

THAT DOLPHIN-TORN SEA

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H.J. Alden

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For RH

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER 1

The first time I dreamed of the dolphin, the sea was obscured in haze. It seemed it was not night or day, but a twilight of uncertainty in which vague presences played. I floated among them as if nowhere, until the brilliant blue dolphin tore through my sleep, heaving and streaming out of a sudden, bright, depth of blue. It's hard to explain, but in that moment I felt as if I'd been delivered. From what, I did not know, and into whose hands I would not have guessed. On waking I turned to look for Sharon, but she wasn't there. Or anywhere else.

Every death is hard, but Sharon's was like my own death come early. I wandered the city of Amberville like a ghost. Alone in traffic. Alone at work. Alone in the house where we had laughed, played, sighed. Each cell

of my body constricted around her absence, ached in the aftermath of so much empty ceremony. The days went by slowly. The nights were like swimming in an ocean of fading gleams.

I hate the word cancer. I remember the first time the doctor said it, the look on Sharon's face when she heard. For a moment I thought she had been suddenly transfigured. She seemed almost to glow, and almost to whisper. She spoke in tones so hauntingly low, it was as if she had already become a spirit, overseeing the disposition of her body like she'd been waiting her whole life for just that moment. Later, when I remembered the history of cancer in her family, how it had taken her mother, her aunt, her niece, I understood her relentlessness as she pressed for answers, pushing for details on the progress of the disease, the effects of the inoperable mass in her colon, the slow tumor in her kidney, the lymphoma in her right leg. I understood her temptation to forego chemotherapy, to avoid the loss of quality of life her mother had sacrificed for a small chance of survival. In the end though, Sharon consented for her family's sake, for the comfort of those around her, that they could hold out hope.

She was beautiful, that's for sure. Her long black hair held streams of light, and her eyes seemed to swim in their own lucidity as if made of pure joy at their ability to see. Her high forehead and oval face put me in mind of a Raphael Madonna. Her lean, athletic body moved beautifully as she moved. She sighed at trouble and laughed without apology, and if it sounds as if I'm writing her eulogy, I am, as I have been writing it daily against the day of her death. That was a day I remember unmercifully, a day of gravity and deepening sadness. But I don't want to get ahead of myself. This is a story that must unfold as it happened, or at least as it makes sense through a filter of random memories, as it has something more to offer than the pathos of mortality, or my personal loss, or Sharon's courage. It's a story of the possibilities within our silences and our descents, a story of life as learning, a gift.

CHAPTER 2

I remember it all. But it's miasma, vague. Small things surface as I look back--memories which seem now like defining moments in her progress toward death. There was one day in particular, after the diagnosis and the second opinion, the prescriptions for shiny pills and the guarded whispers. I was upstairs looking out on the backyard of our Victorian house, when I saw Sharon move through the little garden we had made, past peonies and crepe myrtles, past pink and red rose blossoms in shadows of amethyst, toward a sparrow that had suddenly fallen from the sky after flying into our attic window. By the time I got outside Sharon was crying. We held each other for a very long time. It was warm and it was cold, and we melted into a silence that was both of us and neither. That night she cried again and it was ocean and rain. And I held her because I could, and I was glad I could.

Often I remember a day in Bethania, peering into the sky at a kite without a tail. How it ducked and bobbed against the clouds. How the sun was in my eyes as I followed the white string that stretched from the pretty, dark-haired woman to the kite floating above her like a small, white diamond. She backed toward where I lay, oblivious that I was in her path. I watched the string and her honey-blond tan, until I thought she was OK and wouldn't fall. When I closed my eyes and lay back down, it didn't occur to me she might walk backwards again. It was nowhere in my mind that she would step on my hand, until I felt hot sand grinding into my sun-burned fingers. Sitting up suddenly, I saw Sharon's face—her look of surprise, amusement and embarrassment all at once. When she let go of the string to keep her balance, I laughed. The kite fell into the sea, but that night Sharon and I went out to dinner and danced.

It's all broken pieces, shards of memory. One moment I see her laughter, the next I remember the sound of her last breath. (It takes everything I have to remember that again, to try to make some kind of order from the cancer's chaos.) I continue to think on how we met: water, sea oats, the windy silence. Pieces of that first conversation on the sand:

“Hi I'm Steven. You're standing on my hand.”

“Oh, is that yours?” Sharon looked at me and laughed. The air falling and rising again. The wrestling of little green plants with the wind. Sea and clouds. Magenta and emerald.

“I'm Sharon,” she said, and she was laughing at her joke and brushing off my thumb, and I was laughing and the sun was shining. It was only as I walked her to her hotel that afternoon that we found out we both lived in Amberville and had come two hundred miles to meet as strangers by the sea.

I'd never been in love like that. She was bright and kind, quiet and dark. She teased me in a way that left me laughing at myself, as if she enjoyed my shortcomings, as if they were part of her reason for staying. It was enough and more than enough to keep me interested. In fact, there were days when it was almost frightening: her insight, her intelligence, her passion for understanding.

I proposed eight months later on Christmas Eve. It wasn't a hard decision. I didn't have to think about it. She had given me the best months of my life so far and I knew without any doubt at all, that Sharon would give me a lifetime more. White lights ringed the fir trees in

her father's yard. We could still hear the carolers from the little church down the street.

“Sharon, will you marry me?” I said, and she said “Yes,” immediately.

As I put the ring on her finger her hand was trembling.

CHAPTER 3

Sharon's first shot was on a warm day in June. I remember driving her to the doctor that morning. White clouds scudded across the sky, dragging deep shadows over the fields of Amberville. Having brought along a book, she read until I parked the car. As we went inside and waited our turn, she was thoughtful, introverted, speaking only when she had to. Though as far away as she was from me, as if wrapped in silence like a thickness of gauze, she turned quietly toward me and looked into my eyes the moment the needle went into her arm.

On the way back to the house she was even quieter than before. As soon as we were home she headed to the garden with a stack of books, then sat in the sunlight and read for hours. That evening, at her request, we went out to dinner at a little Italian restaurant nearby, though, in the end, Sharon had no appetite.

A few days later the side effects began. There was nausea, dizziness, deep fatigue. Lying on the couch as the pain took hold of her, Sharon spoke from a stream of long forgotten memories, talking through waves of rising distress, distracting herself as long as possible until it was finally too much and she could not say more. I can still see her face as she turned toward me that afternoon. She was insistent as she spoke, and I listened in silence, every word a source of agony and beauty--a means of knowing Sharon I hadn't imagined we would have to endure.

“When I was a little girl I used to look at my mother's picture, then run into my room and close the door. Then I would dress myself like the woman in the photograph and pretend that I was her, and that I loved my daughter. I realize now, looking back on it, that it wasn't just a kid's desire to imitate her mom. I wanted to become her, to live the life she didn't get a chance to live. I wanted to be as smart, as pretty and as poised as she was. I copied her smile, the way she tilted her head when she laughed. . .” Sharon paused, then turned away. I thought I heard a sigh before she took her next breath. Turning back, she looked straight through me, then said almost casually,

“Now it looks like I'm copying her death.”

I can still see the pain in her eyes that day, how it was set inside a look of sorrow, as when a diamond is set with ruby side stones. Later that afternoon, as I watched her out of the corner of my eye, I felt as if my emptiness had been forged from summer air, as if the sweep of summer were a kind of slow-motion agony in which Sharon and I were both suspended, waiting carefully for an end that may not be what we wanted.

By the time the effects of her first injection had passed, the hardest thing in my life was the certainty there would be more. The chemo was with us for over half a year--dividing our lives the way a giant divides a landscape into shadow and sun. As we witnessed its power we were almost overcome, uncertain whether its purpose was to hurt or to heal. Sharon stayed with the program though. And eventually we got used to it, taking refuge in the medicine as our only possibility and doing what we had to in order to help a long shot have its best chance to work.

During that time Sharon often retreated to the garden. She was happier in nature than anywhere else, in the presence of leaves and flowers, earth, sky and birds. During subsequent rounds of chemotherapy, (it was three weeks off and one week on) she made a place for herself

under the willow tree and read, luminous in bright air and shifting sunlight.

But when the medicine was active it blurred her vision. Her books were no use to her then, so she bought a little mp3 player and listened to Verdi, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, the Beatles. . . . Once I heard her singing along. I was out of her line of sight, crossing behind her through the garden. I still remember hearing that slow, sad song, though I was too far away to know exactly what it was. She sang for herself, and for herself alone, and her song was her solace and, in that moment, her only comfort.

Sharon once told me that singing in the choir was the reason she had insisted on finding a church, that otherwise religion would have remained a private matter for her--that she got far less from sermons than she did from her books. Though as much as she loved music, there were times when she was too sick for it to be anything but a disruption, a distraction that increased her dizziness and nausea. On those days she took her stomach pills and waited for the discomfort to pass. Lying in a lawn chair with a pair of sun glasses on, she would close her eyes and try to rest.

Though occasionally even the medicine wasn't enough, and Sharon could do nothing but lie in bed ._____

CHAPTER 4

In our off-times from the drugs we did what we could to keep our lives on an even keel, focusing on life and its distractions--books, plays, concerts and short trips out of town. Those trips were a mixture of joy and sadness. There were moments that felt like the day we first met, and others when Sharon appeared wrapped in the same distance I had seen at the doctor's office on her first day of chemo.

If she had any discomfort she didn't complain, though more than once I noticed the fine tremors that would sometimes cloud her features, and the accompanying wistfulness that had, as an undertone, a hint of hidden resentment. Of course, Sharon pretended those feelings weren't there, turning to look at the scenery out the window, or asking me what I would like for lunch. Having known her for five years, I understood those signals,

and I also knew she didn't want me to mention them to her.

Sharon's stoicism in the face of death was a source of wonder and frustration for me. In addition to her injections, it was there at her CAT scan and her MRI . . . a silent submission that seldom betrayed any other emotion, until she resembled a carved figure on a veneer of stone. That this was a means of carrying herself through so many indignities was obvious, so I stayed quiet when I saw it and let her make her own way through that hall of insults.

In late July we returned to Bethania, where we'd met five years before. The air was strange there--full of promise and power--and I fell in love with Sharon all over again and somehow that love still seemed immortal.

“Steven, look: That was where you stayed when we first met. I remember because it had that neon flamingo on the sign and I thought for a second you might be depraved.” She laughed. I laughed. The blue sea surged.

“Of course, now I know how depraved you really are.”

The next afternoon I bought her a little dolphin pendant in a jewelry store off the boardwalk. It was a delicate piece of white-green porcelain dangling from a thin silver chain. Against her dark hair and sunburned face, it

swam like a talisman of some ancient, forgotten faith, and for a moment I could have sworn she was a goddess of the water--a beauty come to teach me of sand and waves.

I can see that trip as if it were happening now, though I didn't realize at the time it was a prelude to something more: a sweep of days that were all their own, a moment enclosed in a parenthetical silence, both luminously present and ominously so.

Driving home that Sunday, Sharon had suggested we read *The Tempest* together, to fill the silence richly before sleep and dreams. So that's what we did for the next few weeks, involving our lives with Prospero's and Miranda's, and the strange sense of hope they seemed to inhabit. I'm still not sure why, but during that time things seemed to change. It was out of nowhere really--a quiet surprise, as if we had become figures of a deepening intensity, charged with the immediacy and importance of each moment until the mundane aspects of our lives seemed to fall away. Our days became so full they seemed to ache with fullness, as if life itself could not contain what we felt. It was so unusual we didn't discuss it at first, though our jokes were funnier and our arguments more sad, and every difficulty that came our

way resonated and intensified in the depths of each breath.

So when fall came and I had to work again, I nearly lost myself in grief that summer was over. Though it ended anyway. August bled gradually into October. I was not alone in my sadness though. Sharon was left desolate because she couldn't teach that year. Being moved by literature the way others are moved by the events of their own lives, she was formed by words, changed by them, and she loved that process and was committed to it the way someone else might commit to building a company or writing symphonies.

Sharon met that loss as she did so many others, by refusing to give voice to anything but her acceptance of circumstance.

“Maybe next year,” she said. But her voice held no hope, only a sense of resignation that dissolved into the air, as if it had become an echo in an all-pervasive silence.

As we turned from those disappointments toward the coming winter, that sense of fullness continued, pervading everything we said and did, lining our lives with a rich music both intense and significant, as if an invisible player had struck an unusually beautiful chord, and we

lived inside its echo, conscious only of its effects. Alive inside that lush, bright tone, I thought Sharon grew more beautiful as her disease progressed, and I idealized her more than I ever had, as if preparing my memories against the day of her death. In fact it's fair to say I was nearly enraptured with the sight of her, though it wasn't desire I was feeling, but a means of perceiving beauty I had never experienced, and no matter how I tried, could not quite grasp.

Unable to understand, I was reluctant to talk about it. I didn't want Sharon to think I was fascinated with her illness. Rather it was the way it charged the air between us, making her presence more powerful than it had ever been--the way a crumbling leaf or a drying petal becomes all the more compelling in its dissolution, something to press in a book, or store in a frame, as if memory could keep alive what nothing else could save.

When that feeling grew so strong we could no longer pretend it wasn't there, it was Sharon who spoke first, making it clear she knew there was something different at work, though for her it wasn't a question of whether it should be there or not. She accepted its inevitability with her usual acceptance--perhaps because she'd been through it with her aunt and her mom.

It was late October. The sky was blue above the garden. Looking deep into the willows as she spoke the words, she said, in that level, quiet tone of hers, that there was something about her dying that made our lives explode with an immediacy neither one of us had ever felt before.

That night she held me and told me more. She whispered that she loved me, that love was the most beautiful thing on earth. That this was how it feels when that beauty is fading, preparing to turn itself into a different form, changing everything in its path into something more, until a glimpse comes in which what is hidden is almost known.

CHAPTER 5

There was an early snow in Amberville that year. It came in mid-November. The gray sky seemed to ache above the white landscape, and the cold seemed taut, resistant to itself, as if it knew it must eventually end, and with that ending would come the green, chirping, cataclysm of spring.

With that snow came a change I should have expected, but it caught me off guard, to say the least. The intensity between Sharon and I began to gradually dissipate, until one morning in early December I woke up to realize it had disappeared. Looking back on it now, I can see how those weeks took her farther and farther from me, until the stoicism and distance that had served her well with the doctors gradually won out over the immediacy that had been there just a short time before. Having grown increasingly silent and removed, her withdrawal

separated her, not just from me, but from everything she loved in the world around her. And though she managed to stay with her daily routine, from morning till night she seemed quietly empty, ignoring her phone, refusing visitors, staring out the window into the garden's cold. Of course, I tried to help her come back to her life, but in the end I failed. She was too far away. Her withdrawal brought up an odd mix of feelings for me, though I suffered them in silence, saying nothing at all. How did I know what was going through her mind? What right did I have to ask a dying woman for her time?

In hindsight, her withdrawal was inevitable, I guess. Perhaps it was the shadow-side of the lushness we had felt, or maybe it was something simpler and more immediate: a sense of emptiness she just couldn't shake. Whatever its cause, Sharon accepted it the way she accepted everything else. It wasn't like her to cling, and she would never have visited her unhappiness on me by being irritable, unless of course, she just couldn't help it. So it seems that left nothing but a quiet hunkering, as if she had decided to make an ally of the pain she felt, letting it teach her of withdrawal, contraction and distance. And though withdrawal wasn't safety it was less of a risk, and Sharon, in those days of heavy medicines and illness, did what she could to minimize her losses, as

once a month for days on end, she continued to endure the chemicals that attacked the cancer with a heroism of the mind against the body's betrayals and a sense of purposeful focus I could only witness with a mixture of admiration and quiet sadness

At Christmas it snowed again, falling in bright waves--a shower of whiteness both undulant and indifferent, piling up against houses full of warmth, kids and presents. As usual, we had dinner at Sharon's father's place, with Sharon's sister Althea, her husband Tom, and their two kids, Lucy and Benjamin. A friend of Sharon's had found army men for Ben, and he ran through the halls chasing their Jack Russell terrier, who had suddenly, and with much consternation, become the very incarnation of the enemy general. Lucy, who was the oldest, age ten, sat in a corner with a book.

“She takes after you Sharon,” Althea said, and I thought I could see a tremor at the corner of her mouth as she spoke. I looked away and made an offhand joke, “Then I pity the guy who marries her,” I said. And I laughed with the others as Sharon managed a wan smile, though I noticed that in my voice there was a tone of resentment I hadn't meant.

For many weeks afterwards Sharon was nowhere at all. An untouchable little ball of compact numbness. In that time she moved with a prisoner's resignation, spending days without speaking, except to say what she had to in order to live in this world, where nothing is given without effort and breath. And though she continued faithfully with her medicine, it did not take away the rigid indifference with which she had come to regard herself, or the ongoing, quiet suffering she masked with silence.

CHAPTER 6

We were well into the new year before Sharon let some of that distance go. It was the third week of February, a Saturday, I think. We were at home and we were going to stay at home. It was a week without chemo, but she had eaten very little--perhaps because I hadn't pushed her to. I sat across from her in the living room one evening, having become used to her silence, expecting nothing else. After maybe an hour in which I had lost myself in reading, Sharon came to me quietly and wrapped me in her arms, saying the words I had wanted to hear for at least three months.

“I love you Steven. I've always loved you.” And then, after a silence of perhaps five minutes more, her voice breaking from the strain of her sadness, she put her head on my shoulder, and murmured into my chest,

“I don't want to die, Steven. Please, I don't want to.”

That night we cried together and made our own small deaths, and in the morning I took her out for breakfast. That was the last time Sharon and I slept together. Those moments faded into a different rhythm. Late winter passed into fits of spring. Her hair grew thin. Her eyes were red. There were times when I thought she resembled a mannequin, beautifully poised, yet fragile and studied in her appearance.

In the second week of March, Dr Rhymer, our oncologist, scheduled Sharon for an MRI. We waited for the results with a sense of resigned helplessness, knowing that whatever they turned out to be, we would face them together, as we had faced everything.

I jumped when the phone rang. I didn't mean to, but I did. My hand shook as I fumbled for the button. I answered cautiously, in a thin, small voice, not knowing what I might hear, afraid, after so much bad news, that this news would also be difficult. But the tumor in Sharon's colon had been shrinking. What had once been an inoperable mass was nearly gone. And it seemed her leg was almost back to normal. Even the tumor in her kidney had begun to reverse itself.

Until then, hope had seemed risky and far away, like a distant island shimmering in a dangerous sea. Then it occurred to us both at almost exactly the same time, that it must have been the chemotherapy and not the illness, that had drained so much of Sharon's energy. That day we laughed, held hands and played. Everywhere around us spring was shining and bursting. Our garden blossomed into wavering air.

I remember Sharon looking me in the eyes that afternoon. "What a surprise," she said, and then she smiled that bright clear smile of hers, and we talked away the hours as if the world were new.

That very night Sharon dreamed a dream. When she woke to tell me, I listened carefully, hopefully, like a drowning man unexpectedly thrown a life preserver:

"I dreamed I was at the sea. It was just past dawn. There was tension in the air, but it was a beautiful tension, like something had suffused itself between the atoms in the wind--a song, or a meaning, or a kind of shining presence. And then I realized the sea was singing, a liquid music that waved and thronged. And though I was intrigued with its song, I was also afraid, and I resisted the idea of plunging in and swimming. Though at the same time there was a feeling of expan-

sion in my body and somehow, because of that, I knew I couldn't resist for long.

That was when I looked up at the sky. The clouds were edged with rose and gold and I felt happy just looking at them, watching sky and waves and the brilliance of the water. When I looked back at the ocean it was crowded with fish: mackerel, flounder, black bass, halibut. And they were calling to me, Steven, they were singing my name, and there was a feeling of bliss in the air as they sang. Then suddenly I understood that the sea was my fate. And the next thing I knew I was in the water and I was swimming, and each stroke, each kick, was a feeling of sweetness I can't explain."

In the silence that comes after a dream like that is told, I lay next to Sharon and a sense of something beautiful took hold of me. As I imagined her swimming safely in the bliss of that sea, I almost believed that she would be saved.

Ecstatic without certainty, optimistic and resisting optimism, we went away to the mountains at the edge of the state. There were juncos and mountain laurel. A deep weave of wildflowers bloomed in the fields. Sharon's mood was incandescent, as if a long, hard rain had abruptly ended and she had emerged with a grin, wear-

ing the sun as her halo, its light adorning the fields, ponds and mountains. It seemed the world had gone delirious with joy, and we played and laughed against all that green. Looking back on it now, I'm glad we went. Though in spite of our happiness and the fact that the chemo had been suspended, Sharon's appetite didn't come back. There were dizzy spells. Shallow breathing. Her chest was tight.

We returned to another round of doctor visits and more of the officious silence with which the dying are met. Dr. Rhymer sent Sharon to a pulmonary specialist after the results of her second MRI came in.

“The good news is, the tumor in the colon appears to be gone,” Dr. Rhymer said. “And the leg is still reversing itself. It’s almost back to where it should be. But there's a shadow on Sharon's right lung that wasn't there before. We want to do some tests to see what it is.”

By the time we were able to get those tests done, Sharon's breath resembled the wing gusts of small birds. It was suggested that she should be hospitalized for a few days.

“To get her stabilized,” Doctor Rhymer said.
“And to rule out some things.”

But Sharon refused, her voice rising to normal out of what had become a hoarse whisper.

“NO HOSPITALS,” she said. “AND NO MORE CHEMOTHERAPY,” and in spite of myself, I supported her. And though both of her physicians objected at first, soon arrangements were made for oxygen and an in-home nurse. By then it was mid-April. Nearly the end of the semester. The flowers in our backyard burned pink and red.

CHAPTER 7

“Steven, come here . . .” This was Sharon.

“Yes,” I said. “What is it?”

“When I die, don't revive me,” she said, in that whisper.

“What?” I said, not understanding. Not prepared.

“I've written a will,” she said. “It says that when I die no one should try to revive me. I want you to promise you'll make it stick. We'll need a lawyer.”

She took a drink of water. Her hand was steady and she looked at me calmly, though there was sadness in the small blue oceans of her eyes. It was hard to answer her. I looked away.

“Promise me,” she said again.

And I couldn't help it, I had tears in my eyes. When I looked at her I couldn't speak.

We sat that way a while. The garden ticked with the sound of insects and birds. A light breeze wrestled with the streaming willows. When I was able to, I said the words.

“When you die, you die,” I said, looking at her.
“I promise I won't let anyone revive you.”

Sharon looked relieved and rested in her chair. Then she sat up again. Her cheekbones were red. Her face tight and very thin.

“I married you because I knew you wouldn't leave,” she said. “And because you're funny. Now tell me a joke.” And I smiled at her and thought of what to say next, but before I could say anything, Sharon looked up.

“I'm glad I married you,” was all she said.

After finding a lawyer and filing the paperwork, our days continued more or less as they had. Each morning Sharon would dress herself and sit in the garden on a white leather chair her father had bought her a few months before. When I read Yeats out loud she would lean back and close her eyes like his were the only words possible at that particular moment--as if the language itself contained her, and its bright descriptions were the freedom she hoped for. As the sky would deepen and the afternoon fall, I would tell her I loved her, that I didn't

want her to go, and she would reply, as she had many times before, that she loved me too, but this wasn't something she had a choice about.

“And besides,” she said one day, in a whispered tone of mock annoyance, “I'm not actually leaving you. One day you'll realize that, and I hope it's soon.” I was surprised to hear this, not knowing where it had come from or why, but Sharon did not bother to try to explain. My reaction must have shown on my face as I listened though, because Sharon used what strength she had to roll her eyes and smile. Unable to think of anything else to do, I looked back and smiled too, as if I understood.

That was three weeks from the day the pulmonary specialist had offered her opinion: the cancer had metastasized from the kidney to the lungs. It was diffuse and pervasive. It would not be long.

I hear her voice. I see her in the garden. She wanted to talk, and I did not have the strength or the heart to stop her, to insist she save her own strength to live.

“When the wind moves the willows like that, I can see golden birds billowing in the branches. The sun makes them shine when the branches shake. I think I'd like to live that way, and take my shape from the wind

instead of all this flesh.” She said the word “flesh” in a distant whisper, and for a moment I thought she said something else, but I was very sad and didn't ask. I only watched her as she looked up at me and smiled, as if she had just made the world a better place through the use of her imagination.

I couldn't resist a little joke just then.

“You've been reading too much Yeats,” I said. But Sharon only looked at me, her smile fading into a look of quiet confidence.

The light in Sharon's eyes turned to distance again. Spring seemed to ache as it woke around us, so much so I could have sworn the trees resisted their own blossoming, hovering between a budding green and the flares of color any first green promises.

Though there was a lot to be done, at that point the nurse did the greater part of it. Quietly and kindly, with little intrusion, she and Sharon's family helped in any number of ways, and I was able to spend most of my time with Sharon. Of the many things she did, the nurse was especially helpful with the medicine: the morphine that had been prescribed when Sharon had begun to cough up blood. She had shown Bill how to measure out the dosage, and I was given a lesson too, though for the

most part Sharon and I continued to follow our daily routine--that slow, tremulous walk from the bedroom to the garden, where I would read to her through the afternoon.

She ate almost nothing then. Her body was small and delicate, her skin as dry as paper. For the last few days her family slept in our spare rooms, though with Sharon outside in the garden so often, for me the house was like a morgue, and I felt as if I walked through rooms of ghosts to reach the one fragile, yet tangible presence there--a woman of clarity, dignity, beauty and bright insistence whose leaving made the world more immediate each day. That this presence was Sharon left me quietly empty and wrapped me in a silence both point-blank and far away.

Sharon died on a cool May evening. She had said very little for quite some time. Though even that last day, with help from all of us, she had gotten out of bed and dressed, then walked slowly to her white leather chair in the garden, placed between the willows and the window ledge, where she could feel the breeze and still have access to her oxygen. From there she looked out at the crepe myrtles where the finches sang, and there was wind and leaves and family.

Sharon wouldn't leave the garden that afternoon. She lingered, watching the bees as the blossoms unfolded, with what little she said attempted in only the thinnest of whispers. When it was time to move to the bedroom upstairs, it was almost cold. There were shadows on the flowers. It seemed to take forever for her to stand up. Each step was slow-motion, an agony of her will against an inevitable entropy. Her father and I held her as she tried to walk, but in the end we had to carry her. She was just too tired.

When she finally lay down on the huge, four-poster bed, it took an hour for her to take her medicine. Eventually she swallowed the morphine after Bill mixed the drops into a small glass of water. Then she looked up at me quietly and smiled a smile that was partly an apology and partly good bye.

“Long day,” she said. Then she closed her eyes.

I remember family. Mine and hers. Althea, Tom, Lucy and Benjamin, and of course, there was Sharon's father, Bill.

My parents made the trip from Carlton by car. There were calls to make. Visits from neighbors and friends. There was angel food cake and coconut cake. There were

jello molds, casseroles, salads, breads, brownies, cookies. But I had no interest in them. I wasn't hungry.

I recall that week as a dim blur of figures passing words of solace that were inevitably well meant though frequently painful as they touched on Sharon's absence. Of course there were the arrangements: the crematorium, the memorial service. . . And then the service itself, which was a jumble of songs and words against a background of flowers and family pictures.

We scattered her ashes off the shores of Bethania, just before evening settled on the sea. The boat rose and fell. The water was glassy, and the quiet swells chuffed against the hull, ending in little gurgles that trailed off into the next wave. I tossed a white lily from the rising bow. It floated into undulant dusk as I and Althea and Sharon's dad emptied Sharon's ashes into the murmuring ocean. They moved like clouds through its deepening green. Then there was silence as darkness came. I thought I saw a large fish pass under the hull. We stayed the night at anchor there, talking a long time of how we loved her.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER 8

Memories fall around me, each an image of what had just passed: Sharon in the hallway, laughing charitably at my jokes. Sharon at Christmas, snowflakes melting on her black felt hat. . . . Even after the trip to Bethania, two weeks after her body was cremated, there were visitors and condolences, flowers arriving, cards from the college where she'd taught English.

Every minute of every hour I saw her face, as if someone had printed a thousand photographs guaranteed to create the greatest possible pain, then rained them down silently on a somber procession, from morning till night, for many days. As much as they hurt me, I found those pictures compelling. So much so that if I could have chosen my own fate, I would have sealed myself inside them for the rest of my life and let the ordinary world fall away. And if I still feel a tinge of the grief I felt then, it's not because I continue to feel lost, but because a profusion of

hard memories must always be a funeral's legacy, and the gravity that remains makes a pattern from the emptiness that finally and inevitably has to be enough, because it feels like all we have to offer or explain.

It was hot that summer, but I was cold inside. I felt that chill well into September, sitting all day till it was too dark to see, forgetting to turn on the lights in the living room as I pored over our wedding album or rummaged through old letters, keepsakes and pictures. The world of responsibilities and friends was unreal, so much so there were times I thought Sharon was waiting for me to call her name and that if I did she would return as if the past nine months had been an elaborate and somewhat cruel joke she would apologize for with kisses while she whispered my name. Then I'd remember her beauty, so full of what it means to love, and remember that by life's indifferent subtraction, all that beauty had been taken from me.

Imprisoned by those thoughts I hid away, as if caught in a storm that suspended time--the wind disturbing the sun and the sky, the rain falling relentlessly through each gust of sadness in a slow motion delay that left me uncertain of where I was and where I was going. In fact, that's part of why I'm writing this now. To finally clarify what I could not acknowledge then. The distance,

confusion and ambivalence. The silence I interpreted as the very earth's disdain.

More than anything I missed her intelligence and her wit. The long discussions we had about literature and psychology. I remembered the day she balked when I diagnosed Hamlet as psychotic.

” You can't diagnose a character,” she said.

“The most you can do is let the character have its life inside the play.” So of course I laughed and diagnosed Sharon. And she laughed back wickedly, consigning me to her favorite circle of Dante's Inferno, “The Circle for Diagnosticians of the Sacred.” She said I would be punished there and she would oversee that punishment, that she would make me diagnose cartoon characters in hell.

To say the house was empty is to say nothing at all. The house was useless, silent, dull. I felt as if I moved between life and death, wandering the halls of desire and emptiness. At times I saw Sharon's face projected on the walls of those listless rooms. I have no idea how often that happened, I only know that when it did, I could not look away. Sharon had been life itself for me. The day she died I dissolved into sorrow, and was left to wander, with no way home. Though when I bothered to think about things lucidly, it was clear to me I was a man in

trouble, that the relentless course of her death had marked me.

CHAPTER 9

In late August I went to Bethania again. I'd been alone for three months and I just didn't know what else to do. It was so unbelievably hot that day the thought flickered through me that the world was melting. The sky was a vague blue and the sand ticked in the wind. A white pillar of cloud like a cotton anvil squatted at the edge of the cobalt horizon. Against it the beach was a strand of molten glass stretching languidly away against the ocean's edge.

As I stood among the dunes, I saw the dolphins. They wove the blue sky together with the ocean's deeper blue. They were as beautiful as anything I had ever seen. A presence. Familiar. As if they held a message for me I couldn't quite grasp, though I sensed in the effortless intelligence of their bodies a grace beyond the ordinary grace of women and men.

As I walked the boardwalk listlessly, the crowds hurried by on their way to nowhere. People scrambled to sell or buy. The wind was a constant off the beach, moving in gusts that rose and fell, saturated with the smell of brine.

That night, when I dreamed of her, I was not prepared. I remember becoming aware of myself standing in a clearing at the edge of a dark wood, and Sharon was there and we were talking. For a moment it was as if she had never left. She wore the same clothes she had worn the night we met: a black cotton dress that buttoned down the front, adorned with a simple necklace of woven gold. She was whispering a secret to me and she was animated, excited, and when I heard what it was I was excited too, as if I'd remembered something I'd forgotten I knew.

Before I met Sharon I had nothing at all. But I didn't know it, so nothing was like a world--full of bright intensities, objects of interest: cars, women, books--so many compelling and beautiful distractions. Then she was gone and I found out what nothing really is: a hole where only silence sings, its song a dirge of emptiness and longing.

I could see myself alone and growing old. That image disturbed me: a dry little man with stick-like limbs, the wind circling my wavering, thin body. At home and teaching again after my weekend in Bethania, I imagined my students already saw me like this. I was silent, cautious, introverted. And because of that I grew worried about myself, afraid for my future and my mental health. Surprisingly, in the days that followed, an awareness slowly surfaced in me without any conscious effort at all, until one night I realized I would not stay in Amberville, though I didn't know how to leave or where I would go.

CHAPTER 10

Things went on like that for a month or more after my trip to the sea, grinding me down, taking my power. With no energy for life I had no energy to avoid it, so I dragged through the silences that formed the substance of my days like an alien being observing a foreign city as it unfolds around him without his understanding. Then, one night, as I slept in the bed where Sharon had died--the same bed where we had planned to conceive children--I dreamed I saw a shadow move from the window to the closet, swaying beautifully, suggestively, before it dissolved. Startled, I woke up, looking carefully into the darkness that was a thick mass of clothes--hats, scarves dresses and more--things of Sharon's I just couldn't give away. And that was when Sharon called my name. It was her voice exactly, there was no mistake.

It took a few seconds for me to realize what I'd heard. When I did, I was stunned, fearful and concerned.

Shaking, I left the bed and paced the floor. For the next hour I considered calling a colleague from work, caring nothing for the fact that it was three AM. Finally, I calmed myself and closed the closet door. I slept in the guest room from that night forward.

The shock of that night brought me to myself enough to see how deeply I had been immersed in Sharon's absence. The next morning I found myself anxious for my future-- afraid I might live the remainder of my life inside the dark, hovering cloud of an unfulfilled wish, moving only in its silence, unable, perhaps unwilling, to love anyone else. The more I thought about that, the more I could see how lost I'd been-- how I'd spent four months on an indulgent tear, avoiding as much as possible my work, friends and family--everything I knew and held familiar. I saw I had done this in order to keep the feeling of Sharon's last days--to capture them inside a cloud of nostalgia I had known all along would have to fade.

CHAPTER 11

To push that grief back wasn't easy, not at all. Minute by minute I wrestled with myself, turning things over, examining my motives, thoughts and actions, until eventually I saw I had no choice but to re-join the ordinary round of life and work the world around me still lived out daily. From then on I filled my time with errands and phone calls and made myself go where I had refused to go before: into the labyrinth of bills and insurance, bank accounts, interest, notifications. I cleaned the house and went through Sharon's clothes, giving away everything but the few items I just couldn't part with. Then I forced myself, against all inclinations to wallow, to carve some semblance of a social life out of the desert that was Amberville.

But Sharon was still there. Her presence gracing our house and garden, animating the grass, the flowers and the sky. At times I thought I could sense her in the backyard, lush with dying roses and the thinning crepe myrtles that suffused the late fall. Once I caught the scent of her hair moving through the silence with the shifts of the wind. When it was gone there was only life and its emptiness--shadows leaning backward out of a bed of violets, the wind whispering faintly like a church in prayer.

I fought the impulse to indulge those moments with all the will that I could muster, and to that end I began to talk with Sharon's dad, who had, until then, remained at a respectful distance. Sometimes Bill and I would take walks by the river. I would reminisce about my wife and Bill about his daughter.

“Jesus. She was so stubborn,” Bill once said, “I remember when she was maybe five years old and her dog had pulled himself loose from his chain. She tore across the neighborhood, refusing to come home, until we finally found him over by the high school. It was all I could do to follow her and keep her safe. She was so focused and so mad, like she was gonna turn God upside down and shake him till that dog fell out. I never saw a kid so resentful of something she couldn't understand. Of course, this was before she lost her mom. . .”

Bill looked at the ground and kept on walking. Then he turned to me with a look of earnestness I haven't seen from him since, his voice cracking just a little bit, and said,

“If I could, I'd turn God upside down myself if I thought it would bring her back to me.” Then he looked away, as if embarrassed. But he didn't have to be embarrassed at all. I knew exactly what he meant.

CHAPTER 12

I remember a dinner with Sharon's family. It was early in the winter after her death. Darkness came quickly then, and always it brought with it a tinge of grief and sadness.

That night the discussion had shifted aimlessly at first, from television, to dreams, to archaeology and the bible. At that point something in the atmosphere of the room changed. I'm still not sure exactly how that happened. Tom said he didn't believe the bible. That at best it shouldn't be taken literally at all. It was a metaphor, a poem of the struggle to believe in a spirit we couldn't see or know. Althea agreed.

“Are we supposed to think there was a literal Eden,” she said, “where Adam and Eve walked around naked and the serpent whistled at them?”

I listened, intrigued, not ready to respond, since my own beliefs were not so much beliefs as opinions, ways of expressing an intuition I didn't trust. At the same time I could see Bill was disturbed. He chewed quietly, heavily. There was tension in his jaw.

When Tom turned to me and asked what I thought, I didn't really want to answer. But when he asked a second time, I put down my fork.

“I don't know what's literal and what's not,” I said. I don't really have an opinion about that. And whether it's a document we've inherited from the mouth of God through the mouths of human beings is something I don't think we can ever solve—except perhaps, individually. So my question is different from yours, Tom. It's the question of whether God is something we can know directly. Nothing would please me more than being able to say for certain that he or she, or whatever God is, actually exists--to experience God, the way St. Theresa or Joan of Arc said they did. As far as I'm concerned that's the only way to answer it. But without some kind of experience, there's no way to know for sure.”

At that point Bill, who had been listening carefully, said in a stiff voice that implied he'd had enough,

“Look, I'd give anything to know that Sharon and her mom were in a place that's better than this one is. It would take away my doubts. I could sleep again. But talk like this makes me nervous, understand? Because people who think about this stuff too much are in danger of losing the life they already have. Truth is, If I spent too much time worrying about religion and such, I'd be concerned about myself. Hell, I might even go to the headshrinker here.” Bill nodded at me and everyone laughed.

For the rest of the evening I thought about Bill, how much he had lost in his life, and how profoundly it must have affected him, and felt, instead of sympathy, a deep resistance to his resigned helplessness in the face of the eternal questions. It was a powerful feeling and an unexpected one, and as the conversation continued over coffee and dessert, that feeling did not pass. Instead, it became increasingly palpable. I followed very little of what was said after that, having become distracted by something I did not understand, a far plaintive chord that no one else there seems to have heard.

That night, after dinner and the conversation that solved nothing, I came home, as always, to the emptiness of memory. The house was silent, the garden mute. It was

early February and the cold was brutal. It seemed deliberately intrusive, while the sky had a cloudless clarity that left it riddled with stars. I remember walking in the garden where I had read to Sharon almost a year before. I could see her bright, attentive smile, how her love of poetry had seemed to change her for a moment from someone who was dying into someone who knew the secret of how to live. And I thought of my own ignorance against her courage, and how those words could not touch either of us now.

I did not realize until later that my fists had been clinched, that I'd been breathing hard through my mouth, even in that weather. It was my first dim inkling of how enraged I was. The next day, first thing, I walked past my office to the Dean of the College and requested an application for a sabbatical to begin the following fall.

CHAPTER 13

In early April I received an email informing Dr. Steven Martier that his request for sabbatical had been officially approved. I wrote an acceptance to my chair and sent a copy to the dean of the graduate school. That afternoon, after classes, office hours and an interminable meeting of the graduate faculty, I walked the perfected lawns of the college, the grass as green and smooth as felt on a pool table, and watched the students move as in a rigid ballet. They were silent and bright, filing across the lawn in predictable waves that had been set in motion thousands of years before, to unfold as visions of the Am-berville clay, smiling and boisterous and on their way.

And I was a shadow cast by flames. A form of desire without an object for that desire. An emptiness in human form. A widower, a professor, who felt himself a fool.

By the first week in May I had managed to lease my house to a graduate student and her husband. They were moving east from California and would arrive the first of June. I would be gone from that prison and its memories, memories I had almost begun to resent, as if Sharon were a burden, as if she had meant to hurt me with her absence.

The weeks remaining seemed an impossible wait. I wanted only to disappear, to be far from that place and the ache of its loss. At that point I didn't know or care where I would go. I only marked the days until I would be free of Amberville. To that end I imagined the house and its memories turning slightly more transparent each week, till at the end of the month it would be entirely invisible, dissolved in bright air under the Amberville sun.

The second time I dreamed of the dolphin, the sea was a glossy green, its surface like a piece of polished jade. I was high above it in some kind of tower, looking down at the water as it seemed to shiver, then surge. That was when the dolphin arched above the waves, its cerulean glossy against the ocean's silence. When it dove deep into the sea again, I felt myself being pulled down too. At the moment I realized I was about to drown, I woke into

the darkness with a scream no one heard, and nothing could assuage that swelling terror.

They say that to dream of dying means you'll never wake up. But I did wake up, and I lay there sweating--shaking with tremors and little waves of fear, as shadows grew and faded on my bedroom wall. But as frightened as I was, I was not without a feeling of relief, because somehow I knew where I wanted to go. With only three weeks left to make it happen, the next morning I checked online, then sent emails to several realtors in Bethania. It made no difference that the summer season was about to begin, or that the influx of so many vacationers was already underway.

My queries were a waste of time, of course. There was nothing left except a few beach front properties that were far beyond my price range. I was about to give up when, unexpectedly, and with the kind of luck that suggests to some that fate is involved, I decided to attend an art opening at a gallery near my house, and there I ran into an acquaintance from the English Department where Sharon had taught. In the course of that conversation he mentioned he owned a small cottage in Bethania, and though he and his family usually stayed there in the summer, he had found out at the last minute about an opportunity to do research in Rome. When I told him I

was interested in the place, he quickly agreed. It was worth it to him to forego some of the high summer rent, because normally the cottage sat empty in the winter.

My last two weeks were full of packing and cleaning, phone calls to friends, arrangements of all kinds. I performed these chores in an empty haze, as if my present and my past were one and the same thing. Every scrap of my old life that I sold or gave away was the marker of an ache I felt would never fade. But I did what I had to do in order to leave Amberville, throwing the few things I wanted to save into several worn boxes, then stacking them in the basement for another day.

It was a Saturday when I said my goodbyes. Sharon's father listened with a kindness that surprised me. He had been staking tomatoes in the backyard when I arrived. The maple trees that surrounded his yard were still and quiet in the hovering heat. He moved deliberately through the garden, tying young plants to bamboo stakes with fuzzy brown twine, and re-staking others that had already fallen, from weather or poor soil or just from time.

He stood up as I approached. I was reminded again he had been a handsome man, and I guess he still was, in

spite of his age. His white hair was thick with sweat and earth, his blue eyes clear under the bright blue sky.

We stood for a while in the little plot of upturned earth, then moved to the porch and sat down in the shade. After a little while Bill went inside and brought out two tall glasses of lemonade. For a while we talked about nothing at all. Bill was in no hurry, and neither was I. There was the weather to consider, and the Triple-A minor league baseball team.

When I told him I was leaving, he said he understood, adding that when his wife died he would have left too if it hadn't been for Althea and Sharon.

“Love's the only thing worth taking the risk of losing, Steven,” but the loss, when it comes, is as hard as it gets.”

I thanked him for everything he'd done for me and felt like a fraud when I promised to keep in touch.

The last day I lingered. There was nothing else to do. The house was empty. The pine-board floors resembled polished glass. I stood in the archway that connected the kitchen with the little alcove Sharon and I had made into a breakfast nook.

In that quiet, every echo seemed to snicker back. I heard them rise and die as I walked through each room, then stepped outside into the garden. It was lush but unkempt. The crepe myrtles were in bloom and the willows swayed suggestively as if some wild and dissolute spirit inhabited them. So much life and joy had happened there, yet nothing was left of what had been love. In the end I could not decide which one of those two truths to use. I sat a long time in the hope that some kind of clarification would come, but in the end there was nothing there to suggest an answer.

At twilight I came back to myself. It was time to leave. I locked the house and headed to my car to begin the long drive to Bethania.

CHAPTER 14

There were several times I almost left the beach, having walked the town endlessly, playing and replaying the day I met Sharon. Against that backdrop of salt and memory, I remember a feeling rising in my body, a tone of anxiety and frustrated resentment, like the little town at the edge of the sea owed me something and wasn't paying--as if the waves held a promise of some unspoken possibility hidden in the surf as it beat the sand. There were days when those waves seemed to ignore me completely, and others when they seemed a garbled voice, whispering of hope and unrealized dreams. Though there were other moments when they rushed forward relentlessly, like a chorus of voices echoing out of the past, amplified into a single chaotic roar that pounded and punished the shimmering sand.

Against those feelings the dolphins gleamed. I saw several schools of them those first weeks in town, their blue

like living threads, winding casually, silently, through the shimmer of the water. They arched and sped and dove again, moving brilliantly against the rush of the waves.

I spent three weeks like that, glistening and empty. Each day the same as the one that came before, each new sky arriving relentlessly, as inevitable and sure as the ocean's pounding. I slept late, drank too much and walked the beach. Then everyday around two o'clock I made my way to the boardwalk, to a little place that served sandwiches and coffee. That it was called the Blue Cafe was an irony I appreciated. It was clean, cool and comfortable, and I sat outside under the blue and white striped awning that seemed always to swell and fall in the breeze.

From there I remembered everything, and those memories were thin air. The cancer, Sharon's death, and the emptiness that came after--the indifference that dwarfed even the vastness of the sea, until the ocean's gray ache was merely a metaphor for loss and the cold dull sparkles that edge the empires of death.

Strangely, I grew calm. Though it was an empty calm, infused with an air of longing and self-enmity. It seemed I had come two hundred miles to the beach only to turn and look back wistfully on Amberville and its ghosts, at the same time I tried to avoid those ghosts, walking, swimming, haunting bars and arcades, looking out at the ocean and its cascading white waves.

But as hard as the days were, the nights were worse. Filled with dreams and flashbacks, they left me lost in the bright flares of time's slow violence.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER 15

A night with Sophie was like drowning in rose petals. She moved like dark silk, her tanned skin smooth against the moon's bright air. Both shadow and flame, she was dark and intense. When I looked at her the earth melted, and the only words between us were the red words of love.

She was warm where I was cold. She was volatile where I was empty. It was if she knew something she would not say, and what she knew could bring a man to sorrow and pain, then lift him up again, free of everything but Sophie.

The day we met was not the day I fell in love with love. It was the day I stopped distinguishing between hope and desire. She stood in my doorway wet with the sea and

asked to borrow a corkscrew and a martini. I laughed at her audacity. She laughed at my amusement.

“You just moved in a few weeks ago didn't you? You should come to the party. You might make a friend.” So I went to the party. And stayed long after the party left.

Sophie was slender and very pretty. Dark eyes. Red mouth. Her black hair fell in waves, as if it were a negative of the sea 's white foam. Her long, tanned body was an undulant field, a place of whispers and hunger and a silence that vaguely resembled prayer. Sophie wore that beauty like a cop wears a gun, as a display of force against the world's randomness.

You could say she changed everything, plucking me from the fire of my self-immolation with the ease of an adept snuffing out a candle. Her voice was rich and dark, with a habit of innuendo. In her smile there was an air of intimate confession. Her sighs were a mixture of hunger and aggression.

Sophie adopted me quickly and easily. I was not difficult to control, both eager to please and desperate for company, for the little kindnesses she offhandedly threw my way, the quick kisses and pressures as we sat on the

beach. Surprisingly, like Sharon, she once told me she liked the security of knowing I wouldn't leave.

“And the sex,” she added, “because you taste like whipped cream.”

Those were manic times, full of wine and desperation. I spent my days alone, but my nights were Sophie's. There were dinners by the docks, walks on the beach. It was a summer of glassy twilights, each suffused with an insidious melody, both resigned and seductive as it played out in our bodies. I found myself confused and fell in love with confusion. Her's was a presence of almost rude intensity and I followed her body through rituals of passion that bordered on obsession, in a void where sorrow mingled with beauty and need.

Being with her was like swimming in the surge of the sea. There was salt and humidity, the swell and the roar, until each wave of her breath was done in by the next and she shuddered in a silence that was all her own. Then there was another silence as she emerged, gasping and smiling, a fine, dark animal.

I recall a night when the sea-surge was strong. A half-moon hung in cloud-sludge above the beach. We had walked to dinner through the neon and the crowds, the

cool salt air and brackish wind, then returned to Sophie's house with its small, pink bedroom.

She turned as we came through the screen door of the porch, pressing herself against me. Then she kissed me and stroked my chest, oblivious to the world beyond our shadows. Taking my hand, she pulled me into the house. It was dark in the hallway. A feathered stillness. She kissed me again and led me toward her room. That night was slow and desperate and hot. I drifted off, exhausted, in the early morning, and with Sophie next to me, naked, asleep, I fell through my fatigue into a dream of the ocean.

In that dream waves rang against the shore, like perfect, delicate, crystalline bells. And I was happy there, with blue sky and beach-swell. I swam with Sharon through the motions of the sea, then crashed on the sand, lying down on a towel brightly painted in a myriad of colors. Sharon looked at me beautifully, with a sadness in her eyes that seemed to mourn, not just our loss, but all the sadness of the world.

“Remember to prune the garden,” she said. “And remember how Prospero finally became wise.” Then she was gone and the earth seemed to sigh. I looked up into a sky of magenta and green and a little bird of an un-earthly blue flitted past, keening a song.

Waking from that song I felt quietly lonely, and in my loneliness I wrapped myself in Sophie's arms. It was the end of July, about five weeks from the night we met, though time itself seemed to have lapsed into a fog. The world was strange and indeterminate, each thought, each sensation, different. My past had become a movie glimpsed through mullioned glass, and in the light of Sophie's eyes, I realized I'd left Amberville the day Sharon had died, though it had taken a year for my body to catch up with my mind.

CHAPTER 16

Having come to the beach to escape my life, I had not expected to find a future. But it almost seemed like Sophie had been sent, and I felt powerless to refuse her, as if some unimaginably benevolent force had intended her as compensation for the loss of Sharon. Grateful for her presence and everything she offered, each day I gave up the sense of loss I felt to follow her through waves of an intense, bright need. Walking on the sand or playing in the tide, our days and nights wore on in a blur of flesh, warmth and silence, until one day those urgencies began to fade a little as they always must, and we found ourselves wrapped in an air of cozy familiarity and the rush of new intimacy that seemed to justify a new life.

At first I approached that change with some reluctance, regretting the shift at the same time I welcomed it, feeling caught between Sophie's intimacy and the world's indifference. But it was a change that continued, regardless of how I felt, and I knew I had no choice but to accept it and go on.

Gradually though, I began to appreciate what it meant--how that transformation carried with it a sense of normalcy and comfort--things I had once loved and had missed profoundly after Sharon's death. After that realization, I surrendered to the situation with an attitude forged out of both joy and emptiness, and my confidence in the certainty I found in Sophie's pale green eyes. By late August even the form of our relationship had begun to shift, so much so that one day it seemed only the sea had remained the same, its cathedral-blue shining beneath white clouds while the crowds surged on the boardwalk, cooled by the prevailing breeze. Slowly, quietly and with the same inevitability with which the tide advances and then recedes, Sophie and I took up the threads of our own lives and began to establish ourselves as separate people at the same time we made ourselves, tentatively, into a couple.

“Steven,” This was Sophie. I could hear her distantly, as if I, or she, were underwater, I could not tell

which one of us it was. I felt as if I were swimming against the tide, moving slowly, dully, dragging heavy chains.

“Steven,” she said again, and it was louder this time, though what direction it was coming from was not at all clear. “

STEVEN, WAKE UP,” Sophie said. And she was smiling I think, or I imagined her to be. My eyes were still closed, though I was also smiling, still pleasantly drunk from the wine the night before.

“Get up, you bum,” she said, “It’s time for lunch.”

She slid into bed beside me, kissed me hard, and I began to wake up.

“What?” I said, “time for what?’ And I leaned forward and returned her kiss. That was when I noticed the wine bottle in her hand. A Merlot, I think. Green glass sheltering a darkened red. It shifted in the bottle in waves like little tide rims.

“I brought you something,” she said, then poured a slug of wine onto my chest through the sheet. I put my hand up her shirt.

“For me?” I asked.

“Not that,” she replied, matter-of-factly,

“This.” She tossed a slender book onto the pillow next to my head. It was bound in brown leather with gold lettering that read “The “The Book of Nothing” .

“Don't shrinks like to read?” Sophie asked. “I found it at the shop.” Then she kissed me again, a quick, playful kiss.

I put the book on the night stand and pulled her down.

After Sophie had returned to her antique shop up the beach, with its oceanic hoard of oddities, knick knacks, old furniture, and paintings, I walked lazily down the boardwalk to the Blue Cafe, carrying the book that was her gift on my search for coffee and a newspaper. The cafe's awning fluttered like a flag over an oasis. Its white, wrought-iron furniture ticked occasionally with the wind-borne sand. I sat down and ordered, then read the news. There was war and famine, politics, lies, consumerism, manipulation and greed. Occasionally I looked up at the white-capped sea. It was choppy and blue. Flecks of foam broke on the farthest waves. I thought about those waves and then about Sophie, remembering her waves, the shapes our desire made of her and of me. When I'd worn those thoughts out, a thought of Sharon crossed my mind, but I pushed it away and looked back at the ocean. Then my mind became a silence like its broad blue-green, and I stared at it quietly until I was tired of staring.

Eventually I turned to The “The Book of Nothing” , thumbing through it absently. When I looked for an author and a publication date, I found that page had been torn away, leaving a jagged tear of paper near the book's spine. When I opened it at random I saw these words: “From the nothing we arrive. To the nothing we return. In between, the nothing teaches us, and we become, if we work, the shining forms of its potential.”

I looked away, running my eyes down the long line of the beach. A hundred yards out a school of dolphins curved, their cobalt surge devoured by the sea until they reappeared again as if to swim in the air, sparkling in the wind with the salt of the ocean. Then, without really understanding why, I smiled at a feeling that was far from certain--an inkling, a possibility, that seemed to suggest a kind of wit or humor hidden somewhere in the gorgeousness of the day's blue dream.

By the time I left the cafe it was late evening. Here and there a neon light buzzed on. I followed those lights until I arrived at my cottage, emptied of silence, emptied of words, a man without knowledge, with a rented home. And Sophie was there in a black mini skirt, leaning back on the porch, balancing herself in a white plastic deckchair, her heels hooked on the railing. She was tanned, taut and beautiful.

“Hi there,” she said.

“Hi,” I returned.

“You know, the ocean makes me lonely. And hungry too. Is there any way you can help me with those things?”

I smiled and kissed her, then made us both a drink. We sat close for a while, talking aimlessly of the waves and the silence between us. Then we swam together in the wide, green sea and walked arm in arm to dinner up the beach.

That night we lay on the sand while the water whispered, then roared, and the sound of the foam seemed to echo in my chest until I began to imagine I was the sea itself, full of currents, eddies, sharks, whales, corals, anemones. The fall and the rise of them, the surge and the swell. And Sophie was the landscape I rushed to fill.

CHAPTER 17

As those days turned into weeks, the blue waves of Bethania glossed the sand at the shore. I continued to adjust myself to Sophie's routine and the careful, layered calm that had descended on me, until one afternoon with nothing to do, I found myself at the Blue Cafe again, having brought along a few books, one of them being Sophie's. There, I thought and read and wondered, addressing life's problems without hope of an answer, as the crowds surged on the boardwalk and the clogged city streets.

I had brought The “The Book of Nothing” as a way to pass time, a distraction from the intensity of my bright new life. Though when I finally began to look into it in earnest, (having only glanced over a few pages before) I found that the more I read, the more I wanted to read. I was fascinated with its approach to the subject of spiri-

tuality, the way it assumed, without any question, that the spirit was as real as a tree, a stone or the color blue. I was taken by the tragic story too, for, as they say, misery loves company, and the man at its center had suffered greatly, his experience of life both deep and wide. Finding the book to be a comfort, I began to read in it almost everyday, and my life became a garden where little question marks grew, as summer approached its end and the year continued.

While I read I thought of how I'd never belonged, that I'd always been part of that small minority that broods and confuses itself on the eternal questions, that from childhood the problem of what it means to exist had stuck in my mouth like a chicken bone at a church dinner. As a result I have been difficult, resistant to a world that insists we close our eyes and sleep while those in power use us to paper their houses with money. . . . But that's another story, one I'll leave alone for now. Suffice it to say that as that first initial rush of heat and love died down with Sophie, something unexpected happened. I began, once again, to be able to think on the meaning of things. Only this time there was a deeper need than ever before, a need I did not wish to admit was tempered in the flames of Sharon's absence.

As a result of that freshly reawakened interest, I haunted the bookstores in and around Bethania, scouting their shelves for anything interesting. I read Plato, Meister Eckhart, the Confessions of St Augustine, St Theresa, Evelyn Underhill, Martin Buber and more, all the while sitting on the boardwalk at the Blue Cafe as the sea crashed down on the hapless beach and the light beat on the sun-drenched bodies. When I was tired I walked, or swam, or slept. At night, when I had exhausted my mind with questions, I would meet Sophie and a few of her friends for a drink. Then I would exhaust myself with Sophie all over again in a mutual cleansing that was hot and rich.

Alone the next day in the rush of Bethania, the arcades, bars and crowds that edged the waves, there were times I imagined the streets as lines in an enormous hieroglyphic script, their existence proof of something greater than themselves--a series of as yet untranslatable runes waiting for just the right person to turn them, finally, into a clarity of the sun. Against those strange glyphs I continued to read and brood, until I felt, on waking and looking out at the sea, that my life and Sophie's, and everyone else's, held something hidden but inevitable--a bright intense destiny I could sense, but not know.

Of course, I resisted those thoughts, at least at first, being well aware of the problems with such speculation,

particularly with concepts like predetermination and fate. I was a psychologist, a scientist, trained to approach the world objectively. More specifically, I was trained to approach the sensible world that way: the world of behaviors, symptoms, language and actions. It had been drilled into me to remain neutral, though I had long ago begun to realize that most of my colleagues were not, that they maintained instead a hidden air of superiority in which their disdain for a knowledge beyond sense-based logic became a badge of belonging, a rite of passage into a fraternity of cautious men and women. To them, people who puzzled over the mysteries of existence were to be treated carefully--kept at a distance--or worse, left to starve with the artists and poets, those whose lives only had meaning when they were gone, if at all. But I was in a place where the tide changed constantly, with no faculty or inclination to keep me from my brooding, so in spite of my reservations I asked those questions repeatedly. In fact, it wasn't long before I dropped any pretense of scholarly caution, pursuing those interests because I wanted to, but also because there was nothing else left. And for too many reasons to account for in the end, I realized one day I had no choice but to acknowledge that the world that had risen in front of me since Sharon's death had begun to spell itself in the form of a relentless, metaphysical question.

BOOK FOUR

CHAPTER 18

It was about that time that Damon returned to Bethania. Sophie had mentioned him once or twice in passing. He was her partner in the antique store, though a passive one mostly, preferring to stay out of sight and let Sophie run things with the same relaxed precision that made her personal life so appealing to me.

Apparently, Damon had access to a considerable sum of money, though how that had happened and whose money it was, even Sophie was not clear on, and Damon himself did not seem interested in discussing it.

Damon was thin, pug-nosed and middle aged. He seemed to move sluggishly, as if in slow motion, though I once saw him catch a white porcelain cat as it fell from a high shelf in Sophie's store, its blue paste eyes accelerat-

ing blankly. Reaching out easily, he cradled it against himself, setting it down without so much as a blink of surprise. His reflexes were remarkable then, as was his presence of mind. Yet they were incongruous with his appearance--his small size, his swagger, and the elegance he projected in spite of these, an elegance that, oddly, seemed to suggest an aristocratic lineage, so much so that when he spoke his voice seemed tinged with a superior tone. Later on I came to understand this as the confidence that comes to anyone who has not wasted their life, but at first it bothered me, and I was at times put off.

Though for all the quirks of his character and the way he presented himself, it was Damon's face that held my attention most. It was smooth like a serpent's yet angelic at the same time, and the entire moody motion of so many disparate elements flickered, rose and fell, across his almost grotesquely high cheekbones, which were sometimes set off by a bright but distant grin.

I was curious about Damon for a lot of reasons. His relationship with Sophie was one of them. But Sophie would not discuss this, and Damon gave no hint that helped me understand. So eventually I let that question die, since I wasn't all that sure I really wanted to know the answer.

But there was more, much more, to Damon than that. There was something about him I couldn't put into language, something that seemed to suggest he was a man out of the ordinary. In fact, there were times when I was tempted to believe that in the course of his life he had encountered things others could not imagine. There were even a few occasions when I found myself thinking of him as an initiate of some rarified, still-hidden knowledge. I have no idea why those thoughts came to mind, though I know I was ripe to believe them as a result of my reading. It may have been my need to think such insight exists, and Damon, being gifted with a fine intuition and a truly unusual view of the world, was someone I could easily project those things on. Though more than once I saw him size up someone instantly, seeing what they needed and interpreting it back to them so subtly they left convinced they had just solved some long standing problem of critical importance to them while engaged in casual conversation with a stranger.

As a psychologist, I was fascinated by Damon's intuition and tact. But it was that intangible something that lived in the space around him--a feeling of certainty and deliberateness-- that held my attention most. When he looked at me I felt as if I had been weighed and measured, not physically, but mentally, or morally perhaps. From that assessment came the depth, tone and complexity with which he addressed my questions. Yet at the

same time I was aware of a quality of non-judgement in him I could only envy, having very much less of it myself. As long as I knew him, I noticed those things, knowing perfectly well that in the end my questions about him would remain unanswered. Nonetheless, I was always slightly anxious in his presence, feeling a hint of shadow on even the brightest days

CHAPTER 19

The day I first spoke to Damon was a Thursday, I think--a warm afternoon in early September. Outside, the sea was white with foam and gulls. I had gone to the shop to pick up Sophie for lunch when I saw him wandering down the aisle near the front door. At first I thought he was a customer. He paused and looked at me, then looked down again.

“This is beautiful, don't you think?”

He pointed to a black horse--a statuette. It stood on three legs, its left foreleg in the air. The high, fierce head curved off in the same direction, as if it were turning to look back over its flank, its eyes closed against the suddenness of its motionless motion until the horse itself seemed a dream of its own turning.

“Yes, beautiful,” I said, and I looked at Damon. But he was staring fiercely at the statue again, and for a moment I felt as if I had disappeared.

I went to the office. Sophie was there. She was sitting on the couch near a pile of worn books. She was quiet, inward. I thought she looked sad.

“Did you meet Damon?” she asked. She seemed distracted.

“Oh, is that him?” I said.

“Yes, he showed me a little statue. Very pretty. It must've just come in.”

I ran into Damon a lot after that--out in the world under the Bethania sun, or at the little place on the boardwalk I had adopted as my second home. I remember the first of those meetings well. I was sitting in a white chair at the Blue Cafe, reading *The Book of Nothing* after ordering a sandwich.

“Damon, Damon Tauler?” I said, as he walked by. He seemed distracted, preoccupied for a moment, then turned toward me all at once and called me by name, though he had given no hint at the antique shop that he knew me.

“Steven Martier? I recognize you from the store. I'm Damon. But you already knew that, didn't you?”

“Yes,” I said, and then, “sit down.” I was surprised when he did sit down, waving the server over and ordering a cup of coffee.

“I understand you're a psychologist,” he said.

“Yes,” I said again, “but at the moment I feel a long way from all that. In fact its been such a difficult year, I sometimes think I'll never go back.” I was quiet for a moment, thinking the tone of plaintive bitterness in my voice had given away too much of myself. But Damon only looked at me, saying nothing for what must have been a full two minutes.

“The ocean can change you,” he said. “I've seen it before.”

When I looked back at him he seemed amused by what he'd said, or perhaps he was amused in anticipation of what I might say in return. For a few seconds I didn't have an answer. Something crossed my mind, but went away before I could identify it in words, more the flavor of a thought as it disappeared.

“Im able to think when I look at the waves,” I said finally.

“What do you think about?” Damon asked. The question surprised me. I was not used to anyone except Sophie taking an active, probing interest in me. I took a chance and answered him honestly.

“I think about life and death,” I said. “How the ocean is a metaphor for absence and presence at the same time.”

He studied the surf, then looked at me again, picked up The “The Book of Nothing” for a moment, then put it down.

“Life is a prelude. It's death that's important. How we live determines the death we make.”

I was more than a little surprised by the suddenness of his statement, and the thought crossed my mind that Damon might say anything. Though I felt a tug in my heart as he spoke. It was a glimpse of something, but too small, too fast.

“Most people ignore me when I talk like this.” I said, smiling.

Damon laughed. He seemed to sense my vulnerability.

“Even Sophie?” he asked. And I was embarrassed. I looked down at the table, then out toward the sea.

“No, she doesn't ignore me. She finds it endearing when I think.”

Damon looked amused all over again. Then cautious. Then indifferent. Or so it seemed. He watched a wave fall into the beach, then turned back to me and said in an even voice,

“As bright as Sophie is, she lives most comfortably in the intelligence of the body. I, on the other

hand, suffer each new thought until I can fit it into a coherent world view.”

“What is your world view?” I said, deciding suddenly to pin Damon down, to play a little of his own game with him by asking the unexpected. Damon was unfazed. He simply answered the question.

“We're spiritual beings trapped in the bodies of animals,” he said.

I looked away from him and felt suddenly sad. Then I was aware of nothing at all for what must have been a full minute, possibly more. When I came back to where I was, I saw myself studying the small blue veins on the back of my left hand. Not long after that the conversation ended, and Damon left to help with the books at Sophie's store.

CHAPTER 20

That night after dinner, Sophie and I lay down. There was light and shadow. The house broke into textures and desire. After dessert she had kissed me and I kissed back hard, wanting badly to understand her, for Sophie and I to be one and the same thing. I told her I loved her and wrapped her in my arms, holding her through the waves of that star-swept darkness.

But as sweet as it was, that moment was not without a price to pay, because on falling asleep in Sophie's bed I found myself in a dream of pain--a world of emptiness and resurgent sorrow. That dream was not an image at all, but an overwhelming feeling of dread and resistance that tore through the night like a gathering wind.

A few days later, autumn came to Bethania to stay. The crowds thinned out and the beach grew quiet, until a moment arrived in the first week of October when it seemed as if the entire world had dissolved, and the sand that lined the ocean and the little city at the edge of the sea, marked a boundary between two different forms of the same silence. That the Blue Cafe remained open was a comfort to me, since Damon and I had evolved an informal agreement to meet there in the late mornings most Tuesdays and Thursdays. Though Sophie was my main bulwark against the coming cold. As the waves continued their relentless, garbled roar, I drowned myself in her and forgot about winter in moments so intense there were times I felt like life itself might burst from its seams.

When those moments faded and I was alone, I felt as if Sophie's presence had pressed itself into the deepest fissures of my mind. As ephemeral as soap bubbles whenever they surfaced, those pictures floated in front of me as I walked the shore, and like shining templates of my regard for her, they reflected forms of flesh and hope, each lined with a note of infinite sadness:

“Steven, look:” This was Sophie. She was staring out at the beach through my cottage window. It was late afternoon. The sun was low. She held an old army blanket across her chest, but her long, tanned back was

smooth and bare. When I got to the window I put my arms around her. Together, we looked out at the sea, its cobalt burning against the sun's bright orange. At first I noticed only receding blue ridges, then the sky at the horizon, like a finely etched line on a blue china plate. Then I saw the dolphins. They fell and rose, moving and plunging through the water's blue-green. I had the flash of a thought but didn't speak. It was a thought about the dolphins, and it was somehow familiar--that they were essential to the sea's existence, both its song and its bursting--the beautiful burning silence of it, as if their presence brought sea and air into alignment and that without them those worlds would never meet at all.

“They're so beautiful,” Sophie said, “ I like the way they rise and fall, as if air and water are different densities of the same thing.” And I felt immediately that she was both right and wrong.

“Yes, I said, “like they belong both places, and at the very same time they don't belong anywhere.”

Sophie turned to me. The late afternoon light streamed through the window. The dolphins, like the day, were fading, almost gone. She seemed thoughtful before she spoke, looking into my eyes for such a long time that I began to feel slightly uncomfortable.

“I'm sorry you lost your wife,” she said. “Probably more sorry than you'll ever know.” Then she held

my hand and took me to her bed, and I could feel kindness in her touch and hear compassion in each murmur and in every whisper.

BOOK FIVE

CHAPTER 21

Do you believe in God?" Damon looked at me quizzically. Having posed the question he waited quietly, and for a moment I thought his body hung suspended from his head as he sat in silence and watched me intently to see if I could hang in the air with him. Beyond the cafe the white surf churned. A few waves surged past the high water mark of the previous night's tide. A gull hovered over a trash can nearby, then turned and wheeled away, leaving a jumble of wrappers and crusts untouched.

"I don't know what God is," I said. "It's indefinable, so it's impossible to believe in."

"Perhaps so, Steven, but does that mean God is out of reach, or merely that belief is not the way to any certainty about God? Or perhaps it means there is no God at all, that we're only a collection of biological

urges, which we, in our hope for order, look on and pronounce as proof of design.”

“For me, a proof of God in the intellectual sense is useless,” I said. “What do I care about a pretty pattern of someone else's thought, if I haven't perceived a reason for it myself?”

“What if that person claims experience of God,” Damon asked. “In that case would you be interested?”

“Yes,” I said, “in that case I would. But even then there are obvious problems, Damon. How can I believe someone if I haven't experienced the same thing? And what about all the frauds that have pushed themselves on history--the little impostors just waiting to take advantage?”

Damon's eyes seemed to smile, as if for him this was amusing, a very fine game of cat and mouse indeed.

“What do you think it would be like to experience God?” he asked.

I stopped, confused. I had never seriously imagined such a thing. Of course, I'd read what some of the saints and mystics had to say, but when I thought about it for myself, considering the possible manifestations of an unseen and all-powerful being, as hard as I tried I drew a blank in the end. I looked at Damon and told him so.

“Maybe its best you can't imagine it,” he said.

“So many of the saints and mystics you refer to had unbelievably difficult lives.” Damon picked up his coffee cup. It was white with a thin brown stain at the rim. He took a sip, then another, then set it down.

“I would think it would be painful to see what others can't--to know the essence of the soul itself. It would almost be a kind of death, certainly it would be a death to the world of everyday beliefs. After all, how would you communicate your experience to anyone else unless they'd seen it too, and even in that case they wouldn't necessarily be interested the same way you would. Besides Steven, before that ever happened, before you could survey those other worlds, the books speak of the need for an initiation: to see everything hidden in your own being first, the rage and hunger, the murderous depths of your desire. I think that would be profoundly difficult, don't you?”

That night, as Sophie slept beside me, Damon's words came back, echoing. I thought a long time about the anger I might have, knowing from the textbooks and the theorists that it was part of all of us. I could see my resentment that Sharon had died, but that was inevitable. Nothing to hide or deny, and besides, it was something I had been handling all along. After all, there was nothing

to do but go on. Grieving had been too costly in a personal sense, perhaps even a little dangerous, which was exactly why I shut the door on it when I did--because grieving, for me, had just meant wallowing.

When I thought about Sophie, and the burning need I had for her, I certainly realized we had done things quickly, but I was grateful for her presence, her passion and her wit, and there was nothing in my mind that meant her any harm. Then, for no reason, I thought of my family and the estrangement between us--the blocked humanity--and I edged up against something I did not want to touch. It was a feeling that seemed all-inclusive, encompassing Sharon, Sophie, and my entire history all at once. But I put it away, though just for a little while, and went for a walk in the deep night air, leaving Sophie asleep in the pleasure of her dreams.

CHAPTER 22

The next day I nearly missed my meeting with Damon. I was tired, restless, having slept only a few hours after returning from the beach the night before. As I sat at the Blue Cafe and listened to him speak, it began to dawn on me that Damon's way of thinking could make things difficult--not just for me, but for anyone who took them seriously. With that recognition came a rush of anxiety and a sense of intense anticipation over what my interest in spirituality might cost me. But in spite of my concerns I shrugged those feelings off. There didn't seem to be much else to do. In the end I didn't care if Damon's ideas kept me up at night. I had the sense that what he was teaching me was more important than anything I had ever heard, and I intended to understand it as well as I could. Which is to say that the more I met with him the more I wanted to meet, in spite of any worries about what the future might bring.

Surprisingly, the more we talked, the more I changed. Those changes came with great intensity-- a succession of understandings I was not expecting and not prepared for. At first I grew voluble and opinionated, willing, even eager, to explain my dissatisfactions. I complained about the world that history had handed down to us, expressing my unhappiness with the available models of the universe--a Newtonian physics that left a legacy of cause and effect and a relativity that theorized based on measurement alone, unable to account for the imagination that created it.

I noted that the sciences had evolved in such a way as to deaden our sensitivities to the life that surrounds us. Yet at the same time they advertised themselves as awestruck conservators of the "wonders of nature." Of course, their research was also responsible for every possible advance in weapons technology-- as well as the consumerism that makes human beings into quantities to be bought and sold, to say nothing of the pollution that threatens our very existence..

Damon, in return, slowly unfolded a cosmology all his own. It was a world-view so strange, so unfamiliar, there was nothing I could do but listen when he spoke. So I listened in silence, and was often confused. Though

I had a strong sense that, in Damon's case, confusion was better than nothing at all, and I felt a mixture of wonder, hope and resistance as he spoke.

I can still see him sitting at the Blue Cafe, leaning forward, talking slowly, with an almost involuntary wringing of his hands as he chose his words. Moving through the litany of his conceptual framework, he treated all of creation as if it were alive and not some impersonal source of natural resources to be "developed."

The Earth breathes," he said, "and we are sustained by it's breath . . . We are the part of the Earth that thinks. It cannot know itself through thinking if it does not sustain us. And if we destroy our ability to live on this planet, the Earth will continue, though the beauty of our thought life, which is one of our planet's greatest gifts, will necessarily and tragically remain unperceived . . . Above all, it's imperative to think living thoughts--thoughts clearly felt and deeply imagined. That kind of thinking leads to higher life. Dry concepts and abstractions are among the most destructive internal activities possible and they have a profound negative effect on the natural world. . ."

I thought constantly about what Damon said. But to understand it, to assimilate it, that was different. After all, for Damon, thoughts were traces of living beings,

and the forces we entertained in our life of desire could be as destructive in their world as gunfire in our own. His was a universe so alien and strange it took everything I had to hold a picture of it in place. Yet I did all I could to keep it in front of me, because as different as it was I had to admit that in some curious way that picture seemed familiar.

Yet as compelling--and at times disturbing--as Damon's descriptions of the world could be, they were only part of the effect he had on me. There were even times I felt as if the words he spoke held some strange power of their own--that by absorbing as much of their meaning as I could, they had somehow begun to change me from the inside out, until I became more aware of myself than I had ever been.

As a result of that process--wherever it came from--I grew increasingly more sensitive to my surroundings, and the life beyond my skin seemed more present than before. Things were clearer, more immediate, and because of that they were harder to avoid. Oddly, that clarity brought with it an almost obsessive desire for self-examination, and I felt as if a light whose source I did not know shone constantly on all I did, said and felt.

Accompanying that restlessness and the compulsion to see and know, there came a further moment of recognition. At first it was only a dim understanding--a subtle flash, or an inkling. Though it wasn't long till I saw that there was more to my desire for self-examination than reading, introspection, or even Damon's words could account for. I felt as if I had arrived at a new kind of attention--something I had never experienced before--and that attention, combined with Damon's emphasis on the interconnectedness of things, let me see clearly for the first time that the reasons for my actions were as important as the acts themselves. As a result, my most insignificant thoughts and the gestures that flowed out of them became objects for an even more intense examination and scrutiny than what had come before.

I found that look into my life exhausting.

In the midst of that fatigue, which was a condition I felt I had no choice but to accept, I brooded over every lesson at the same time I kept track of what was still unfolding. In a way I hadn't thought about things since I was a child, I realized (or should I say, remembered?) that if my actions were important then so were their effects, and I began to think not only on what I did and why, but on the ways my words and deeds made a difference to others. Strangely, I even felt that this phenomenon

applied to Sharon. That she'd been gone for over a year didn't matter at all. I remember thinking that was a crazy idea, but it persisted in spite of my objections, not as a passing thought, but as a beautiful, light, feeling-tone that lived in me of its own accord. I puzzled over that feeling as I walked the dunes, or gazed into the sky from my cottage window. I lived inside its quiet insistence as Damon described a world of beauty and meaning in which the subtleties that had been lost to us over eons of time waited for the day we would be able to understand them again. And though the Earth he described was the same one I lived on every day, as he talked there were times I felt it as a foreign place--a deep blue planet of intense significance, a world that was my home, yet alien to me.

CHAPTER 23

As if it wasn't enough to examine my motives and actions, I also began to look back over my past. I was particularly interested in what had led me to Bethania, and in my mind I played and replayed Sharon's death and the string of empty days that followed. Strangely, I did this as a pleasant distraction, because it allowed me to relive the sense of relief I'd felt--a relief that had flowed from Sophie's kindnesses and the little flashes of hope I felt when she comforted me. Though there were moments alongside those when I remembered how intensely desperate I'd been, and I wondered how my new life--carved from so much fear and pain--could sustain itself indefinitely in an unfamiliar landscape, especially when I'd left so much behind, sleeping profoundly in the little town of Amberville.

It was a painful realization--one I hadn't expected to make--though it flowed so naturally from my talks with Damon that by the time I realized that level of their consequence I was also worried about what might come next, and in the depths of my anxiety, confusion and despair, I pursued, as I always had, a sense of safety in isolation, or the simple pleasures of a walk on the beach. At the same time, I continued to read and think, trying to make the most sense of Damon's words, scouring bookstores, libraries and the internet for a text or a quote that might shed light on some obscure point he'd made. In fact there were days I would read until my head grew tired, then I'd attempt to integrate what I was able to learn into the growing spiral of my attention.

When nothing could pull me from my confusion, I turned off the lights in my cottage and slept. I told no one where I was, not even Sophie, and in the mornings when I woke--usually late--I heard only silence cascading down the walls to fill my little bedroom with nothing at all. And though my need for isolation didn't happen everyday, whenever it did, I wondered what it meant. There was even a moment I asked myself if I would be able to continue to commit to Sophie, and then the thought went through my head, not once but often, that ours was a closeness based on need alone, and in the end

need would not be enough to sustain it. I even worried it had become habit and the thrill of habit, or, for that matter perhaps, it was the habit of the thrill.

I can't count how many times I pushed those thoughts away, closing my eyes till only loneliness was left, hun-
gering inside me like a shadowy animal, not caring at all about right or wrong. In those moments I wanted only Sophie's presence--the warmth of her desire and her pale green eyes, the silent rushes that hovered in her kiss, until the amount of effort it took to avoid the truth of what I was doing, was exactly equal to the intensity of my need.

To say I was of two minds would be an understatement then, since the subtleties that rose out of Damon's teaching had clearly not fully penetrated to the depths of things. As a result I was torn between doubt and loneliness and a high-minded knowledge, the consequences of which I could not fully face. Lost between those poles I was sad and empty, and in an attempt to overcome the pain I felt, I turned to Sophie again and again, as if she were the source of life itself.

During that time I knew instinctively that I was losing my grip, and in an attempt to escape the growing nervousness that pushed on me from every side, I continued to read from The “The Book of Nothing” , practically committing to memory the section on life after death. In fact, you could say I was fixated on it, as if something depended on my ability to understand. I felt compelled to know just what that “something” was. There was one quote in particular I was fascinated with, so much so I committed it to memory: “What you want tells you how far you are from being at home in the nothing.”

Yet for every attempt I made to live in that knowledge, there was, in the end, a final emptiness I could not speak, until at times I felt nearly as desperate as when I'd left Amberville--as if an illness were about to claim me at any second, having come on with such a gradual intensity I was unable to realize it until it was too late. By then it was with me and I could not deny it--a fever too virulent not to spill into the street.

CHAPTER 24

The first week in November the Blue Cafe closed, its comfortable familiarity falling away. Against the changing smears of light on the beach, I moved carefully, anxiously, thinking of Sophie, Sharon and her family, and Damon, all the while remembering passages from *The "The Book of Nothing"* . Then one day in the middle of that ongoing reverie, as I walked the gray planks of the boardwalk where it paralleled the beach, my eyes fell on a woman who looked so much like Sharon I couldn't help but exhale hard, just like I'd been punched in the stomach.

For a moment it was as if she had never left: dark hair, blue eyes, the same bright features and joyful sighs. And I saw in her figure the same lilting drift I had followed from Bethania to Amberville years ago.

I couldn't help but watch her, discreetly, at a distance. I saw her as she paused to window shop on the street, the way her fine hands fell to her side as she walked, brushing against the gray pleats of her dress in the same gesture of shy femininity that Sharon had made when she walked in the garden. I followed her quietly as she left the boardwalk, passing the sparse knots of people that made up the winter crowd, then headed toward a quiet section of Bethania to the door of a nondescript townhouse on the sound. She was met there by a tall man with dark red hair and a rough, thick beard. He let her into the house with a kiss, staring coldly over her shoulder at me as he touched her lips gently, lovingly, with his. I looked away quickly, turning back toward the boardwalk and the distant, restless purr of the sea, thinking of the life Sharon and I might have lived, and the thousand deaths and reincarnations that had changed me irrevocably since the day she left.

After following Sharon's double through the streets of Bethania, I hid in my cottage for the next three days. Alone with my thoughts, and the reverberations of an emptiness that I had not felt so intensely in over a year, I slept, watched TV and ignored the door bell, a thousand miles from Sophie and light years from grace. A quiet sadness lined each hour, and I could hear in every

sweep of the wind down the sand a soft reverberation like a woman's whisper.

By the time I made it back to my life things had changed. There were moments when the emptiness that had been there since Sharon's death began to show up again as if it had never left, shining through the cracks in the boardwalk's decking, and between every word in The "The Book of Nothing" .

It didn't take long for Sophie to notice the difference. I was quieter, more withdrawn, and the times I avoided her grew ever more frequent. To my surprise she didn't ask what had happened--though I suspect she had a dim sense for what it might be. As I floated like a ghost between two worlds, she stepped back slightly, and with a self-possessed calm that still surprises me, quietly allowed me the freedom I needed, accepting what she couldn't change without judgment, anger, or recrimination. And though there were a few times she hid her pain behind an awkward silence, for the most part she adjusted with poise and dignity to the distance I kept when I felt far away, the desire I indulged when I had nothing else to offer, and the days and nights when I avoided her completely.

At the time I regarded her consideration as unnecessary. I even resented it a little, feeling as if it were somehow condescending. Though in hindsight I realize Sophie could see clearly that there was nothing she could do to save me from my endless turning inside an endless series of burning questions.

BOOK SIX

CHAPTER 25

It was the second week in December when it all fell apart. Outside, in the cold, the waves crashed in on themselves and glazed the frozen sand. A flock of stray seagulls floated above the boardwalk in search of a few scraps to help them through the Bethania winter.

I'd been alone for a few days, having lost track of the clock, thinking and rethinking the world and my place in it. When Sophie knocked I opened the door. We made dinner. We talked, and Sophie stayed over.

I was tired the next morning. The sunlight woke me far too early. A brilliant intrusion, a burning magnesium hammer tapping on my eyelids. The night before had been very deep: the dark shimmer and twist of Sophie's beauty in my bed, our fine writhing toward sleep in the

little deaths we made of love. And though waking up was difficult, I got up to walk just after she left. My body was sluggish with the resonance of the night's gifts--our deep, bright melting--but also with the dream that followed. . .

I had seen a city of burnished gold. There were vistas of high buildings, ornately inscribed veneers, minarets of exquisite delicacy and detail, basilicas of white tile shining into the high, white circle of the sun. And the sky behind it all was a brilliant blue that seemed to hold a yellow nimbus above the silence of the city. Then I saw a woman in plain white robes. She wore a sash of indigo and silver. On her head was a crown of white and green emeralds. In her hands she held a scale of gold, and on that scale there were two ivory cameos--one of Sophie and one of Sharon. Then somehow I could feel that Sophie's image was heavier than Sharon's, that it had been cast of lead and painted over. I was startled. Unsettled. I woke in a sweat.

I didn't know a dream could do that. In a single picture it called into question every ounce of hope that Sophie and I had left. I felt like a man who hangs a mirror on his wall but refuses to look as he walks by. Yet he sneaks a look when he's alone, and when he does he's stricken by the pity in his eyes--pity for himself and pity

for his neighbor, the long, dull look of someone tired and empty.

That image reverberated through my body in a way that left me alienated from Sophie and her friends. As a result of those feelings a sense of hopelessness crept in--a heavy sadness that seemed to have no limit. After that I avoided her more than I ever had, even as I still managed to hope we might be saved--that perhaps another dream, or some as yet unforeseen moment of quiet clarity might bring us back to the promise that Bethania once held, and we would be happy as we walked against pastel sands while the white clouds moved vastly from the ocean inland.

But three days later a letter came. One cold, bright morning, somewhere around eleven, I wandered to my mailbox, half asleep, and found an envelope addressed in neat handwriting to Steven Martier, 100 Ocean View Drive, Bethania. . . I recognized the return address immediately. It was Sharon's father Bill, with news of the family. It seemed Althea, Tom, and the kids were doing well, though it had been a hot summer in Amberville. . . It was almost as an afterthought that Bill mentioned his prostate cancer, playing it off as it were a minor inconvenience, saying "the doctors tell me I'll probably die of old age first."

I did not know what to do, or what to say. I only knew I'd had enough of dying. After an hour of staring vacantly out the window, I sat down at my desk and wrote to Bill, wishing him well and reminding him how much I loved his daughter. As I sat at the window, writing in longhand, Sophie came in and sat beside me. Seeing I was upset, she put her hand on my back. "Steven, what's wrong, are you OK?" she asked, and for a moment it was as if the distance between us melted, and I remembered every kindness she had ever offered. I turned to her to acknowledge that when, without any warning--and to my great surprise--what rose inside me instead of appreciation was a dark sneer of cold resentment.

That was ten days before Christmas. The blue ocean washed the sand. After that, almost reflexively, I found I had banished Sophie to a far away land, unable to see her as anything but an embarrassment--an absurdity even--a dull distraction that could not save me. My response, as usual, was to walk the beach and boardwalk, brooding over what I could not understand--how, in a moment of vulnerability linked to Sharon, I could have suddenly and involuntarily pushed Sophie so far away. But the worst part, the most painful part, the part I could neither deny nor acknowledge, was how I could be left so utterly paralyzed by someone I cared for as much

as Sophie--someone who had helped me through the most difficult time of my life with deep concern and kind compassion. But her decency had finally become too much! It burned me and left me empty, until, whenever I thought of her trusting, hopeful eyes, I felt myself wither, and I was ashamed.

In the grip of that shame I refused to go near her, unable to even pretend that things were alright. I did not, I could not, break up with her though, unable to face the finality of that moment, unwilling to speak the words we both knew were inevitable. I felt myself a fraud from beginning to end. More than once I avoided her when she knocked on my door, hiding from her love with the same careful attention I had used to seek it out just a couple of months before. In doing so I isolated myself more than I ever had. And Sophie was wounded. She did not understand

CHAPTER 26

Six weeks after following the ghost of Sharon to the sound, Sophie came to visit in the middle of the afternoon. She wore a dark red velvet hat and a gray linen dress under a long coat of black cloth with a high cloth collar. She was dark and pretty as she walked through the door, advancing slowly, saying nothing at all. She kissed me without a word and pressed me against the wall. It was absolutely silent, as if the world had stopped breathing, and I moved with her beyond hope or understanding, following her beauty through the intensity of its need.

When that silence was over and we lay down on the bed, Sophie seemed worried, confused, distracted. When she kissed me again, it was a soulful, empty kiss, and I had the thought that she was kissing a memory, hurrying to catch it before it faded. When she spoke, she rambled at

first--something about her childhood and her beliefs about stars--though eventually her words took on a coherent rhythm, and she fell into what at first seemed a tangential story, though it became obvious it was a story she felt compelled to tell. Her voice was a near whisper from beginning to end, and as she continued I felt my own life shrink to a silence, until I could only lie there and listen.

“ . . .When I was a kid my dad took me sailing. He and my mother and I took our old white sailboat out in the bay.” Sophie paused and took a drink of red wine. “I'll never forget my father that day. He was so happy, so free, so full of possibilities. I loved him so much, both he and my mom. Mostly I remember how they laughed and played, how I watched the two of them from my place on the bow as I grew smaller and smaller, until I shrank into the silence and, almost, but not quite, disappeared. . . .I can still remember the weather that afternoon. It was perfect--mid- seventies--with only a few stray clouds. I looked back and forth between my parents and the bay, fascinated with the waves, almost hypnotized as the boat divided them, splitting the blue water into two halves of foam, the white flecks fading as we sped by. It was beautiful Steven, I remember it perfectly. The bay was blue with shadows of emerald, and the farther out we went, the more blue it became, until we came to the middle, and it was like it was the

middle of blue itself, and that was where we slowed and finally dropped anchor. My dad fished and my mother swam. I'd brought along a book, but mainly I watched them--with all the jealousy an only-child has for their parents--because it always seemed there was some kind of invisible wire between them, a connection I could never know or be part of. And somehow, as I watched, I realized I would never be happy like that--that I would always be restless, empty and sad, and those people with that quiet, untouchable joy of theirs, would never be able to completely understand me. After that I never fully trusted them again. Maybe I even resented them a little. But the one thing I'm sure of, like nothing else, is that I've never been able to stand too much happiness myself."

By then it was late. Darkness had come. Without waiting for a reply, Sophie got up and dressed, bent down and kissed me, then quietly left.

That night as I slept, the ceiling opened, and a billion stars rushed by. I sped farther and farther into the silence of the dark, passing novas and supernovas, nebulae, wormholes, clouds of hydrogen and ammonia, carbon and methane, moving faster and faster until the universe became a blur of light and that light became a white sphere, diminishing in circumference as it surrounded me

with a glow so bright I was translucent with it, each organ of my body an instrument in the symphony that was my life. The next thing I knew I was in a movie theater. The screen lit up as I sat down. I had the feeling something significant would appear.

My time with Sophie flashed in front of me. It was a film of my loneliness and of Sophie's need, followed by a montage of what had passed between us, of our desire for one another as a kind of avoidance. I saw her move against me that first night in bed. I saw my pride that she liked me, that she was interested. And I understood in a way I could no longer push aside, despite all the resistance that still hunkered inside me, that Sophie had left because she loved me, and because she had known beyond any doubt at all, that I was paralyzed by my past and couldn't love anyone.

She didn't come back, and I didn't try to find her. I lay in the huge bed most of the next day. It was clean and warm. Outside my window there were white and blue clouds. A line of sand against a violet sea. It was almost 2:00 p.m. when I got dressed. I didn't care. I didn't think. I showered. Ate something. Picked up a book and scanned a chapter on dreams.

Went nowhere at all for five full days, living off old groceries, ordering for delivery.

BOOK SEVEN

CHAPTER 27

Bethania shrinks to a ghost town in the winter. Only a few thousand people live there year-round. They're natives mostly, born to the rough seas and stiffening winds, while I was a stranger to both the ocean and the town. Alone there and empty with everything that had happened, I moved through my life with a sense of stunned resignation.

I remember the holidays in a red and green mist. I was lonely, restless. Boredom had set in quickly. So I made a short trip to see my parents, and though I felt like a stranger there, it was a familiar estrangement, and I was at home and warm with family. That week passed in a haze through New Year's Eve. I returned to Bethania quietly empty and hid in my little cottage, shivering.

I weathered that cold in an almost dream-like isolation, reading and sleeping, then reading again, paying as little attention as possible to necessities, eventually losing track of the day and the week. When I realized it was Valentine's Day I made a rough calculation: It had been about two months since I had seen Sophie.

For a long time the wind blew relentlessly off the beach. The boardwalk took the brunt of it. Businesses and cottages took the rest, though there were times I swore the buildings seemed to push back against the incoming gusts as if they were shouldering their way through the winter to the spring. It was only an imagination, but I felt at the time it was one I needed, being alone in a strange place, far from my memories of Amberville and Sharon.

At the end of February there was a four inch snow. I watched it fall from my bedroom window. Flake after flake melting in the sea, piling up on the sand, covering Bethania.

Often I recalled Sophie's silence as she left, the room's shadows traversing her long gray dress until she finally disappeared into darkening air, her silence swallowed by the night's greater silence. She never asked for an ac-

counting from me, and I never told her what I had finally been able to put into words in her absence: that neither her love for me nor her kindnesses would ever be able to make up for Sharon's death.

In the end, it seemed, I had only my brooding. As it grew I began to realize things I'd had only an inkling of before. They emerged as from a cave of hidden memory and pain as dire and relentless clarities, as fresh as the day I put them away. In the light of that knowledge I realized many things: that I would not be able to casually wave away the sense of emptiness that had come when Sharon died, or the relentless, haunting sense of fear I'd felt after seeing her dark figure disappear in my dream. I understood that, in the end, no trick of the mind would minimize my sorrow or the intense imprint left in me by Sharon's suffering. Finally, I saw clearly that I had no right at all to avoid the reality of my circumstances because I had felt them as an unfair imposition on what had once been a normal and happy life. What's more, it had become obvious that in the end I was stuck with two losses instead of one--that I missed Sophie almost as much as I missed Sharon. More than once I opened *The "The Book of Nothing"* and saw the same line appear again and again: *Regret is the writhing shadow of a flawed character.*"

Emptied of dreams, I was emptied of possibilities, the sea changing constantly from bright green to steel gray, then a rough cerulean with glittering edges that deepened into waves of ultramarine. When I read too much and was sick of reading, I walked the beach the way I always had. A cloud of painful images followed me as I went: images of Sharon, images of Sophie. Images of their sorrows and my self-absorption. I saw myself use Sophie as a distraction from losing Sharon, and I saw my sense of loss submerge even as it fueled my desire for Sophie. I realized I'd been a man between two worlds. Having blundered into one I had lost it too soon, then assumed the other without releasing the first, and I wandered between their ghosts down a thin strand of beach, silent, penitent, emptied of grace.

I spent five weeks that way, unable to resign myself to what I'd done--having looked away from my most basic humanity, away from a deep cry to take responsibility for myself. Knowing that was hard. Yet it was something I had to know. And in seeing how easily I had deceived myself, and the consequences of that deception for myself and for others, eventually I resolved that, if I could, I would make my peace with Sophie--and with Sharon too, if that was in any way possible--until my life was my own again, at least as much as it ever had

been. Having made that resolution one cold day on the beach, I walked into my little cottage and picked up The "The Book of Nothing" . My eyes fell on the following passage: "The man who deceives himself does not deceive eternity, but isolates himself from the living silence that the infinite waves of the dead inhabit."

Strangely, in that time of realization and penance, I suddenly realized that I would return to Amberville, that in fact that feeling had been growing in me for some time. I had no idea where that thought came from. I only know I felt as if I had something to do there, something that should not be done in Bethania. Until then, I had imagined Amberville as only a distant possibility, a hazy memory against the ocean's push. But it had begun to shine dimly like a jewel in my brain until I knew my return was important, even necessary.

CHAPTER 28

Having made that realization I was quietly hopeful, though I also knew it wasn't time to leave Bethania. That was late March. There had already been a few warm days sandwiched between cold spells, though it was mostly wind and rain that beat the shore that month. That rain drummed and foamed against my windows, as if it were a promise of even more pain to come. And in fact there was a night in the middle of that pounding (water in sheets against the darkened sky, running in torrents down sandy alleys) when I was unable to sleep, unable to dream, and I walked in the night to the little silver diner where Damon and I had begun to meet after the Blue Cafe had closed some months before.

Sliding into the corner booth, my hair and jacket soaked in spite of my umbrella, I ordered coffee and a piece of cake. As I waited, my eyes ran down the line of customers at the counter, and I could see that they were safe faces, unfamiliar and anonymous, until I reached the end of the row of shiny red plastic stools, and there, without warning, my eyes met Damon's.

He came immediately to my booth, a newspaper folded under his left arm.

“Steven?” he said, “Do you mind if I sit down?” He sat down before I answered. I was uncertain, nervous.

“Hi Damon,” I replied.

Damon looked at me. I couldn't tell what was on his mind.

“How are you?” he asked. “It's been a while since I've seen you.”

“I'm fine. I said, not ready to take any chances with him.”

Damon stopped. He seemed to turn inward for a minute. His eyes were almost closed, and what I took for a shiver crossed his broad face with its extraordinary, almost wolfish bones. Then he began to talk, in that way of his. Without preface or prelude or explanation.

“I've been thinking about you, Steven. About our last conversation. You were a long way off that day, like you were struggling with something, trying to arrive at a resting place or make a decision.” Damon paused as the server walked by. He ordered coffee. Nothing else. Damon drank coffee as if it were the elixir of life itself. He pronounced the words with a kind of distracted reverence.

“Coffee, black, he almost whispered, then turned back to me, immediately unmindful of the interruption.

“I had the feeling you were in pain, that something was bothering you. Then a few weeks later I heard Sophie left.”

For a moment I grew irritated with him. I felt as if he wanted something from me, or worse than that, he wanted something for me. I broke in and interrupted him before he could say anything else.

“How is Sophie?” I asked, then I was sorry I asked. But the look on Damon's face didn't change.

“Sophie's sad. She's sad,” he said. And then he was silent.

The thought crossed my mind that Sophie and Damon must be very good friends. I let that thought go quickly. I needed a friend myself.

“I'm sorry. She was good to me.”

But Damon didn't respond. The coffee arrived. He took a sip then looked out the window. A few stray headlights slid down the wet street. After a couple of minutes he turned to me.

” It's funny,” he said, “after all their time together on this planet, there's still more sorrow than joy between men and women. It's not a question of fault here you understand. It's a question of awareness, self-knowledge. Sophie knew she was taking a risk with you. But she loved you enough to take it anyway. You, on the other hand, didn't realize you were a risk. But in my mind that you are able to apologize is to your credit.”

“I'm glad for that too,” I said, “but it hurts me to think I was able to hurt her.”

Damon turned back from the window's darkness. He looked straight into my eyes as he spoke, though his look was not one of challenge or chastisement.

“When someone we love dies, we go with them a little way into the land of death. From that perspective, our own life is like a movie. And sometimes, when things are really difficult, it can be like a movie made from old, familiar negatives. A sadness shared may seem

like intimacy, a loneliness that has been soothed can seem like love.”

I looked back at Damon. Then away from him. I had not expected this. Not his tone of compassion or his insight either. After all, I was the doctor, the shrink who read books. But I had been seen by him. Recognized. And I was embarrassed.

When I asked Damon politely if he would change the subject, he was quiet for a moment. He bowed his head as if he were in meditation or prayer. When he looked up his mood had changed. He began to talk again, but almost in a whisper, as if he didn't want anyone else to hear.

“You know, throughout history there have been certain cultures in which it was a practice to read spiritual books to the dead,” he said. I was unsure if he had heard my request, though I was more able to listen to this than to squirm in my embarrassment, pegged in Damon's crosshairs.

“The Tibetans and the Egyptians both wrote books of the dead. I've always thought it was a beautiful idea, and especially necessary now, if you think about it, because in our time so many of us leave empty-handed, not knowing, and maybe not even caring, if anything

comes next. What a unique position we're in when we finally reach the other side. Think about it Steven, the mystery has been solved, the question answered. Yet most people carry no knowledge with them of that new territory, no perspective gained during life that can help them orient themselves after death. There can't be a time when they are more open to what has been written in the great books than when they've found themselves in that bodiless world, where everything that moves has its being as meaning."

I forgot everything Damon said earlier in the rush with which his words filled me. I did not know that I accepted them, I only knew I felt them inside my body as if I myself had been spoken as he spoke. My head and heart grew oddly warm, and I felt a clarity that was beautiful, new and strange. It was me, but it was also something bigger than me--a feeling of certainty and trust in a silence that held me like I had never been held before. I was not ready for that and could only stammer, undecided as to whether I should be grateful or afraid.

We talked awhile after that, as we always did, but by then I had come to understand that when Damon and I met there were usually just two or three points he made with great precision. The rest was window dressing, or the approach to what he had intended to say all along.

For a while he elaborated on a few of the finer details of his beliefs. When he left an hour later, I walked back to my cottage in the rain and wind. I did not feel them. Instead, I felt like I'd been taken apart without realizing it, then expertly put back together again. But something was different, radically changed, though I was not at all sure how to say what it was.

The third time I dreamed of the dolphin was after talking to Damon in the diner that night. I dreamed I was falling through a dark tunnel toward the sea. There was a rush of wind and the sound of a scream. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I hit the water hard and sank like a sodden blossom through the waves, unable to move, unable to breathe. That was when I felt the dolphin push me safely through the density of the water to the shore. When I opened my eyes to sunlight again, there was sand and silence and an expanding breeze and Sharon and Sophie were standing side by side. Together they sang a pretty duet, and though I do not remember the words they sang, the sense of it was that I owed the sea a debt, and to pay it I would have to come to terms with them, without judgement, embarrassment, or even regret.

CHAPTER 29

I do not know if it was the dream, or my meeting with Damon, or something else, but the change I felt that night in the diner continued, though nothing external had changed at all. I was just as alone as I had been for months--though I was able to regard my loneliness in a very different way--to see it as a chance to accept the reality of myself more than I had ever been able to before. I spent a lot of time walking the beach after that, thinking on life and loss, on love and its meaning. I considered various theories of sea and sand and their relationship to the silence that had so profoundly announced itself to me the last time I had talked with Damon. Yet no thought, no theory, no desire to understand, exceeded the urgency of the ocean's insistence, or was more coherently pulsating than the air that surrounded me, resonating with the deep contrition I felt as I walked the punished shore.

In that time I imagined myself to be dead to the world. Dead even to Sophie's beauty and the sonorous whisper of her breath in my ear. I reminded myself that she was only a memory and that her memory was a temptation that I would have to watch out for, because it could lure me away from my ultimate goal: to feel my own heart beat and take responsibility for it.

I spent days, then weeks, in contemplation, and as I did I grew to know the shifting widths of the sand, how it varied through the tides and the wave-wrack that pounded it, until one day, watching a gull hover, as white and pure as any scavenger I had ever seen, I had the feeling that Sharon was watching me, and I was beginning my return from a far, lost country and she did not blame me for where I'd been or how I had learned the things I'd learned.

That was a good day. I saw where the gulls were likely to cluster in the afternoon and felt their beauty as they floated in the air, their white wings hovering in the blue of space. I saw the sand differently than I'd seen it before: its inconstant shades and tints of color ranging from peach to lemon, to the high white radiance of the noon-day sun, then on again to evening orange. And all the while I had an inkling that there was something impor-

tant in those colors, something essential and silent that was beyond all grief.

In late April there were three more dreams, staggered over a week and a half. For that infinitesimal flicker of time I completely forgot that I was alone. The dreams were that powerful, as was the resonance that came after them--able to fill the void that Sophie and Sharon once filled. I allowed them that place happily, without question or resistance, as if they were a blessing, or a destiny that insists.

Falling asleep before the first dream came, the sea-sounds through my window seemed to murmur in my ear, and I thought, as I fell away from the earth and its tears, what a beautiful song it was, how lovely were the voices that played in the surf's drowning. There was Sophie's voice singing a drinking song, and Sharon's voice singing of wind and rain--the little song she loved from the end of Twelfth Night. And there were other voices too. I thought I heard Sharon's dad and my own father and mother, against a chorus of even more distant voices that were also familiar. They were singing of the sea, as if to call me forward into its luminous glittering as I floated between the earth and the canyons of the moon.

Their song held a sense of hope and possibility, and I knew, as it played out, that the voices I heard were both the voices of loved ones and the substance of the sea, the same sea I had admired and feared as I passed it by, walking importantly with my books to the Blue Cafe.

That dream moved me profoundly, as did the feeling of luminous buoyancy that came with it, as if I were made of light, and that light called me back to the source of light itself. I burned to tell someone who could appreciate it. But there was no one to tell it to. No one except Damon. And though he had been receptive in the diner a few weeks before, I was hesitant to call him, afraid he would refuse. After some thought, I called him anyway.

I arrived at the diner before Damon did, sitting quietly in the booth at the end of the row, thinking the whole time of how to explain. When I told him the dream he laughed at first. It was not an unkind laugh at all. Rather it was the laughter one friend has with another when something important is understood, or when a significant milestone has been passed by one of them. When his smile faded he was thoughtful, sober.

“So often our dreams know more than we do,” he offered. Then Damon chuckled quietly again, as if he

knew a lot more than he had already said. After a few seconds of smiling like that, his eyes still twinkling like he had a secret, he looked out the window and casually changed the subject.

There was water in the second dream, though it was not the pale blue of the sea at all, but a putrid circle of blackened well water. A place to fear. A place to drown in, haunted by a writhing and shimmering evil. Exactly in the middle of its thick sheen of scum, a small opening showed through, and I saw my face there, composed of that same evil. Then inside my reflection as I bent down and looked in, I saw a million teeming maggots and worms finishing off the half eaten carcass of a pig. That image was more than I could stand. I woke into the darkness of my little bedroom, sweating and panicked, with a great self-loathing.

A week or so later the third dream came: I saw, etched in light, the towering figures of angels and archangels outlined brightly against the stars. They moved gracefully, beautifully, inside the night, wheeling overhead at the pace of the constellations, looking with both love and indifference on the earth below. In their slightest gesture or offhand remark, spring burst into flower, or there was desert, or snow fall. Great waves of plague swept whole

populations. War spread mindlessly across countries and continents. I had the feeling there was a single purpose underneath those figure's actions, an end that was orchestrated by a presence even greater than their own. It was a purpose into which our desires and ambitions flow until we finally see them for the futility they are--that the birth and death of each living thing is only a note in a symphony written by time itself.

I had been changing for a while, but those dreams changed me more. I remember feeling bliss at the thought of such bright figures moving vastly through space, the beauty of their silence and the grace of their intentions as they observed and participated in our ongoing revisions. But what moved me most was the sense of significance in their gestures, as if the flutter of an eyelash could mean waves of joy, if only we were capable of knowing what an eyelash really is. After that I understood things very differently--having a greater appreciation for the value of what, to us, seems insignificant--with a more acute awareness of each small object's importance to the whole. As a result I was silent a lot more often, listening to the sea and the crying gulls.

CHAPTER 30

When I walked to the jetty by the entrance to the sound, it was the first time I'd been fishing since I'd come to Bethania. I sat on the huge rocks that lined the channel, not really caring if I caught anything. As I relaxed in the cool air, intent on nothing in particular for the first time in years, the man next to me caught a small skate and threw it offhandedly between the huge, gray-blue jetty stones. A boy of maybe nine or ten suddenly drew out a long thin knife and stabbed the fish with several quick thrusts before cutting it into strips to bait his line. Suddenly I remembered the figures from my dream, and for a moment I wondered what infinitesimal gesture the death of such a fish would rate. . . .It was then that Damon tapped me on the shoulder. He was dressed in a light jacket, plaid shirt and jeans, though for a moment I thought he was an angel from my sleep, his face darkly outlined against sun and sky.

“Hello Damon,” I said. “I run into you at the funniest times,”

“What's funny about this time?,” he asked politely.

“Funny because so strange. I had just been thinking of life and death, and here you are, leaning down darkly out of the sun. For a second I thought the grim reaper had come.”

Smiling, Damon sat on the rock beside me, looking out to where the waves broke as the ocean met the sound.

“It's beautiful here today,” he said. Sometimes when it's like this, the thought of death doesn't occur to me. Sometimes I even think death is an impossibility.”

I turned to him and said nothing for a moment. Then,

“If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's how real death is” .

Damon apologized, calling himself insensitive for not remembering Sharon. But I hadn't said it because I wanted an apology, or sympathy, but rather as a plea for understanding, a way of reminding him and myself that I was still fragile and somewhat uncertain. And then I did what I always did with Damon. I told him about my life, that my solitude had yielded two more dreams. . .

When I was finally quiet he looked at the waves, their pearls and ivories as they crested and caved.

As he turned to look at me, he focused over my shoulder. His eyes seemed to shine as if he had seen something bright.

“Of course, we can only speculate, unless we've been dead ourselves, but in your dreams you saw the hand of destiny come forward, though only after glimpsing the evil that lives inside us all. To allow them both to exist, side by side, without judgment--all the while working tirelessly to transform what's less than perfect--to me that's the trick, the difficulty and the hope.”

We continued to talk for a while after that, but what I remember was the feeling I was left with afterwards. It was a feeling of inexplicable sadness, and underneath that a familiar feeling of embarrassment, even shame. And as I walked home in the twilight, after catching a few fish and returning them to the sea, I realized I wanted to talk to Sophie, though I had no idea what I would say.

Three days later I walked by her store. Sophie was in the window, preparing for the season, unpacking stock and rearranging. She put a rag doll on a little straw

chair, and a wooden soldier dressed in a blue uniform in a conspicuous place near the white front door. Her back was turned as I approached. I saw her dark hair, her lithe, trim figure.

It hurt to see her. My breath increased. I stood a few feet away and watched her work. When she turned around I saw her eyes first. They were beautiful and wide. Dark streets, dark houses, and for a moment, as I stared into them, I felt the same desire for her I felt before. Yet somewhere I also knew it didn't matter, that something more important had brought me there--a dim, far whisper that I would not ignore.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hello,” she replied.

“I wanted to talk to you, if you don't mind.”

This I offered tentatively, not at all comfortable with what might happen.

“That would be alright,” she said.

Then I told her I would be leaving soon, and I thought I saw relief in her eyes at the same time I saw sadness.

“Yes, I figured you'd be going,” she said. “I wondered if you'd stop by.”

“I wanted to say I'm sorry,” I said, not waiting for her to ask why. “I'm sorry I hurt you. I could have loved you if things had been OK.”

“I know,” she said. “I know that. And the funny thing is, I'm not sure I'd have loved you if things had been different.”

She stood in the sun at the doorway to the shop. There was nothing to say. Nothing more to offer. Then a question formed itself and jumped from my mouth unexpectedly, as if it had been waiting there all along.

“Are you seeing Damon? I asked.

Sophie smiled, almost laughed, and there was something of that old look in her eye, a look of wistful longing and mischievous kindness.

“None of your business,” she said, and she smiled even wider.

I grinned shyly back, hugged her and went home. And as I left I realized I'd been wrong about Sophie and Damon all along--there was nothing to fear from them, nothing at all, and nothing about their relationship I needed to know.

CHAPTER 31

My last weeks in Bethania were spent much like the first. The Blue Cafe had reopened, and I sat under its striped awning, reading from The “The Book of Nothing” and staring out at the sea. The crowds moved in waves of pink and dark flesh against the bright blue-green of its wrinkles and pleats. It was a quiet time, one of reflection and sadness, with a note in the silence that seemed strangely like joy, though I did not yet know how to let that joy be part of me. It seemed more like a possibility, a distant, shining thing.

So I watched and waited and read at the cafe. And the sea was my companion, and my reality. It glittered and roared, shimmered and played, and I held that glittering inside myself like the reverberations from a moment of

absolute honesty, and felt a feeling that was like a promise of something clean and pure.

The last day I packed the car and locked the cottage door, then walked down the block and left the key with the realtor. After that there was nothing to do. I was ready to begin the drive to Amberville. But instead of leaving, I went down to the sea and stood barefoot in the sand, looking out at the clear, twinkling blue of infinity. Then, before I could care about the wallet, shoes and shirt I'd left behind, I was swimming into the glass beyond the breakers--and there was silence there, and I dove deep, my eyes closed tight to the grit and brine. When I came back to the bright world of women and men, the beach was far away--a beige line shimmering at the edge of the waves. And I felt as if Bethania were a part of me, that what I'd learned there no longer lived in my memory, but was instead a presence that breathed as I breathed. I swam to shore, dressed, and walked slowly to my car. Drove west out of Bethania toward Amberville.

It was after midnight when I pulled into the driveway. The house was dark in the late June heat. I walked to the door slowly, opening it with the key I'd nearly forgotten I had. When I stepped inside onto the hardwood

floors, the smell of the house brought back worlds and time. They were worlds of love and beauty, loss and pain, and I was immersed in them without warning and without protection.

I walked quietly through the darkness and the echoes that lived in the corners of each room. A sense of loss pervaded everything. Not even a year of absence had erased it. I thought for a moment I should not have come back, that it was a mistake to believe Amberville held anything at all for me, though somewhere inside myself I knew that wasn't true, and I felt a quiet certainty that could not be threatened.

There was no electricity. I stumbled in the dark to the living room couch and lay down with the windows open, hoping to catch a breeze. As I began to drift off I remembered Sharon's face, and I sighed for what had been and what would never be.

I spent the next couple of weeks running errands and getting settled. As soon as I could, I went to see Bill. We talked a long time, and when I left I promised to stop by often, and this time I knew I would keep my promise. Later, I called a couple of my colleagues on the faculty and caught up with what had happened while I was away. (I had only six weeks to write up my "research," to legitimize a year's reading in academic language.)

As I went through each day's chores, the phone calls and cleaning, random pictures appeared in my mind. There were pictures of Sharon, Sophie and Damon, pieces of old feelings and conversations. I saw Sophie toss a leather book on my bed, and I heard Damon's remarks about reading to the dead. I absorbed myself in those memories whenever they arrived, regarding each of them as something instructive and quietly alive.

CHAPTER 32

The last time I dreamed of the dolphin, the ocean was silent--a quiet blue-green with an underplay of shadows. Out of its stillness the dolphin leaped, gleaming brightly between the sun and the sea. Its blue shape flexed as it reached the top of its arc, then it curved, dove deep and vanished in the depths. As it disappeared I heard Sharon call my name. It was a loving voice this time, both tender and resigned. And in the dream her voice held me, the dolphin and the sea. And the desire that drove me through my stay in Bethania was also there, though it had changed. It had become a single riff in an unfathomable song of love, hunger and aspiration, twining always through the earth and the flesh the earth dissolves.

Waking from that dream, I opened my eyes slowly, remembering Sharon just before her death. I saw her in the garden, watching the willows sway. I saw her smile. I heard her laugh. I remembered how it felt to hold her through the sadness and the pain that had marked the end of her life.

I thought of many things I hadn't thought of since that day: how Sharon had been warm and fallible and human--a silence, a veil of breath, as I was also all those things. And I saw that I had abandoned her memory in part to avoid admitting that I would also die, and that in doing so I had nearly killed the part of myself that loved her. When that recognition came I resolved to make a change, to move through each loss without looking away. Then I let in Sharon's memory as fully as I could, and for a moment I was almost crippled with the pain. When it passed I found myself on the floor of my bedroom in the middle of great sobs and burning tears, remembering her intelligence and the compassion in her eyes, and in that moment I loved her as much as I had when she was alive.

The next day was unusually cool. The first of August. The finches sang in the branches of the oak trees. After breakfast I followed their song to the garden. It was the first time I'd set foot there since I'd gone away. I

walked the perimeter of the waist-high brick wall. My hand traced the rough surface of its darkened red until I was calm and quiet and ready to begin. Then I sat in the white chair where I had once sat with Sharon and a feeling came over me that was both old and new--a feeling of solace in an absurd conviction--and under green willows that waved like the sea, I read to Sharon from "The "The Book of Nothing" " .

EPILOGUE

It's been four years since I finished this diary. At this point there isn't much left to say. I take the book out maybe once a year, to remind myself of how easy it is to make mistakes. But this last reading reminded me of something else: that after a time even the profoundest loss and pain can fade, how I had read to Sharon until it did, and assumed that, when it came to me, finally, to bring that phase of my life to an end there was a reason for its ending, and something new and powerful and important would begin, not just for me, but also for Sharon.

As for Sophie and Damon, I haven't seen them since. Though there was a day a few months ago when I wandered through an antique store on the outskirts of Amberville, and came across a copy of *The Book of Nothing*, and seeing it brought back memories that

were not so hard. Standing beneath a shelf of odds and ends, the plastic mask of a smiling ghost, a silver hat pin, a lava lamp, I opened the book to the title page. The author's name was Damon Tauler.

