos from the depot ever since, little dispatches from the land of the silent. Rafael answers with voice memos in which you can always hear gulls and usually laughter.

At four thirty Miguel hands off the bus and rides home as a passenger, the 3 train out to New Lots, and the doorman becomes a passenger again: he posts up by the door, puts in his earbuds with nothing playing, shield only, and stares at a point above all heads. You have to know the rules to appreciate them. You have to administer them all day to hate them.

The apartment: the Pink Houses, eighth floor, two bedrooms, about 730 square feet, five people. When Miguel unlocks the door he performs what he calls the airlock: jacket on the hook where four jackets already hang, shoes into the rack that is no longer a rack but a mound with a history, and then two seconds standing still, listening to what's waiting.

Today: Mateo. The three-year-old comes rocketing down the hallway like something that ought to be on a leash and clamps onto Miguel's leg, and Miguel walks the last stretch to the kitchen as a man wearing a child for an ankle monitor, and it is the best moment of his day, every day. The door across the hall is still open; Miss Ramona is gathering up her knitting. She takes Mateo on the days Shannon has the late shift, until Miguel gets home, has for years, paid in empanadas and gratitude.

At the kitchen table, Iris is bent over a notebook. Iris is ten, has Shannon's serious eyebrows and a way of looking at adults that makes certain teachers nervous. In front of her lies a ruler.

"What's this going to be?" Miguel asks.

"Statistics." Iris does not cover the notebook. Iris never covers anything; she has no need of secrets. "I'm counting something."

“What are you counting?”

“Not saying yet. The survey is in progress.”

Miguel decides against further questions, because he knows from experience that Iris’s surveys sooner or later end up as a wall chart, usually at an inconvenient moment. Last year she documented for four weeks who changed the toilet paper roll and how often, and presented the results at dinner, with a bar graph. Miguel did not come out well.

Out of the kids’ room that Flynn and Mateo share comes Flynn, thirteen, in his jersey, and opens the refrigerator with the assurance of a man for whom food is a natural phenomenon.

“Dad. Tell Mom to call the school. They put me down as Torres again.”

“You are a Torres. Also.”

“I am a Torres-Kelly,” Flynn says with dignity, “and for short, Kelly. It’s my professional name. I’ve explained this. It’s statistics.”

“Explain it again,” Miguel says, because he loves the explanation.

Flynn sets down the milk and raises one finger. “Jim Kelly took the Bills to four straight Super Bowls. Four. In a row. Hall of Fame, two thousand two. Now find me a Torres in the Hall of Fame. There isn’t one, Dad. Zero. I play quarterback. That’s not an opinion, that’s math.”

“He lost all four,” Iris says without looking up.

“He GOT to four!”

Miguel lets the two of them fight it out and puts water on. It amuses him that his children compete for the Irish half of their double name the way other siblings compete for the bigger room. Iris wants to be Kelly too, but for an entirely different reason: in the school library she read a profile of a governor, Laura Kelly, out in Kansas, who ran a whole state, budgets, floods, the works, and ever since, Iris says things like: “You have to organize the help, not just feel it.” This year she is giving her third class report on the woman. The teacher gently suggested maybe choosing somebody new, and Iris replied that she was not yet done with the subject.

Shannon has the late shift and won’t be home before eleven. So Miguel cooks what he can cook: pasta, red sauce, grated cheese in the quantity Mateo considers appropriate, namely all of it. It is loud at the table. It is always loud at the table. Flynn narrates practice, Iris corrects Flynn’s numbers, Mateo sings the cheese song, which he composed himself and which consists of the word cheese, and Miguel sits in the middle of it, eating, nodding, thinking a thing he would never say out loud.

He would like one hour of hearing nothing.

Not forever. Not even an evening. One hour. He loves every single person at this table with a force that sometimes scares him, and still there is this point, usually around seven, when his head is as full as the bus at the Junction, and then he wants all

the sounds of the world to step off for a stop. He never had a room of his own. Not as a kid, sleeping alongside Rafael and their father's toolboxes, and not now: two bedrooms and the windowless box. Parents in one, Flynn and Mateo in the other, Iris in the box, her kingdom, and heaven help whoever calls it a closet. Subtract all that and the adults are left with less than three hundred square feet, and the couch stands on it. The most private space Miguel owns is a driver's seat, and it belongs to the MTA.

After dinner he puts Mateo to bed, which is a proceeding in three instances: teeth, story, negotiation over the door, open a crack, always a crack. Then he sits on the stairwell landing for seven minutes, his driver's cab without passengers, and records the day's voice memo for Rafael.

"Today," he says quietly into the phone, "a guy had his phone so loud on the bus that three people sighed at the same time. At the same time, Rafa. Like a choir. That's the maximum uprising we get here. I'm telling you, all this city is missing is a membrane between everybody, then we'd finally have quiet, and then everybody would cry, because the quiet came. Kiss the kids. And the gulls."

At eleven forty he hears the key. Shannon comes in with that late-shift face he knows, tired in a way that doesn't come from standing, and he warms up her pasta and sits with her and asks nothing, because sometimes she has to eat first before the day can come out of her.

"Mrs. Halloran didn't want to let go today when I left," she

says at some point. "She always holds on to my hand. I had to peel the fingers off one by one. Like a kid on the first day of preschool, only in reverse."

Miguel puts his hand on hers. They sit like that a while in the kitchen that still smells like the cheese song, two people who had other people too close to them all day long, and who now, when there would finally be room, keep no distance voluntarily.

In the bedroom, later, Miguel hears the neighbors' bed frame through the wall, the old man's radio from below, the elevator that sounds at night like a sigh in its shaft. Seven hundred thirty square feet, five people, and around them a building with four hundred more, wall to wall to wall.

One hour of hearing nothing, Miguel thinks as he falls asleep. Just one hour.

End of the Reading Sample

The complete book: “The Membrane, Book One: Cocoon” by D. Rose.

New York, 2031. A device promises every person an inviolable space of their own. What it seals in, and what it costs.