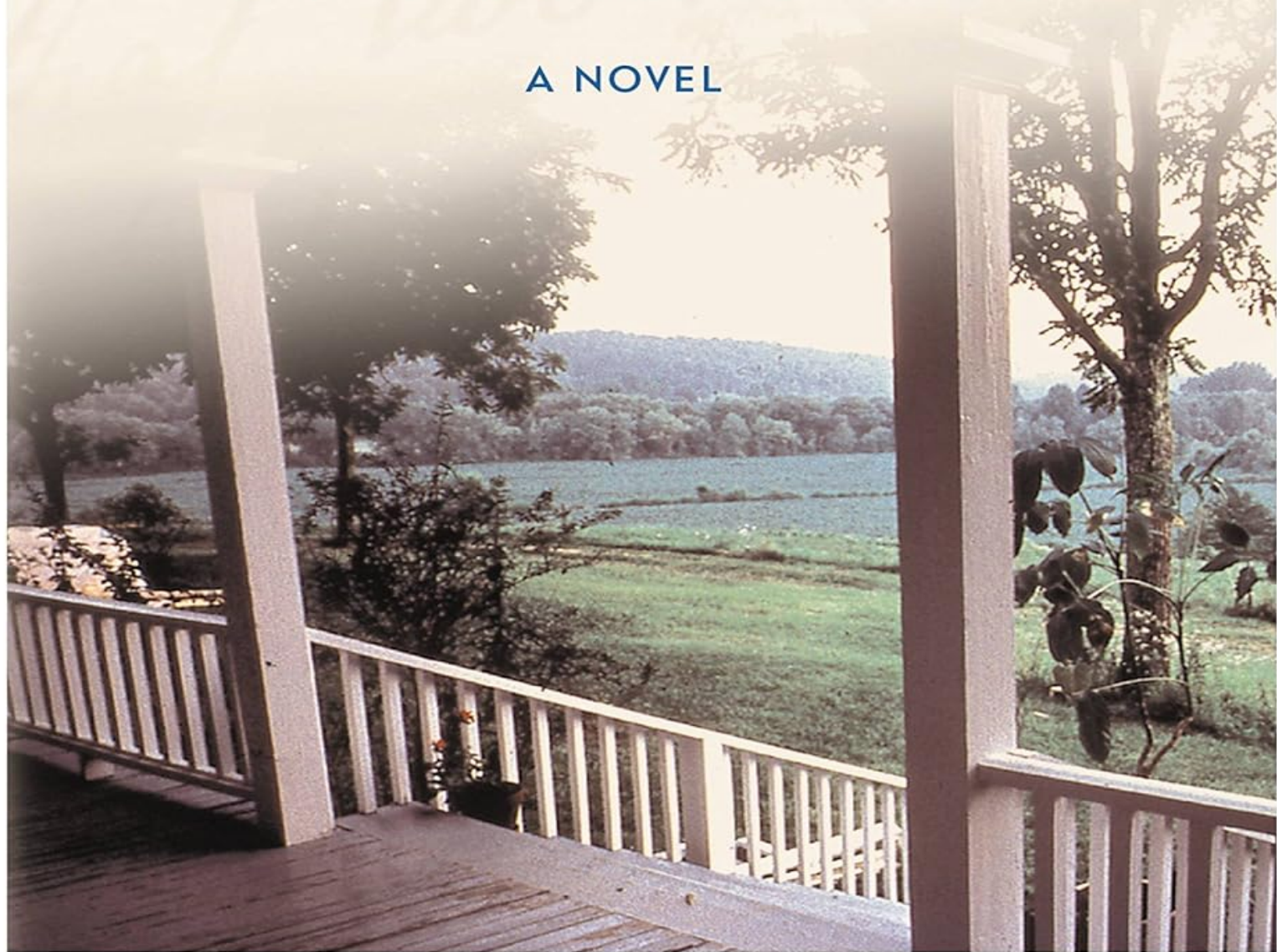


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# NICHOLAS SPARKS

## THE NOTEBOOK

A NOVEL



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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## Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Miracles](#)

[Ghosts](#)

[Reunion](#)

[Phone Calls](#)

[Kayaks and Forgotten Dreams](#)

[Moving Water](#)

[Swans and Storms](#)

[Courtrooms](#)

[An Unexpected Visitor](#)

[Crossroads](#)

[A Letter from Yesterday](#)

[Winter for Two](#)

[Reading Group Guide](#)

[A Q & A with Nicholas Sparks](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Nicholas Sparks on Nicholas Sparks](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

## THE WORDS OF LOVE...

“I am nothing special; of this I am sure. I am a common man with common thoughts, and I’ve led a common life. There are no monuments dedicated to me and my name will soon be forgotten, but I’ve loved another with all my heart and soul, and to me, this has always been enough.”

And so begins one of the most poignant and compelling love stories you will ever read...

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—*Raleigh Spectator* (NC)

ALSO BY NICHOLAS SPARKS

*Message in a Bottle*

*A Walk to Remember The Rescue*

*A Bend in the Road Nights in Rodanthe*

*The Guardian*

*The Wedding*

*Three Weeks with My Brother*

*This book is dedicated with love to  
Cathy,  
my wife and my friend.*



## *Acknowledgments*

This story is what it is today because of two special people, and I would like to thank them for everything they've done.

To Theresa Park, the agent who plucked me from obscurity. Thank you for your kindness, your patience, and the many hours you have spent working with me. I will be forever grateful for everything you've done.

To Jamie Raab, my editor. Thank you for your wisdom, your humor, and your good-hearted nature. You made this a wonderful experience for me, and I'm glad to call you my friend.

## *Miracles*

Who am I? And how, I wonder, will this story end?

The sun has come up and I am sitting by a window that is foggy with the breath of a life gone by. I'm a sight this morning: two shirts, heavy pants, a scarf wrapped twice around my neck and tucked into a thick sweater knitted by my daughter thirty birthdays ago. The thermostat in my room is set as high as it will go, and a smaller space heater sits directly behind me. It clicks and groans and spews hot air like a fairy-tale dragon, and still my body shivers with a cold that will never go away, a cold that has been eighty years in the making. Eighty years, I think sometimes, and despite my own acceptance of my age, it still amazes me that I haven't been warm since George Bush was president. I wonder if this is how it is for everyone my age.

My life? It isn't easy to explain. It has not been the rip-roaring spectacular I fancied it would be, but neither have I burrowed around with the gophers. I suppose it has most resembled a blue-chip stock: fairly stable, more ups than downs, and gradually trending upward over time. A good buy, a lucky buy, and I've learned that not everyone can say this about his life. But do not be misled. I am nothing special; of this I am sure. I am a common man with common thoughts, and I've led a common life. There are no monuments dedicated to me and my name will soon be forgotten, but I've loved another with all my heart and soul, and to me, this has always been enough.

The romantics would call this a love story, the cynics would call it a tragedy. In my mind it's a little bit of both, and no matter how you choose to view it in the end, it does not change the fact that it involves a great deal of my life and the path I've chosen to follow. I have no complaints about my path and the places it has taken me; enough complaints to fill a circus tent about other things, maybe, but the path I've chosen has always been the right one, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Time, unfortunately, doesn't make it easy to stay on course. The path is straight as ever, but now it is strewn with the rocks and gravel that accumulate over a lifetime. Until three years ago it would have been easy to ignore, but it's impossible now. There is a sickness rolling through my body; I'm neither strong nor healthy, and my days are spent like an old party balloon: listless, spongy, and growing softer over time.

I cough, and through squinted eyes I check my watch. I realize it is time to go. I stand from my seat by the window and shuffle across the room, stopping at the desk to pick up the notebook I have read a hundred times. I do not glance through it. Instead I slip it beneath my arm and continue on my way to the place I must go.

I walk on tiled floors, white in color and speckled with gray. Like my hair and the hair of most people here, though I'm the only one in the hallway this morning. They are in their rooms, alone except for television, but they, like me, are used to it. A person can get used to anything, if given enough time.

I hear the muffled sounds of crying in the distance and know exactly who is making those sounds. Then the nurses see me and we smile at each other and exchange greetings. They are my friends and we talk often, but I am sure they wonder about me and the things that I go through every day. I listen as they begin to whisper among themselves as I pass. "There he goes again," I hear, "I hope it turns out well." But they say nothing directly to me about it. I'm sure they think it would hurt me to talk about it so early in the morning, and knowing myself as I do, I think they're probably right.

A minute later, I reach the room. The door has been propped open for me, as it usually is. There are two others in the room, and they too smile at me as I enter. "Good morning," they say with cheery voices, and I take a moment to ask about the kids and the schools and upcoming vacations. We talk above the crying for a minute or so. They do not seem to notice; they have become numb to it, but then again, so have I.

Afterward I sit in the chair that has come to be shaped like me. They are finishing up now; her clothes are on, but still she is crying. It will become quieter after they leave, I know. The excitement of the morning always upsets her, and today is no exception. Finally the shade is opened and the nurses walk out. Both of them touch me and smile as they walk by. I wonder what this means.

I sit for just a second and stare at her, but she doesn't return the look. I understand, for she doesn't know who I am. I'm a stranger to her. Then, turning away, I bow my head and pray silently for the strength I know I will need. I have always been a firm believer in God and the power of prayer, though to be honest, my faith has made for a list of questions I definitely want answered after I'm gone.

Ready now. On go the glasses, out of my pocket comes a magnifier. I put it on the table for a moment while I open the notebook. It takes two licks on my gnarled finger to get the well-worn cover open to the first page. Then I put the magnifier in place.

There is always a moment right before I begin to read the story when my mind churns, and I wonder, Will it happen today? I don't know, for I never know beforehand, and deep down it really doesn't matter. It's the possibility that keeps me going, not the guarantee, a sort of wager on my part. And though you may call me a dreamer or fool or any other thing, I believe that anything is possible.

I realize the odds, and science, are against me. But science is not the total answer; this I know, this I have learned in my lifetime. And that leaves me with the belief that miracles, no matter how inexplicable or unbelievable, are real and can occur without regard to the natural order of things. So once again, just as I do every day, I begin to read the notebook aloud, so that she can hear it, in the hope that the miracle that has come to dominate my life will once again prevail.

And maybe, just maybe, it will.

## *Ghosts*

It was early October 1946, and Noah Calhoun watched the fading sun sink lower from the wraparound porch of his plantation-style home. He liked to sit here in the evenings, especially after working hard all day, and let his thoughts wander without conscious direction. It was how he relaxed, a routine he'd learned from his father.

He especially liked to look at the trees and their reflections in the river. North Carolina trees are beautiful in deep autumn: greens, yellows, reds, oranges, every shade in between. Their dazzling colors glow with the sun, and for the hundredth time, Noah Calhoun wondered if the original owners of the house had spent their evenings thinking the same things.

The house was built in 1772, making it one of the oldest, as well as largest, homes in New Bern. Originally it was the main house on a working plantation, and he had bought it right after the war ended and had spent the last eleven months and a small fortune repairing it. The reporter from the Raleigh paper had done an article on it a few weeks ago and said it was one of the finest restorations he'd ever seen. At least the house was. The remaining property was another story, and that was where he'd spent most of the day.

The home sat on twelve acres adjacent to Brices Creek, and he'd worked on the wooden fence that lined the other three sides of the property, checking for dry rot or termites, replacing posts when he had to. He still had more work to do on it, especially on the west side, and as he'd put the tools away earlier he'd made a mental note to call and have some more lumber delivered. He'd gone into the house, drunk a glass of sweet tea, then showered. He always showered at the end of the day, the water washing away both dirt and fatigue.

Afterward he'd combed his hair back, put on some faded jeans and a long-sleeved blue shirt, poured himself another glass of sweet tea, and gone to the porch, where he now sat, where he sat every day at this time.

He stretched his arms above his head, then out to the sides, rolling his shoulders as he completed the routine. He felt good and clean now, fresh. His muscles were tired and he knew he'd be a little sore tomorrow, but he was pleased that he had accomplished most of what he had wanted to do.

Noah reached for his guitar, remembering his father as he did so, thinking how much he missed him. He strummed once, adjusted the tension on two strings, then strummed again. This time it sounded about right, and he began to play. Soft music, quiet music. He hummed for a little while at first, then began to sing as night came down around him. He played and sang until the sun was gone and the sky was black.

It was a little after seven when he quit, and he settled back into his chair and began to rock. By habit, he looked upward and saw Orion and the Big Dipper, Gemini and the Pole Star,

twinkling in the autumn sky.

He started to run the numbers in his head, then stopped. He knew he'd spent almost his entire savings on the house and would have to find a job again soon, but he pushed the thought away and decided to enjoy the remaining months of restoration without worrying about it. It would work out for him, he knew; it always did. Besides, thinking about money usually bored him. Early on, he'd learned to enjoy simple things, things that couldn't be bought, and he had a hard time understanding people who felt otherwise. It was another trait he got from his father.

Clem, his hound dog, came up to him then and nuzzled his hand before lying down at his feet. "Hey, girl, how're you doing?" he asked as he patted her head, and she whined softly, her soft round eyes peering upward. A car accident had taken her leg, but she still moved well enough and kept him company on quiet nights like these.

He was thirty-one now, not too old, but old enough to be lonely. He hadn't dated since he'd been back here, hadn't met anyone who remotely interested him. It was his own fault, he knew. There was something that kept a distance between him and any woman who started to get close, something he wasn't sure he could change even if he tried. And sometimes in the moments right before sleep came, he wondered if he was destined to be alone forever.

The evening passed, staying warm, nice. Noah listened to the crickets and the rustling leaves, thinking that the sound of nature was more real and aroused more emotion than things like cars and planes. Natural things gave back more than they took, and their sounds always brought him back to the way man was supposed to be. There were times during the war, especially after a major engagement, when he had often thought about these simple sounds. "It'll keep you from going crazy," his father had told him the day he'd shipped out. "It's God's music and it'll take you home."

He finished his tea, went inside, found a book, then turned on the porch light on his way back out. After sitting down again, he looked at the book. It was old, the cover was torn, and the pages were stained with mud and water. It was *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, and he had carried it with him throughout the war. It had even taken a bullet for him once.

He rubbed the cover, dusting it off just a little. Then he let the book open randomly and read the words in front of him:

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,  
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,  
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,  
Night, sleep, death and the stars.

He smiled to himself. For some reason Whitman always reminded him of New Bern, and he was glad he'd come back. Though he'd been away for fourteen years, this was home and he knew a lot of people here, most of them from his youth. It wasn't surprising. Like so many southern towns, the people who lived here never changed, they just grew a bit older.

His best friend these days was Gus, a seventy-year-old black man who lived down the road. They had met a couple of weeks after Noah bought the house, when Gus had shown up with some homemade liquor and Brunswick stew, and the two had spent their first evening together getting drunk and telling stories.

Now Gus would show up a couple of nights a week, usually around eight. With four kids and eleven grandchildren in the house, he needed to get out of the house now and then, and Noah couldn't blame him. Usually Gus would bring his harmonica, and after talking for a little while, they'd play a few songs together. Sometimes they played for hours.

He'd come to regard Gus as family. There really wasn't anyone else, at least not since his father died last year. He was an only child; his mother had died of influenza when he was two, and though he had wanted to at one time, he had never married.

But he had been in love once, that he knew. Once and only once, and a long time ago. And it had changed him forever. Perfect love did that to a person, and this had been perfect.

Coastal clouds slowly began to roll across the evening sky, turning silver with the reflection of the moon. As they thickened, he leaned his head back and rested it against the rocking chair. His legs moved automatically, keeping a steady rhythm, and as he did most evenings, he felt his mind drifting back to a warm evening like this fourteen years ago.

It was just after graduation 1932, the opening night of the Neuse River Festival. The town was out in full, enjoying barbecue and games of chance. It was humid that night—for some reason he remembered that clearly. He arrived alone, and as he strolled through the crowd, looking for friends, he saw Fin and Sarah, two people he'd grown up with, talking to a girl he'd never seen before. She was pretty, he remembered thinking, and when he finally joined them, she looked his way with a pair of hazy eyes that kept on coming. "Hi," she'd said simply as she offered her hand, "Finley's told me a lot about you."

An ordinary beginning, something that would have been forgotten had it been anyone but her. But as he shook her hand and met those striking emerald eyes, he knew before he'd taken his next breath that she was the one he could spend the rest of his life looking for but never find again. She seemed that good, that perfect, while a summer wind blew through the trees.

From there, it went like a tornado wind. Fin told him she was spending the summer in New Bern with her family because her father worked for R. J. Reynolds, and though he only nodded, the way she was looking at him made his silence seem okay. Fin laughed then, because he knew what was happening, and Sarah suggested they get some cherry Cokes, and the four of them stayed at the festival until the crowds were thin and everything closed up for the night.

They met the following day, and the day after that, and they soon became inseparable. Every morning but Sunday when he had to go to church, he would finish his chores as quickly as possible, then make a straight line to Fort Totten Park, where she'd be waiting for him. Because she was a newcomer and hadn't spent time in a small town before, they spent their days doing things that were completely new to her. He taught her how to bait a line and fish the shallows for largemouth bass and took her exploring through the backwoods of the Croatan Forest. They rode in canoes and watched summer thunderstorms, and to him it seemed as though they'd always known each other.

But he learned things as well. At the town dance in the tobacco barn, it was she who taught him how to waltz and do the Charleston, and though they stumbled through the first few songs, her patience with him eventually paid off, and they danced together until the music ended. He walked her home afterward, and when they paused on the porch after saying good night, he kissed her for the first time and wondered why he had waited as long as he had. Later in the summer he brought her to this house, looked past the decay, and told her that one day he was going to own it and fix it up. They spent hours together talking about their dreams—his of seeing the world, hers of being an artist—and on a humid night in August, they both lost their virginity. When she left three weeks later, she took a piece of him and the rest of summer with her. He watched her leave town on an early rainy morning, watched through eyes that hadn't slept the night before, then went home and packed a bag. He spent the next week alone on Harkers Island.

Noah ran his hands through his hair and checked his watch. Eight-twelve. He got up and walked to the front of the house and looked up the road. Gus wasn't in sight, and Noah figured

he wouldn't be coming. He went back to his rocker and sat again.

He remembered talking to Gus about her. The first time he mentioned her, Gus started to shake his head and laugh. "So that's the ghost you been running from." When asked what he meant, Gus said, "You know, the ghost, the memory. I been watchin' you, workin' day and night, slavin' so hard you barely have time to catch your breath. People do that for three reasons. Either they crazy, or stupid, or tryin' to forget. And with you, I knew you was tryin' to forget. I just didn't know what."

He thought about what Gus had said. Gus was right, of course. New Bern was haunted now. Haunted by the ghost of her memory. He saw her in Fort Totten Park, their place, every time he walked by. Either sitting on the bench or standing by the gate, always smiling, blond hair softly touching her shoulders, her eyes the color of emeralds. When he sat on the porch at night with his guitar, he saw her beside him, listening quietly as he played the music of his childhood.

He felt the same when he went to Gaston's Drug Store, or to the Masonic theater, or even when he strolled downtown. Everywhere he looked, he saw her image, saw things that brought her back to life.

It was odd, he knew that. He had grown up in New Bern. Spent his first seventeen years here. But when he thought about New Bern, he seemed to remember only the last summer, the summer they were together. Other memories were simply fragments, pieces here and there of growing up, and few, if any, evoked any feeling.

He had told Gus about it one night, and not only had Gus understood, but he had been the first to explain why. He said simply, "My daddy used to tell me that the first time you fall in love, it changes your life forever, and no matter how hard you try, the feelin' never goes away. This girl you been tellin' me about was your first love. And no matter what you do, she'll stay with you forever."

Noah shook his head, and when her image began to fade, he returned to Whitman. He read for an hour, looking up every now and then to see raccoons and possums scurrying near the creek. At nine-thirty he closed the book, went upstairs to the bedroom, and wrote in his journal, including both personal observations and the work he'd accomplished on the house. Forty minutes later, he was sleeping. Clem wandered up the stairs, sniffed him as he slept, and then paced in circles before finally curling up at the foot of his bed.

Earlier that evening and a hundred miles away, she sat alone on the porch swing of her parents' home, one leg crossed beneath her. The seat had been slightly damp when she sat down; rain had fallen earlier, hard and stinging, but the clouds were fading now and she looked past them, toward the stars, wondering if she'd made the right decision. She'd struggled with it for days—and had struggled some more this evening—but in the end, she knew she would never forgive herself if she let the opportunity slip away.

Lon didn't know the real reason she left the following morning. The week before, she'd hinted to him that she might want to visit some antique shops near the coast. "It's just a couple of days," she said, "and besides, I need a break from planning the wedding." She felt bad about the lie but knew there was no way she could tell him the truth. Her leaving had nothing to do with him, and it wouldn't be fair of her to ask him to understand.

It was an easy drive from Raleigh, slightly more than two hours, and she arrived a little before eleven. She checked into a small inn downtown, went to her room, and unpacked her suitcase, hanging her dresses in the closet and putting everything else in the drawers. She had a

quick lunch, asked the waitress for directions to the nearest antique stores, then spent the next few hours shopping. By four-thirty she was back in her room.

She sat on the edge of the bed, picked up the phone, and called Lon. He couldn't speak long, he was due in court, but before they hung up she gave him the phone number where she was staying and promised to call the following day. Good, she thought while hanging up the phone. Routine conversation, nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to make him suspicious.

She'd known him almost four years now; it was 1942 when they met, the world at war and America one year in. Everyone was doing their part, and she was volunteering at the hospital downtown. She was both needed and appreciated there, but it was more difficult than she'd expected. The first waves of wounded young soldiers were coming home, and she spent her days with broken men and shattered bodies. When Lon, with all his easy charm, introduced himself at a Christmas party, she saw in him exactly what she needed: someone with confidence about the future and a sense of humor that drove all her fears away.

He was handsome, intelligent, and driven, a successful lawyer eight years older than she, and he pursued his job with passion, not only winning cases, but also making a name for himself. She understood his vigorous pursuit of success, for her father and most of the men she met in her social circle were the same way. Like them, he'd been raised that way, and in the caste system of the South, family name and accomplishments were often the most important consideration in marriage. In some cases, they were the only consideration.

Though she had quietly rebelled against this idea since childhood and had dated a few men best described as reckless, she found herself drawn to Lon's easy ways and had gradually come to love him. Despite the long hours he worked, he was good to her. He was a gentleman, both mature and responsible, and during those terrible periods of the war when she needed someone to hold her, he never once turned her away. She felt secure with him and knew he loved her as well, and that was why she had accepted his proposal.

Thinking these things made her feel guilty about being here, and she knew she should pack her things and leave before she changed her mind. She had done it once before, long ago, and if she left now, she was sure she would never have the strength to return here again. She picked up her pocketbook, hesitated, and almost made it to the door. But coincidence had pushed her here, and she put the pocketbook down, again realizing that if she quit now, she would always wonder what would have happened. And she didn't think she could live with that.

She went to the bathroom and started a bath. After checking the temperature, she walked to the dresser, taking off her gold earrings as she crossed the room. She found her makeup bag, opened it, and pulled out a razor and a bar of soap, then undressed in front of the bureau.

She had been called beautiful since she was a young girl, and once she was naked, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her body was firm and well proportioned, breasts softly rounded, stomach flat, legs slim. She'd inherited her mother's high cheekbones, smooth skin, and blond hair, but her best feature was her own. She had "eyes like ocean waves," as Lon liked to say.

Taking the razor and soap, she went to the bathroom again, turned off the faucet, set a towel where she could reach it, and stepped in gingerly.

She liked the way a bath relaxed her, and she slipped lower in the water. The day had been long and her back was tense, but she was pleased she had finished shopping so quickly. She had to go back to Raleigh with something tangible, and the things she had picked out would work fine. She made a mental note to find the names of some other stores in the Beaufort area, then suddenly doubted she would need to. Lon wasn't the type to check up on her.

She reached for the soap, lathered up, and began to shave her legs. As she did, she thought about her parents and what they would think of her behavior. No doubt they would disapprove,



especially her mother. Her mother had never really accepted what had happened the summer they'd spent here and wouldn't accept it now, no matter what reason she gave.

She soaked a while longer in the tub before finally getting out and toweling off. She went to the closet and looked for a dress, finally choosing a long yellow one that dipped slightly in the front, the kind of dress that was common in the South. She slipped it on and looked in the mirror, turning from side to side. It fit her well and made her look feminine, but she eventually decided against it and put it back on the hanger.

Instead she found a more casual, less revealing dress and put that on. Light blue with a touch of lace, it buttoned up the front, and though it didn't look quite as nice as the first one, it conveyed an image she thought would be more appropriate.

She wore little makeup, just a touch of eye shadow and mascara to accent her eyes. Perfume next, not too much. She found a pair of small-hooped earrings, put those on, then slipped on the tan, low-heeled sandals she had been wearing earlier. She brushed her blond hair, pinned it up, and looked in the mirror. No, it was too much, she thought, and she let it back down. Better.

When she was finished she stepped back and evaluated herself. She looked good: not too dressy, not too casual. She didn't want to overdo it. After all, she didn't know what to expect. It had been a long time—probably too long—and many different things could have happened, even things she didn't want to consider.

She looked down and saw her hands were shaking, and she laughed to herself. It was strange; she wasn't normally this nervous. Like Lon, she had always been confident, even as a child. She remembered that it had been a problem at times, especially when she dated, because it had intimidated most of the boys her age.

She found her pocketbook and car keys, then picked up the room key. She turned it over in her hand a couple of times, thinking, You've come this far, don't give up now, and almost left then, but instead sat on the bed again. She checked her watch. Almost six o'clock. She knew she had to leave in a few minutes—she didn't want to arrive after dark, but she needed a little more time.

"Damn," she whispered, "what am I doing here? I shouldn't be here. There's no reason for it," but once she said it she knew it wasn't true. There was something here. If nothing else, she would have her answer.

She opened her pocketbook and thumbed through it until she came to a folded-up piece of newspaper. After taking it out slowly, almost reverently, being careful not to rip it, she unfolded it and stared at it for a while. "This is why," she finally said to herself, "this is what it's all about."

Noah got up at five and kayaked for an hour up Brices Creek, as he usually did. When he finished, he changed into his work clothes, warmed some biscuits from the day before, grabbed a couple of apples, and washed his breakfast down with two cups of coffee.

He worked on the fencing again, repairing most of the posts that needed it. It was Indian summer, the temperature over eighty degrees, and by lunchtime he was hot and tired and glad for the break.

He ate at the creek because the mullets were jumping. He liked to watch them jump three or four times and glide through the air before vanishing into the brackish water. For some reason he had always been pleased by the fact that their instinct hadn't changed for thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of years.

Sometimes he wondered if man's instincts had changed in that time and always concluded that they hadn't. At least in the basic, most primal ways. As far as he could tell, man had always been aggressive, always striving to dominate, trying to control the world and everything in it. The war in Europe and Japan proved that.

He quit working a little after three and walked to a small shed that sat near his dock. He went in, found his fishing pole, a couple of lures, and some live crickets he kept on hand, then walked out to the dock, baited his hook, and cast his line.

Fishing always made him reflect on his life, and he did it now. After his mother died, he could remember spending his days in a dozen different homes, and for one reason or another, he stuttered badly as a child and was teased for it. He began to speak less and less, and by the age of five, he wouldn't speak at all. When he started classes, his teachers thought he was retarded and recommended that he be pulled out of school.

Instead, his father took matters into his own hands. He kept him in school and afterward made him come to the lumberyard, where he worked, to haul and stack wood. "It's good that we spend some time together," he would say as they worked side by side, "just like my daddy and I did."

During their time together, his father would talk about birds and animals or tell stories and legends common to North Carolina. Within a few months Noah was speaking again, though not well, and his father decided to teach him to read with books of poetry. "Learn to read this aloud and you'll be able to say anything you want to." His father had been right again, and by the following year, Noah had lost his stutter. But he continued to go to the lumberyard every day simply because his father was there, and in the evenings he would read the works of Whitman and Tennyson aloud as his father rocked beside him. He had been reading poetry ever since.

When he got a little older, he spent most of his weekends and vacations alone. He explored the Croatan Forest in his first canoe, following Brices Creek for twenty miles until he could go no farther, then hiked the remaining miles to the coast. Camping and exploring became his passion, and he spent hours in the forest, sitting beneath blackjack oak trees, whistling quietly, and playing his guitar for beavers and geese and wild blue herons. Poets knew that isolation in nature, far from people and things man-made, was good for the soul, and he'd always identified with poets.

Although he was quiet, years of heavy lifting at the lumberyard helped him excel in sports, and his athletic success led to popularity. He enjoyed the football games and track meets, and though most of his team-mates spent their free time together as well, he rarely joined them. An occasional person found him arrogant; most simply figured he had grown up a bit faster than everyone else. He had a few girlfriends in school, but none had ever made an impression on him. Except for one. And she came after graduation.

Allie. His Allie.

He remembered talking to Fin about Allie after they'd left the festival that first night, and Fin had laughed. Then he'd made two predictions: first, that they would fall in love, and second, that it wouldn't work out.

There was a slight tug at his line and Noah hoped for a largemouth bass, but the tugging eventually stopped, and after reeling his line in and checking the bait, he cast again.

Fin ended up being right on both counts. Most of the summer, she had to make excuses to her parents whenever they wanted to see each other. It wasn't that they didn't like him—it was that he was from a different class, too poor, and they would never approve if their daughter became serious with someone like him. "I don't care what my parents think, I love you and always will," she would say. "We'll find a way to be together."

But in the end they couldn't. By early September the tobacco had been harvested and she had no choice but to return with her family to Winston-Salem. "Only the summer is over, Allie, not us," he'd said the morning she left. "We'll never be over." But they were. For a reason he didn't fully understand, the letters he wrote went unanswered.

Eventually he decided to leave New Bern to help get her off his mind, but also because the Depression made earning a living in New Bern almost impossible. He went first to Norfolk and worked at a shipyard for six months before he was laid off, then moved to New Jersey because he'd heard the economy wasn't so bad there.

He eventually found a job in a scrap yard, separating scrap metal from everything else. The owner, a Jewish man named Morris Goldman, was intent on collecting as much scrap metal as he could, convinced that a war was going to start in Europe and that America would be dragged in again. Noah, though, didn't care about the reason. He was just happy to have a job.

His years in the lumberyard had toughened him to this type of labor, and he worked hard. Not only did it help him keep his mind off Allie during the day, but it was something he felt he had to do. His daddy had always said: "Give a day's work for a day's pay. Anything less is stealing." That attitude pleased his boss. "It's a shame you aren't Jewish," Goldman would say, "you're such a fine boy in so many other ways." It was the best compliment Goldman could give.

He continued to think about Allie, especially at night. He wrote her once a month but never received a reply. Eventually he wrote a final letter and forced himself to accept the fact that the summer they'd spent with one another was the only thing they'd ever share.

Still, though, she stayed with him. Three years after the last letter, he went to Winston-Salem in the hope of finding her. He went to her house, discovered that she had moved, and after talking to some neighbors, finally called RJR. The girl who answered the phone was new and didn't recognize the name, but she poked around the personnel files for him. She found out that Allie's father had left the company and that no forwarding address was listed. That trip was the first and last time he ever looked for her.

For the next eight years, he worked for Goldman. At first he was one of twelve employees, but as the years dragged on, the company grew, and he was promoted. By 1940 he had mastered the business and was running the entire operation, brokering the deals and managing a staff of thirty. The yard had become the largest scrap metal dealer on the East Coast.

During that time, he dated a few different women. He became serious with one, a waitress from the local diner with deep blue eyes and silky black hair. Although they dated for two years and had many good times together, he never came to feel the same way about her as he did about Allie.

But neither did he forget her. She was a few years older than he was, and it was she who taught him the ways to please a woman, the places to touch and kiss, where to linger, the things to whisper. They would sometimes spend an entire day in bed, holding each other and making the kind of love that fully satisfied both of them.

She had known they wouldn't be together forever. Toward the end of their relationship she'd told him once, "I wish I could give you what you're looking for, but I don't know what it is. There's a part of you that you keep closed off from everyone, including me. It's as if I'm not the one you're really with. Your mind is on someone else."

He tried to deny it, but she didn't believe him. "I'm a woman—I know these things. When you look at me sometimes, I know you're seeing someone else. It's like you keep waiting for her to pop out of thin air to take you away from all this. . . ." A month later she visited him at work and told him she'd met someone else. He understood. They parted as friends, and the

following year he received a postcard from her saying she was married. He hadn't heard from her since.

While he was in New Jersey, he would visit his father once a year around Christmas. They'd spend some time fishing and talking, and once in a while they'd take a trip to the coast to go camping on the Outer Banks near Ocracoke.

In December 1941, when he was twenty-six, the war began, just as Goldman had predicted. Noah walked into his office the following month and informed Goldman of his intent to enlist, then returned to New Bern to say good-bye to his father. Five weeks later he found himself in boot camp. While there, he received a letter from Goldman thanking him for his work, together with a copy of a certificate entitling him to a small percentage of the scrap yard if it ever sold. "I couldn't have done it without you," the letter said. "You're the finest young man who ever worked for me, even if you aren't Jewish."

He spent his next three years with Patton's Third Army, tramping through deserts in North Africa and forests in Europe with thirty pounds on his back, his infantry unit never far from action. He watched his friends die around him; watched as some of them were buried thousands of miles from home. Once, while hiding in a foxhole near the Rhine, he imagined he saw Allie watching over him.

He remembered the war ending in Europe, then a few months later in Japan. Just before he was discharged, he received a letter from a lawyer in New Jersey representing Morris Goldman. Upon meeting the lawyer, he found out that Goldman had died a year earlier and his estate liquidated. The business had been sold, and Noah was given a check for almost seventy thousand dollars. For some reason he was oddly unexcited about it.

The following week he returned to New Bern and bought the house. He remembered bringing his father around later, showing him what he was going to do, pointing out the changes he intended to make. His father seemed weak as he walked around, coughing and wheezing. Noah was concerned, but his father told him not to worry, assuring him that he had the flu.

Less than one month later his father died of pneumonia and was buried next to his wife in the local cemetery. Noah tried to stop by regularly to leave some flowers; occasionally he left a note. And every night without fail he took a moment to remember him, then said a prayer for the man who'd taught him everything that mattered.

After reeling in the line, he put the gear away and went back to the house. His neighbor, Martha Shaw, was there to thank him, bringing three loaves of homemade bread and some biscuits in appreciation for what he'd done. Her husband had been killed in the war, leaving her with three children and a tired shack of a house to raise them in. Winter was coming, and he'd spent a few days at her place last week repairing her roof, replacing broken windows and sealing the others, and fixing her woodstove. Hopefully, it would be enough to get them through.

Once she'd left, he got in his battered Dodge truck and went to see Gus. He always stopped there when he was going to the store because Gus's family didn't have a car. One of the daughters hopped up and rode with him, and they did their shopping at Capers General Store. When he got home he didn't unpack the groceries right away. Instead he showered, found a Budweiser and a book by Dylan Thomas, and went to sit on the porch.

She still had trouble believing it, even as she held the proof in her hands.

It had been in the newspaper at her parents' house three Sundays ago. She had gone to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee, and when she'd returned to the table, her father had smiled and pointed at a small picture. "Remember this?"

He handed her the paper, and after an uninterested first glance, something in the picture caught her eye and she took a closer look. "It can't be," she whispered, and when her father looked at her curiously, she ignored him, sat down, and read the article without speaking. She vaguely remembered her mother coming to the table and sitting opposite her, and when she finally put aside the paper, her mother was staring at her with the same expression her father had just moments before.

"Are you okay?" her mother asked over her coffee cup. "You look a little pale." She didn't answer right away, she couldn't, and it was then that she'd noticed her hands were shaking. That had been when it started.

"And here it will end, one way or the other," she whispered again. She refolded the scrap of paper and put it back, remembering that she had left her parents' home later that day with the paper so she could cut out the article. She read it again before she went to bed that night, trying to fathom the coincidence, and read it again the next morning as if to make sure the whole thing wasn't a dream. And now, after three weeks of long walks alone, after three weeks of distraction, it was the reason she'd come.

When asked, she said her erratic behavior was due to stress. It was the perfect excuse; everyone understood, including Lon, and that's why he hadn't argued when she'd wanted to get away for a couple of days. The wedding plans were stressful to everyone involved. Almost five hundred people were invited, including the governor, one senator, and the ambassador to Peru. It was too much, in her opinion, but their engagement was news and had dominated the social pages since they had announced their plans six months ago. Occasionally she felt like running away with Lon to get married without the fuss. But she knew he wouldn't agree; like the aspiring politician he was, he loved being the center of attention.

She took a deep breath and stood again. "It's now or never," she whispered, then picked up her things and went to the door. She paused only slightly before opening it and going downstairs. The manager smiled as she walked by, and she could feel his eyes on her as she left and went to her car. She slipped behind the wheel, looked at herself one last time, then started the engine and turned right onto Front Street.

She wasn't surprised that she still knew her way around town so well. Even though she hadn't been here in years, it wasn't large and she navigated the streets easily. After crossing the Trent River on an old-fashioned drawbridge, she turned onto a gravel road and began the final leg of her journey.

It was beautiful here in the low country, as it always had been. Unlike the Piedmont area where she grew up, the land was flat, but it had the same silty, fertile soil that was ideal for cotton and tobacco. Those two crops and timber kept the towns alive in this part of the state, and as she drove along the road outside town, she saw the beauty that had first attracted people to this region.

To her, it hadn't changed at all. Broken sunlight passed through water oaks and hickory trees a hundred feet tall, illuminating the colors of fall. On her left, a river the color of iron veered toward the road and then turned away before giving up its life to a different, larger river another mile ahead. The gravel road itself wound its way between antebellum farms, and she knew that for some of the farmers, life hadn't changed since before their grandparents were born. The constancy of the place brought back a flood of memories, and she felt her insides tighten as one by one she recognized landmarks she'd long since forgotten.

The sun hung just above the trees on her left, and as she rounded a curve, she passed an old church, abandoned for years but still standing. She had explored it that summer, looking for souvenirs from the War between the States, and as her car passed by, the memories of that day became stronger, as if they'd just happened yesterday.

A majestic oak tree on the banks of the river came into view next, and the memories became more intense. It looked the same as it had back then, branches low and thick, stretching horizontally along the ground with Spanish moss draped over the limbs like a veil. She remembered sitting beneath the tree on a hot July day with someone who looked at her with a longing that took everything else away. And it had been at that moment that she'd first fallen in love.

He was two years older than she was, and as she drove along this roadway-in-time, he slowly came into focus once again. He always looked older than he really was, she remembered thinking. His appearance was that of someone slightly weathered, almost like a farmer coming home after hours in the field. He had the callused hands and broad shoulders that came to those who worked hard for a living, and the first faint lines were beginning to form around the dark eyes that seemed to read her every thought.

He was tall and strong, with light brown hair, and handsome in his own way, but it was his voice that she remembered most of all. He had read to her that day; read to her as they lay in the grass beneath the tree with an accent that was soft and fluent, almost musical in quality. It was the kind of voice that belonged on radio, and it seemed to hang in the air when he read to her. She remembered closing her eyes, listening closely, and letting the words he was reading touch her soul:

It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun . . .

He thumbed through old books with dog-eared pages, books he'd read a hundred times. He'd read for a while, then stop, and the two of them would talk. She would tell him what she wanted in her life—her hopes and dreams for the future—and he would listen intently and then promise to make it all come true. And the way he said it made her believe him, and she knew then how much he meant to her. Occasionally, when she asked, he would talk about himself or explain why he had chosen a particular poem and what he thought of it, and at other times he just studied her in that intense way of his.

They watched the sun go down and ate together under the stars. It was getting late by then, and she knew her parents would be furious if they knew where she was. At that moment, though, it really didn't matter to her. All she could think about was how special the day had been, how special he was, and as they started toward her house a few minutes later, he took her hand in his and she felt the way it warmed her the whole way back.

Another turn in the road and she finally saw it in the distance. The house had changed dramatically from what she remembered. She slowed the car as she approached, turning into the long, tree-lined dirt drive that led to the beacon that had summoned her from Raleigh.

She drove slowly, looking toward the house, and took a deep breath when she saw him on the porch, watching her car. He was dressed casually. From a distance, he looked the same as he had back then. For a moment, when the light from the sun was behind him, he almost seemed to vanish into the scenery.

Her car continued forward, rolling slowly, then finally stopped beneath an oak tree that shaded the front of the house. She turned the key, never taking her eyes from him, and the engine sputtered to a halt.

He stepped off the porch and began to approach her, walking easily, then suddenly stopped cold as she emerged from the car. For a long time all they could do was stare at each other without moving.

Allison Nelson, twenty-nine years old and engaged, a socialite, searching for answers she needed to know, and Noah Calhoun, the dreamer, thirty-one, visited by the ghost that had come to dominate his life.