

## Chapter 1

### A Face

The man lying on the bed did not care that his room had grown dark. In the dying sunset the gun in his hand became a logical conclusion to his thoughts, an inevitable means to his bitter end. He had sworn an oath to himself two years ago, and the words walked with him like a second shadow ever since: “I swear not to draw out my life. When disgust and boredom are all that’s left, I’ll end this.”

He chuckled bitterly. In the sickly twilight his jeans had merged with the bedcover; half his body was already gone, and his checkered shirt was hemorrhaging into solid gray before his eyes. His life too, he considered, had bled away its colors and

shapes. And now here he was again with his 9mm Smith & Wesson.

He opened his mouth, placed the barrel between his teeth—and it was then that he remembered the woman with the ballerina walk.

Her face rose before him like the ghost of a fairy, indistinctly remembered: long black hair, intelligent eyes, a symmetry of features resulting in unearthly loveliness. Her hazy presence had no cause to join him here, no claim to flash across his mind before the bullet sealed his fate. After all she was a stranger to him, though he knew her name from her credit card receipts: Ellie, a customer at Bake 4U, where he worked.

She would come every other Friday, sometimes trailing a little girl, or was it a little boy? Once between taking her money and bagging her cakes, it had somehow happened that he mentioned astronomy and she philosophy. Then yesterday when she arrived after all the cream puffs had sold and she looked so disappointed, he pretended to stumble on a forgotten stash and gave her the ones he had set aside for his wife.

And now there it was, a spark, a reason to live another day.

He still smiled at the memory of Ellie clapping as he pulled the cakes out like a rabbit from a hat. He had waved no wand; yet what he had felt for the span of a few seconds had seemed as mysterious as

magic—the shadow of an echoing happiness so faint that he could hardly be sure he had felt it. But if not, why was he suddenly laughing softly, here, in his dusky bedroom with his finger caressing the trigger?

Not today, he realized, and sat up.

As he slipped the weapon back in the drawer of his bedside table the door opened, and there stood his wife, Fay, a dark silhouette in a triangle of light, with an orange necklace gleaming in the open collar of her shirt. As always lately she seemed just a little hesitant to start a conversation.

“Neil...” She faltered. “Did I wake you?”

“I don’t sleep sitting up.” The words chafed his throat.

“But doesn’t the knocking bother you?” she marveled.

“What knocking?” He focused his mind wearily and heard it.

Past the window autumn was withering the shadowy, backyard maple, though September had only just begun. But the year was 1997; the next millennium was creeping near, and it seemed to Neil that the winds of change were stirring the heavy branch, which was knocking on the window of his unlucky townhouse (number 13 Western Hemlock Way.) “First signs of a dying season.” He shrugged, rising.

He peeled off his shirt, jeans, underwear, as if no one else were there with him. Four years had reduced

his marriage to this. Or had it always been just a little too unimportant, Fay's presence? He no longer remembered. Only at night could his wife reclaim him, when the lights were out and the realm of the physical was all that lay between them.

He heard her following him into the bathroom, unsexy, uncertain, muttering a reminder that they must leave in fifteen minutes. He had forgotten: Saturday night, going out with friends, her friends. "I'll be ready," he said lifelessly, pulling the shower curtain closed.

Only then, lost in the rain, did he realize (almost as an afterthought) how cruel a man he had almost become. The world for him would have ended without pain. But his wife would have rushed into their room to find a faceless, mutilated corpse bleeding on her bed. His farewell gift.

Dripping, shivering, he stepped out of the shower and switched off the light. Darkness swallowed him. He found his way back into the water. To his blue eyes (always so sensitive) each drop was a needle, but he kept them open, accepting the pain as a futile atonement.

And in the distance he heard the summons of the maple.

## Chapter 2

# Glass Flowers

“What’s wrong with the wind lately,” Fay muttered to herself, tucking a curl back in her hand-knitted hat (orange, like the glass of her teardrop pendant.) Her hair was always like this, frizzy and all over the place, which was exactly what she liked about it, except on blustery days when every strand seemed to have a mind of its own.

She finished dusting her garden of glass flowers and wiped her hands on her jeans, the same ones she had worn the day she met Neil. Wistfully her eye sought the marigold patch over her right knee, the

patch that hid the tear that told a story.

She liked to recall the memory in serendipitous negatives; it made her feel as if something impossibly wonderful had happened that day, four and a half years ago: If it had not rained (the way it only rains in Washington State, without coming up for air—) If she had not slipped with all her packages as she was crossing the street— If Neil had not slammed his brakes to avoid hitting her—well then, their bitter-sweet meeting might never have happened.

“It’s my fault. Are you all right?” He bent over her, stopping the rain.

“No, it’s me.” She whimpered. “I feel so stupid. The drain. My heel got stuck—Oh, no!” Wide-eyed she spotted the glass confetti by his foot: her glassblowing graduation project reduced to dust, the kind that could cut a dog’s paw.

“Lean on me,” he insisted, when she tried to get up. “I’ll drive you home.”

“But you shattered my pumpkins,” she kept muttering, as she hobbled to his car.

“Better your pumpkins than you.” He lowered her into the passenger seat.

She could barely make out his eyes through his rain-dappled glasses, but she would never forget his half-amused smile. And now, looking at the marigold patch, it occurred to her that she had fallen in love twice that year. The heat of the glassblowing

furnaces, the heat of Neil's passion, both had set around her heart like strips of cooling glass. But Neil kept cooling, hardening, turning to ice.

She left her fragile garden and walked into the house to wake him, if he was even asleep. Nowadays he always spent Saturday afternoons alone in their bedroom.

"Neil—" she faltered "—did I wake you?" "I don't sleep sitting up," he muttered under his breath. The room, his posture, her question, his answer, all felt like a terrible *déjà vu* of last week and the week before that and before and before....

She watched him strip on his way to the shower, walk past her, oblivious, a shell of a man. He was still her prince charming, paying for everything because her earnings at the Glassworks Studio were little more than pocket money. He was still her knight in shining armor, who had plucked her from the world because she needed saving (from her stalking boyfriend, appalling housekeeping, overdrawn credit cards, you name it!) He was still the man of passion who gave her his body every night, binding her to him as he never did in daylight. But for so long now he moved through his days with a frozen soul.

And yet only a year ago when he discovered computer games, he had seemed to thaw for a while. Until he began to shut a door between them. From then on their spare room became his private sanctuary, his secret gateway to imaginary worlds

she was forbidden to share.

‘But when did I start to lose you?’ The question mocked her as he closed the shower curtain between them. She shook her head at herself in the bathroom mirror, unable to remember. Her husband had tiptoed away in tiny, insignificant steps, and now an invisible chasm gaped between them.

“Neil...” she muttered, smoothing down her wind-blown curls.

“Fifteen minutes, I know.” She heard him over the patter of the water, and her heart shivered at the lifeless tone of his voice.

## Chapter 3

# A Book

“But why bother, Ellie? That’s my question,” said a glossy-haired man, sidestepping the car door his wife was opening. The wind whipped his bleached bangs into his eyes. He flicked them irritably, admiring her long black hair, which glistened without the use of oil.

“Why bother with what, Jake?” she asked, her voice pleasantly low-pitched.

“Buying a book for a complete stranger.” Inwardly he added for good measure, ‘And on my day off, thank you very much!’ Which underscored

why Sunday was his least favorite day of the week, yet one he adhered to with religious devotion, considering it his visiting day with his greatest possessions: his wife and the son she gave him.

“But he isn’t a complete stranger, is he?” She went on smiling at the five-year-old boy she was helping out of the car. The yellow-haired child looked a replica of his father, but he had her eyes, hazel, thoughtful.

“He gave me his secret stash of cream puffs on Friday,” she added gravely. “Can you imagine a weekend without cream puffs, Johnny?”

The little boy shook his head with equal gravitas.

“Besides.” At last she glanced at her husband. “It’s not just a book, is it?”

Her intelligent smile reminded Jake of why it was such a coup having her for his wife, *loving* her as the accepted word went. Perhaps it had been a mistake recommending Ayn Rand’s books to her; he had to admit it. She had changed so much since discovering those larger-than-life heroes. But he, himself, was such a hero after all, albeit a more realistic interpretation of a multi-millionaire at age thirty-two (with a little, secret help from Lady Luck.) And yet...

After the novels Ellie had turned to philosophy, economics, history; who knew what else she studied in her library when she left him by the television every evening at seven. Bedtime for their son meant freedom from her husband. He could of course go

with her, find a book, read too. But, hell, after a day spent at auctions and estate sales, scanning newspapers and magazines, sifting through used musical instruments like vegetables before the market closes and then, his heart shifting into high gear—finding it: a *Steal* (with a capital S.) Well, after all that, who had energy to read? Who could keep awake?

So here they were, going to buy a copy of Ayn Rand’s magnum opus for a boy in a bakery (first chore of the day.)

“Daddy.” Johnny glowed at his father, expectant arms in the air. Jake sighed impatiently but joined his wife in swinging their little superhero across the street. And within minutes Ellie found the book she wanted, moving with such grace, such quickness, thought her husband, admiring the faint outline of her legs in her plain cotton skirt. Mildly aroused he tugged on the tie of his latest Armani ensemble, a style he adopted à la *American Gigolo*. “The movie that changed my life,” he loved to say, by which he meant that it had changed his wardrobe.

“A paperback?” he asked, as they headed for the register. How deliciously disrespectful to give the cheapest edition as a gift.

“If he gives it back to me I’ll have another copy.” She shrugged. “Mine’s so full of underlying and notes. Some of the pages are falling out.”

“Really!” Jake’s smile evaporated. He knew—as

he knew his wife knew—that he could afford to buy her a first edition hardcover, signed and all! If she asked. That would be his reward, to hear her ask. Instead her eyes were sparkling at that eight-dollar mass-market paperback.

“Think he’ll even read it?” He tossed a ten-dollar bill on the checkout counter. “A thousand pages?”

“Probably not,” she conceded.

But he noticed her swinging her little shopping bag as they returned to the car, to get the second day’s chore over with.

Yet, in the end, their little boy was denied the thrill of visiting his favorite playground. And something in the child’s bewildered expression unsettled Jake: the wide, hurt young eyes staring at the Family Tree, that ancient maple which only last week had been huge and filled with swings and laughter, now lying fallen across a bakery, a toy store and a library, a victim of last night’s wind storm. It was difficult to explain to a five-year-old that something had killed the roots underground.

## Chapter 4

# Epiphany

From here on, Neil knew, he would always say that reading *Atlas Shrugged* changed his life. For fourteen days he seemed to live in the world but out of it at the same time, as if another layer of reality had drifted from the clouds to cover the earth, leaving him walking in old, familiar places that looked new.

His mother always called him selfish. His boss said he never met a man so cold. His wife feared his anger, which roared rarely yet for reasons that seemed trivial to her. He never graduated from high

school, but his classmates awarded him an honorary title in the yearbook: Least Likely to Succeed.

He thought of the human pageant that passed him over the years. He was always too quick of mind beside them, too ready to lose patience with their slowness, too happy to mock their stupidity, too coldly rational, too proud. He made no sense in their world, and their world never made any sense to him.

But then he walked into the story of an author who conceived a philosophy for man as nature created him: a mortal being endowed with the gift of reason, who must seek to live each short hour to its farthest possibilities and no days past his lifetime. A here-today-gone-tomorrow flash of light so worthy of glory that he must never demean himself by taking from others unjustly, nor give himself away for free—but every night hold his soul up to the highest arbiter of all: His own reflection in the mirror.

“*I am the meaning of my life,*” said Neil, closing the cover on one-thousand-eighty-four pages that changed him forever. And out there, he thought, was another soul like his, the woman who handed him this book when she came to shop at Bake 4U two Friday’s ago: the customer called Ellie.

For days he struggled to write her a letter, a prelude to a friendship, words from a stranger spoken by a soul mate. But how to bridge events that had not happened yet? How to be her tomorrow’s confidant when she did not even know his name? All his life he

had felt lonely; now for the first time he knew he did not have to be. But how to trade as equals when he was the beggar asking for a favor?

In the end he traced his darkest demon on a yellow writing pad, admitting what he had only discovered about himself yesterday, after the gray mass of his life finished splitting into black and white (or was it splitting still?) Hope vying with unprecedented excitement to see what Ellie would write back—if she would write back—he sealed his short letter in an envelope and tucked it in Ellie’s copy of *Atlas Shrugged*.

The next day he left both the letter and book at Bake 4U, with “*Ellie*” scrawled on the envelope. Then he made plans to escape the endless monotony of his purposeless days, at least for a little while.

Every year Fay and he would take their yearly vacation after the winter holidays, still four months away. But with the famous Family Tree falling on the Bellevue branch of Bake 4U, Neil’s boss was only too happy to spare his Redmond bakery manager and so kill two birds with one stone, as he put it, by taking Neil’s place and saving on payroll.

Investing all his savings and emergency cash too, Neil booked a trip that would separate him from oxygen and solid ground. As a child his favorite pastime had been to swim for hours in the cold, current-tossed ocean. This time he planned to make it a swim to remember.

“Do you mind if we take our vacation early this year?” he asked Fay, after buying their tickets to Hawaii.

“Va-cation?” She stumbled on a wrinkle in the living room rug. “Are you serious?”

He frowned. By the sudden, startled joy of his wife’s expression he realized how unhappy she had looked lately. A twinge of sadness pricked his heart.

“I thought you were going to read yourself to death,” she muttered, almost smiling. “The book that woman left you... Really? Vacation? Oh, Neil.” She twirled in place then sunk on the sofa beside him. “Do you want to go swimming again? Somewhere on the coast?”

“Hawaii.” He smiled an aching smile. Just saying the word felt like breathing sea air.

“Hawaii?” Her gold-flecked eyes looked like shiny walnuts. “But it’s so expensive,” she marveled, childlike. “Isn’t it? For how long?”

“Eleven days.” He felt so old beside her. “That’s all the time I can afford to take off from work. How about you?”

She fluttered her hands, said it would be no problem, Anabella would cover for her, then she asked for all the marvelous details. He showed her the itinerary and told her to be ready at six the next morning. She nodded, exuberant with joy, looking as if she wanted to kiss him.

But suddenly she raised her orange teardrop to her

lips. Perhaps what she was feeling reminded her of the day she first fashioned something out of glass, for she kissed the pendant. And the gesture seemed so self-contained to Neil, so independent of him, that he laughed with her at last, feeling almost carefree.

“You’re finally wearing the shirt I bought you for your birthday,” she said breathlessly. “I’ve never seen you in red before. Your eyes are bluer. You look different.”

“I’ve changed more than my shirt, Fay,” he said, smiling wryly. But he promised to wear red tomorrow.

She was also wearing a red shirt with her jeans the next morning, and in the cab on the way to the airport she retaliated with a surprise of her own.

“Sophia’s coming with us,” she said, still carried on the same wave of excitement. And she told him that she phoned her childhood friend last night when he was in the shower, and together they conspired to recreate their vacation of two years ago; and how lucky that Sophia found seats on the same flight and a bungalow next door to theirs.

Neil blinked in amazement. He knew that Fay was still talking because he saw her lips moving. But he no longer heard her voice, or the hum of the tires on the highway, or the rain on the roof of the car.

‘Two years ago. Sophia.’ The words echoed in his mind. Yet still he sat there, alive but numb to the foreign incantation of that woman’s name. The secret

they had shared for one forbidden night was an ecstasy and a curse to him. The memory haunted him for all the wrong reasons, for all the right reasons; made him pull his gun out in the darkest moments of his Saturdays, his one day off with all that time to kill. When had that catalyst lost her power to torment him with life's forgotten possibilities?

"I hope you like him." He suddenly heard his wife's voice again.

"Who?" He swam up for air.

"Eric. I told you. Sophia's getting married again. Oh, I can't wait to see my first best friend ever! I'm so happy, Neil. So happy."

She turned to look out the rain-streaked window, brushing her lips from side to side with her orange pendant. In the rising sun past her profile Neil saw Puget Sound looking windswept and sparkling beside the highway, like a shattered mirror beneath a rosy sky.

## Chapter 5

# Poems & Cakes

Ellie sat by her drafting board, turning yet another poem into art. This was her passion. Ordinary life paled by comparison. She had chosen to write with a 3.8mm calligraphy pen, blending magenta and pearl inks on the nib. Like an ice skater her hand moved over the parchment she had scorched with fire earlier to give it the look of an heirloom, and thick letters appeared in her wake, twisting into curlicues when her wrist pirouetted.

Slowly the words gathered into a quotation:

*“Footfalls echo in the memory*

*Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened.”*

T.S. Eliot matched her wistful mood. This would be the last of her calligraphy art for tomorrow’s fair. Even the weather was wishing her good luck; for after a stormy September the first Friday in October was sweet-scented and blue-skied. If only she might sell every last poem as she had done in July at the *Bellevue Festival of the Arts*. Maybe she would even cover her costs this time.

Suddenly her concentration snapped. An old-fashioned alarm clock rang out over Rachmaninoff’s Vocalise. She removed the headphones of her Sony Walkman and silenced the red bells with a sigh.

Half an hour later she parked her Mercedes convertible at Redmond Town Center, an open-air mall built in the rainiest state in the country. The sun shone through the rim of the missing roof as she entered a store whose window dressing consisted of metal shelves facing the other way.

“Welcome to my bakery,” barked the proprietor, a short, bald man, decked in gold like a pagan idol.

There was no aroma of fresh baked bread in the neon atmosphere and, today, no young man behind the glass counter. Instead the fat baker grinned at her and made inane conversation. Later, she remembered from seeing him once before, he would cheat at the cash register and stare at her ass when her back was turned. She held her breath, repeating a mantra in her

thoughts: ‘Jake adores the phyllo pockets, Johnny the cream puffs.’ It was the least she could do to make her family happy, especially her husband.

“Reading, always reading.” She recalled their conversation of last night, a replica of so many before it.

“Why don’t you join me, Jake?” She smiled.

“Too tired, Ellie.” He returned the scripted answer.

She threw him a curve. “If you turn the TV off I’ll join you.”

He changed the subject. “New Steven Seagal movie’s out. Go this weekend?”

She had never heard of Mr. Se Gal but was sure the film would be high on action and low on plot, let alone wit, poetry or the occasional footfall worth echoing in the memory. “At least my movies are quiet enough for you to sleep through,” she said, still smiling to hide how sad she suddenly felt.

“Then dinner?”

“Then dinner.” Their usual fallback plan.

Now turning down the pastry aisle it occurred to her how much easier it was to please the body than the mind—that is, so long as sex was left out of the equation. Like a check mark on a calendar a shelf of Halloween cakes reminded her that nearly a year had passed since she slept with her husband. Soon after she started sleeping on the foldout couch in the room where she crafted her scrolls, admittedly because

Jake snored loudly, but of course that gave her the excuse to put him off frigidly. She wondered when the ice had first crept over her. She hadn't always been like that, not at all.

“Our first batch of holiday cookies, buy six get one free.” The baker carried in a large tray, and she ordered two ghosts and a dozen cream puffs, before heading for the grid of breads with the fat man still pawing bulk-offers at her back.

Get this done, she thought impatiently, then pick up Johnny from daycare. Five hours of chores that ended by beginning again. But in the evening her never-ending search for inspiration and knowledge would continue in the books she loved, books written by people who had come and gone, but not before leaving footprints on the sands of time, as the poet, Longfellow, had put it so beautifully.

It was a lesson she learned from Ayn Rand, to perform the circular activities of her life as if they were the scenery from the window of a train. And the train was carrying her up a rising track. And the track widened every so often as she reached a goal. And it seemed to her that the coming goals, not the passing years, were pulling her up into the future.

“Why don't you stay, just this once?” Jake used to whisper in her ear. At twenty-one she was tempted. But now she could not live without her books.

“Is that all?” The crestfallen merchant eyed her basket from the cash register. She wondered what

happened to the young man who seemed out of place here. Why she bought him a copy of her favorite novel she was unsure; a first for her, something to do with the lines from T.S. Eliot except in reverse, looking not from the present to the past but to the future, where regret was an optional extra. Did he end up reading the book, the question teased her.

Shaking her head at more volume discounts she paid and turned to leave. But the fat man called her back. "I almost forget. Neil left you something." And just as she was wondering who the hell Neil was, the baker held up her favorite novel, smirking like a man who samples his confections too often. Or was it nicotine that gave his teeth that tinge of yellow smut? "He left you a letter too," he added, taking just a little too long to release the paperback.

So Neil had read the book, she realized, by the creases on the spine. Then she caught sight of the white envelope sticking out at the top and bottom, and her heart fluttered unexpectedly at the thought of reading something written by someone who was still among the living.

## Chapter 6

Dear Ellie

Ellie faced Neil's letter at seven that evening, right after Johnny had gone to bed. She did not curl by the log fire in her library as usual but went upstairs to her room. She closed the door and sat by her drafting board, staring at the unopened envelope. Her heart was pounding. How absurd! She laughed at herself.

Neil had used no special calligraphy to write her name on the plain white rectangle, just straight, large letters. But there was definite originality in the way he formed his capital E, she decided, and loneliness

in the way his L's looped into each other. Intrigued, she opened his letter.

But the yellow notepad paper was an anticlimax.

Was this an afterthought? She scowled. Just a few words scribbled in haste? Had all her excitement been for nothing? She almost dropped the note to be picked up later between chores. But curiosity got the better of her. Or maybe it was the long-eared owl she could hear hooting in the garden. "Who? Who?" wondered the nocturnal bird, and Ellie in turn started reading the first line and then the second, and soon she was having a tête-à-tête with the writer, two heads meeting.

She cut him off to say, "No, no, you're getting it backwards." Then she nodded and muttered, "I used to think that." Only when she was done reading and again she noticed the yellow-lined paper did she snap out of the illusion of conversation. It was a disappointing sensation, as if Neil had hung up the phone just when things were getting really interesting. Then she moved to her couch, threw her head back against a pillow, and to the "Who? Who?" of the owl, she read his letter again.

*Dear Ellie,*

*To think or not to think is not a dilemma.  
The man who can't or won't think will never  
face this question in his fool's paradise. The*

*dilemma of the thinking man is whether to implement the conclusions of his rational analysis—and pay the necessary price. Or ignore his thoughts and pay a greater price for not realizing their potential.*

*And so two roads are formed, one leading to happiness—but requiring the sacrifice of other people in the name of reason. The other—demanding the sacrifice of happiness (and truth) to love.*

*Unless you examine your starting point. I hope yours does not embrace conflict. To my sorrow, mine does. Thank you for helping me see what I already knew but could not describe in words.*

*Neil*

She closed her eyes and tried to recall the young man from Bake 4U. She remembered that he was perhaps her own age, possibly handsome. But, really, he was just a blur in a circular activity that ceased to matter when it was over. Suddenly she wished she had paid more attention to the man caught in a circular activity himself, with her as a blur to him.

And yet, she admitted, she must have sensed his high intelligence and sadness or she would not have bought him the novel. Recommending a book was the usual way people did it. It was certainly not a gift

to be given to a circle.

*“Unless you examine your starting point. I hope yours does not embrace conflict. To my sorrow, mine does.”* She read those loaded lines again, and again her heart started thumping. This young man was admitting that love was destroying his happiness. But what type of love? Filial? Paternal? Romantic love was her guess. She wished she could remember if he wore a wedding band. It was one thing to study philosophy in books. Now she felt as if this simple sheet of yellow paper was a curtain opening on a human drama, and she was invited to climb on the stage.

She returned the letter to its envelope and wrote on the back: *“I gave—”* she hesitated *“—someone a copy of Atlas Shrugged. He is 28. This is his response.”*

And some part of her, the part that always overdramatized life and was so hard to live with— The part that caused her once to ride her bicycle straight into a parked car because her thoughts had taken flight at the most inconvenient moment— The part that endeared calligraphy to her soul long before she discovered poetry and literature— That part of her nature that made her so different from everyone she met, as if they were a glass menagerie but she was chiseled from a diamond, a finer substance but far less practical, impossible to chafe around the edges to help her fit in with the puzzle of life— That

uniquely Ellie part of her now whispered in her heart an unlikely spell.

This stranger, it said, this no-one you've never met except to exchange money and cakes with, hardly noticing his face, this young man (it seems not entirely impossible) might become someone to you one of these days.

But only if she answered his letter, the hooting owl reminded her. Ellie was not ready to do that. She slipped the white envelope into a floral box in which she kept old greeting cards and closed the lid.

## Chapter 7

# Underwater

A gurgle of black water filled Neil's ears.

Overhead snorkelers shone green flashlights into the deep, while he sat on the bottom of the ocean looking up. And between him and the people, manta rays were circling like giant kites in a liquid night. He had come to Hawaii to swim with these eagles of the sea.

He was the only one of his companions who knew how to dive. Fay, Sophia and Eric were stranded in the shallows of life, snorkeling. It was after midnight, but flares of light shone from their boat. He could see both women kicking flippers in the water, and the

circling parallelograms gave the scene the aura of a dream.

Fay was in a one-piece white bathing suit, Sophia, in a bikini the color of her tan, which made her seem naked. Neil felt nothing at the sight. Two years had passed since that woman's body meant ecstasy and life to him. Couples on vacation in the Florida Keys, and then Sophia and Lorenzo fell apart, and their three years of marriage unraveled in a day. From four friends they became an emotionally charged triangle, and by starlight the abandoned wife came to Neil's bed to underscore her sudden freedom in the arms of a long-imagined fantasy.

He could see the memory undulating in his mind, here in the quiet realm of soothing water. Sophia pulled him out of bed and away from Fay, who was wheezing softly in her sleep. His wife's warmth was still on his skin when he threw her childhood friend on the bed next door.

He watched Sophia take off her lace bra, her matching underwear. In the moonlight her skin gleamed as if varnished with silver. She seemed more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen. He spread her thighs, kissed his way up her legs until she moaned in rapture. His whole being became a single purpose then: to take as much as he gave, to give as much as she could stand. Never before had he made love like this, as if his life depended on the song of that siren's pleasure.

After that night the memory of that woman on that bed became his line in the sand, not a wickedness to shun but a height to match—or abandon life altogether; for during that night he remembered the meaning and the glory of existence. Taboo entwined in carnal lust electrified his flatlining soul. He was a boy again, hanging from a high window to conquer his fear of heights, tackling three bullies who dared to kick his dog, stealing his grandfather's truck because the girl next door agreed to go stargazing with him in a desert, three hundred miles away. That lost, mischievous thrill that used to set his heart on fire was his again.

But this time the price was unconscionable. He had cheated on his wife with her oldest friend. Like so many pathetic men who boast about their conquests in bars and gym rooms, he had broken his marriage vows. His action damned him in his own eyes, yet he could not bring himself to feel guilt, and in this conflict lay the seed of a new torment.

Sophia left the next morning to return home to New York, and he took Fay back to Washington State. Life resumed its former tedium; he became a faithful husband again. But now he lived in the shadow of a suicidal vow, his protection against the kind of man he might sink to should his existence drag on and on.

And so two years elapsed and here they were again, couples on vacation. The heights of life still

eluded him, though Sophia seemed to have fared better for she came with her new fiancé. But on the plane she whispered in Neil's ear: "Another night? For old time's sake? Before I get married?" Like luxurious sheets carpets of water swathed the earth below them. Her warm breath caressed his earlobe. Yes, he had noticed how feminine she looked with her new boyish haircut. Still his spirit seemed to whisper, "I remember her... *vaguely*."

For Neil was imagining another woman hovering against the blue of earth and sky. The oval of Ellie's half-remembered face seemed to fill the window of the plane as if she was flying beside him like a fairy. His thoughts linked her intelligent eyes with the book he had just finished reading, the book that changed everything because between its pages he had glimpsed the heights of a purposeful life. "*I am the meaning of my life*," he muttered. This one thought kept coming back to him these days like a soul-soothing spell.

He was still seeing Ellie's eyes here in the deeps with the manta rays circling over him like vultures, as if he were dead already. But in his mind he was weaving a lifeline, his next letter to that stranger who had gone especially to buy him a new copy of her favorite novel, for it had been new, un-creased and unspotted.

Yet first she would have to answer his thank-you letter, his confession of an impossible conflict: Love

versus happiness and truth. The hope of hearing from Ellie was enough to snap the spell of drowning. He hitchhiked on a manta ray and resurfaced beside Fay.