Prologue

Is it possible, I wonder, for a man to truly change? Or do character and habit form the immovable boundaries of our lives?

It is mid-October 2003, and I ponder these questions as I watch a moth flail wildly against the porch light. I'm alone outside. Jane, my wife, is sleeping upstairs and she didn't stir when I slipped out of bed. It is late; midnight has come and gone, and there's a crispness in the air that holds the promise of an early winter. I'm wearing a heavy cotton robe, and though I imagined it would be thick enough to keep the chill at bay, I notice that my hands are trembling before I bury them in my pockets

Above me, the stars are specks of silver paint on a charcoal canvas. I see Orion and the Pleiades, Ursa Major and Corona Borealis, and think I should be inspired by the realization that I'm not only looking at the stars, but staring into the past as well. Constellations shine with light that was emitted aeons ago, and I wait for something to come to me, words that a poet might use to illuminate life's mysteries. But there is nothing.

This doesn't surprise me. I've never considered myself a sentimental man, and if you asked my wife, I'm sure she would agree. I do not lose myself in films or plays, I've never been a dreamer, and if I aspire to any form of mastery at all, it is one defined by rules of the Internal Revenue Service and codified by law. For the most part, my days and years as an estate lawyer have been spent in the company of those preparing for their own deaths, and I suppose that some might say that my life is less meaningful because of this. But even if they're right, what can I do? I make no excuses for myself, nor have I ever, and by the end of my story, I hope you'll view this quirk of my character with a forgiving eye.

Please don't misunderstand. I may not be sentimental, but I'm not completely without emotion, and there are moments when I'm struck by a deep sense of wonder. It is usually simple things that I find strangely moving: standing among the giant sequoias in the Sierra Nevadas, for instance, or watching ocean waves as they crash together off Cape Hatteras, sending salty plumes into the sky. Last week, I felt my throat tighten when I watched a young boy reach for his father's hand as they strolled down the sidewalk. There are other things, too: I can sometimes lose track of time when staring at a sky filled with wind-whipped clouds, and when I hear thunder rumbling, I always draw near the window to watch for lightning. When the next brilliant flash illuminates the sky, I often find myself filled with longing, though I'm at a loss to tell you what it is that I feel my life is missing.

My name is Wilson Lewis, and this is the story of a wedding. It is also the story of my marriage, but despite the thirty years that Jane and I have spent together, I suppose I should begin by admitting that others know far

more about marriage than I. A man can learn nothing by asking my advice. In the course of my marriage, I've been selfish and stubborn and as ignorant as a goldfish, and it pains me to realize this about myself. Yet, looking back, I believe that if I've done one thing right, it has been to love my wife throughout our years together. While this may strike some as a feat not worth mentioning, you should know that there was a time when I was certain that my wife didn't feel the same way about me.

Of course, all marriages go through ups and downs, and I believe this is the natural consequence of couples that choose to stay together over the long haul. Between us, my wife and I have lived through the deaths of both of my parents and one of hers, and the illness of her father. We've moved four times, and though I've been successful in my profession, many sacrifices were made in order to secure this position. We have three children, and while neither of us would trade the experience of parenthood for the riches of Tutankhamen, the sleepless nights and frequent trips to the hospital when they were infants left both of us exhausted and often overwhelmed. It goes without saying that their teenage years were an experience I would rather not relive.

All of those events create their own stresses, and when two people live together, the stress flows both ways. This, I've come to believe, is both the blessing and the curse of marriage. It's a blessing because there's an outlet for the everyday strains of life; it's a curse because the outlet is someone you care deeply about.

Why do I mention this? Because I want to underscore that throughout all these events, I never doubted my feelings for my wife. Sure, there were days when we avoided eye contact at the breakfast table, but still I never doubted

us. It would be dishonest to say that I haven't wondered what would have happened had I married someone else, but in all the years we spent together, I never once regretted the fact that I had chosen her and that she had chosen me as well. I thought our relationship was settled, but in the end, I realized that I was wrong. I learned that a little more than a year ago—fourteen months, to be exact—and it was that realization, more than anything, that set in motion all that was to come.

What happened then, you wonder?

Given my age, a person might suppose that it was some incident inspired by a midlife crisis. A sudden desire to change my life, perhaps, or maybe a crime of the heart. But it was neither of those things. No, my sin was a small one in the grand scheme of things, an incident that under different circumstances might have been the subject of a humorous anecdote in later years. But it hurt her, it hurt us, and thus it is here where I must begin my story.

It was August 23, 2002, and what I did was this: I rose and ate breakfast, then spent the day at the office, as is my custom. The events of my workday played no role in what came after; to be honest, I can't remember anything about it other than to recall that it was nothing extraordinary. I arrived home at my regular hour and was pleasantly surprised to see Jane preparing my favorite meal in the kitchen. When she turned to greet me, I thought I saw her eyes flicker downward, looking to see if I was holding something other than my briefcase, but I was empty-handed. An hour later we ate dinner together, and afterward, as Jane began collecting the dishes from the table, I retrieved a few legal documents from my briefcase that I wished to review. Sitting in my office, I was perusing the first page when I noticed Jane standing in the doorway.

She was drying her hands on a dish towel, and her face registered a disappointment that I had learned to recognize over the years, if not fully understand.

"Is there anything you want to say?" she asked after a moment.

I hesitated, aware there was more to her question than its innocence implied. I thought perhaps that she was referring to a new hairstyle, but I looked carefully and her hair seemed no different from usual. I'd tried over the years to notice such things. Still, I was at a loss, and as we stood before each other, I knew I had to offer something.

"How was your day?" I finally asked.

She gave a strange half smile in response and turned away.

I know now what she was looking for, of course, but at the time, I shrugged it off and went back to work, chalking it up as another example of the mysteriousness of women.

Later that evening, I'd crawled into bed and was making myself comfortable when I heard Jane draw a single, rapid breath. She was lying on her side with her back toward me, and when I noticed that her shoulders were trembling, it suddenly struck me that she was crying. Baffled, I expected her to tell me what had upset her so, but instead of speaking, she offered another set of raspy inhales, as if trying to breathe through her own tears. My throat tightened instinctively, and I found myself growing frightened. I tried not to be scared; tried not to think that something bad had happened to her father or to the kids, or that she had been given terrible news by her doctor. I tried not to think that there might be a problem I couldn't solve, and I placed my hand on her back in the hope that I could somehow comfort her.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

It was a moment before she answered. I heard her sigh as she pulled the covers up to her shoulders.

"Happy anniversary," she whispered.

Twenty-nine years, I remembered too late, and in the corner of the room, I spotted the gifts she'd bought me, neatly wrapped and perched on the chest of drawers.

Quite simply, I had forgotten.

I make no excuses for this, nor would I even if I could. What would be the point? I apologized, of course, then apologized again the following morning; and later in the evening, when she opened the perfume I'd selected carefully with the help of a young lady at Belk's, she smiled and thanked me and patted my leg.

Sitting beside her on the couch, I knew I loved her then as much as I did the day we were married. But in looking at her, noticing perhaps for the first time the distracted way she glanced off to the side and the unmistakably sad tilt of her head—I suddenly realized that I wasn't quite sure whether she still loved me.

Chapter One

It's heartbreaking to think that your wife may not love you, and that night, after Jane had carried the perfume up to our bedroom, I sat on the couch for hours, wondering how this situation had come to pass. At first, I wanted to believe that Jane was simply reacting emotionally and that I was reading far more into the incident than it deserved. Yet the more I thought about it, the more I sensed not only her displeasure in an absentminded spouse, but the traces of an older melancholy—as if my lapse were simply the final blow in a long, long series of careless missteps.

Had the marriage turned out to be a disappointment for Jane? Though I didn't want to think so, her expression had answered otherwise, and I found myself wondering what that meant for us in the future. Was she questioning whether or not to stay with me? Was she pleased with her decision to have married me in the first place? These, I must add, were frightening questions to consider—with answers that were possibly even more frightening—for until that moment, I'd always assumed that Jane was as content with me as I'd always been with her.

What, I wondered, had led us to feel so differently about each other?

I suppose I must begin by saying that many people would consider our lives fairly ordinary. Like many men, I had the obligation to support the family financially, and my life was largely centered around my career. For the past thirty years, I've worked with the law firm of Ambry, Saxon and Tundle in New Bern, North Carolina, and my income—while not extravagant—was enough to place us firmly in the upper middle class. I enjoy golfing and gardening on the weekends, prefer classical music, and read the newspaper every morning. Though Jane was once an elementary school teacher, she spent the majority of our married life raising three children. She ran both the household and our social life, and her proudest possessions are the photo albums that she carefully assembled as a visual history of our lives. Our brick home is complete with a picket fence and automatic sprinklers, we own two cars, and we are members of both the Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce. In the course of our married life, we've saved for retirement, built a wooden swing set in the backyard that now sits unused, attended dozens of parent-teacher conferences, voted regularly, and contributed to the Episcopal church each and every Sunday. At fifty-six, I'm three years older than my wife.

Despite my feelings for Jane, I sometimes think we're an unlikely pair to have spent a life together. We're different in almost every way, and though opposites can and do attract, I've always felt that I made the better choice on our wedding day. Jane is, after all, the kind of person I always wished to be. While I tend toward stoicism and logic, Jane is outgoing and kind, with a natural empathy that endears her to others. She laughs easily and has a wide circle of

friends. Over the years, I've come to realize that most of my friends are, in fact, the husbands of my wife's friends, but I believe this is common for most married couples our age. Yet I'm fortunate in that Jane has always seemed to choose our friends with me in mind, and I'm appreciative that there's always someone for me to visit with at a dinner party. Had she not come into my life, I sometimes think that I would have led the life of a monk.

There's more, too: I'm charmed by the fact that Jane has always displayed her emotions with childlike ease. When she's sad she cries; when she's happy she laughs; and she enjoys nothing more than to be surprised with a wonderful gesture. In those moments, there's an ageless innocence about her, and though a surprise by definition is unexpected, for Jane, the memories of a surprise can arouse the same excited feelings for years afterward. Sometimes when she's daydreaming, I'll ask her what she's thinking about and she'll suddenly begin speaking in giddy tones about something I've long forgotten. This, I must say, has never ceased to amaze me.

While Jane has been blessed with the most tender of hearts, in many ways she's stronger than I am. Her values and beliefs, like those of most southern women, are grounded by God and family; she views the world through a prism of black and white, right and wrong. For Jane, hard decisions are reached instinctively—and are almost always correct—while I, on the other hand, find myself weighing endless options and frequently second-guessing myself. And unlike me, my wife is seldom self-conscious. This lack of concern about other people's perceptions requires a confidence that I've always found elusive, and above all else, I envy this about her.

I suppose that some of our differences stem from our

respective upbringings. While Jane was raised in a small town with three siblings and parents who adored her, I was raised in a town house in Washington, D.C., as the only child of government lawyers, and my parents were seldom home before seven o'clock in the evening. As a result, I spent much of my free time alone, and to this day, I'm most comfortable in the privacy of my den.

As I've already mentioned, we have three children, and though I love them dearly, they are for the most part the products of my wife. She bore them and raised them, and they are most comfortable with her. While I sometimes regret that I didn't spend as much time with them as I should have, I'm comforted by the thought that Jane more than made up for my absences. Our children, it seems, have turned out well despite me. They're grown now and living on their own, but we consider ourselves fortunate that only one has moved out of state. Our two daughters still visit us frequently, and my wife is careful to have their favorite foods in the refrigerator in case they're hungry, which they never seem to be. When they come, they talk with Jane for hours.

At twenty-seven, Anna is the oldest. With black hair and dark eyes, her looks reflected her saturnine personality growing up. She was a brooder who spent her teenage years locked in her room, listening to gloomy music and writing in a diary. She was a stranger to me back then; days might pass before she would say a single word in my presence, and I was at a loss to understand what I might have done to provoke this. Everything I said seemed to elicit only sighs or shakes of her head, and if I asked if anything was bothering her, she would stare at me as if the question were incomprehensible. My wife seemed to find nothing unusual in this, dismissing it as a phase typical of young

girls, but then again, Anna still talked to her. Sometimes I'd pass by Anna's room and hear Anna and Jane whispering to each other; but if they heard me outside the door, the whispering would stop. Later, when I would ask Jane what they'd been discussing, she'd shrug and wave a hand mysteriously, as if their only goal were to keep me in the dark.

Yet because she was my firstborn, Anna has always been my favorite. This isn't an admission I would make to anyone, but I think she knows it as well, and lately I've come to believe that even in her silent years, she was fonder of me than I realized. I can still remember times when I'd be perusing trusts or wills in my den, and she'd slip through the door. She'd pace around the room, scanning the bookshelves and reaching for various items, but if I addressed her, she'd slip back out as quietly as she'd come in. Over time, I learned not to say anything, and she'd sometimes linger in the office for an hour, watching me as I scribbled on yellow legal tablets. If I glanced toward her, she'd smile complicitly, enjoying this game of ours. I have no more understanding of it now than I did back then, but it's ingrained in my memory as few images are.

Currently, Anna is working for the *Raleigh News and Observer,* but I think she has dreams of becoming a novelist. In college she majored in creative writing, and the stories she wrote were as dark as her personality. I recall reading one in which a young girl becomes a prostitute to care for her sick father, a man who'd once molested her. When I set the pages down, I wondered what I was supposed to make of such a thing.

She is also madly in love. Anna, always careful and deliberate in her choices, was highly selective when it came to men, and thankfully Keith has always struck me as someone who treats her well. He intends to be an

orthopedist and carries himself with a confidence that comes only to those who've faced few setbacks in life. I learned through Jane that for their first date Keith took Anna kite flying on the beach near Fort Macon. Later that week, when Anna brought him by the house, Keith came dressed in a sports coat, freshly showered and smelling faintly of cologne. As we shook hands, he held my gaze and impressed me by saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Lewis."

Joseph, our second-born, is a year younger than Anna. He's always called me "Pop," though no one else in our family has ever used that term, and again, we have little in common. He's taller and thinner than I, wears jeans to most social functions, and when he visits at Thanksgiving or Christmas, he eats only vegetables. While he was growing up, I thought him quiet, yet his reticence, like Anna's, seemed directed at me in particular. Others often remarked on his sense of humor, though to be honest, I seldom saw it. Whenever we spent time together, I often felt as if he were trying to form an impression of me.

Like Jane, he was empathetic even as a child. He chewed his fingernails worrying about others, and they've been nothing but nubs since he was five years old. Needless to say, when I suggested that he consider majoring in business or economics, he ignored my advice and chose sociology. He now works for a battered women's shelter in New York City, though he tells us nothing more about his job. I know he wonders about the choices I've made in my life, just as I wonder about his, yet despite our differences, it's with Joseph that I have the conversations that I always wished to have with my children when I held them as infants. He is highly intelligent; he received a near perfect score on his SATs, and his interests span the spectrum

from the history of Middle Eastern dhimmitude to theoretical applications of fractal geometry. He is also honest—sometimes painfully so—and it goes without saying that these aspects of his personality leave me at a disadvantage when it comes to debating him. Though I sometimes grow frustrated at his stubbornness, it's during such moments that I'm especially proud to call him my son.

Leslie, the baby of our family, is currently studying biology and physiology at Wake Forest with the intention of becoming a veterinarian. Instead of coming home during the summers like most students, she takes additional classes with the intention of graduating early and spends her afternoons working at a place called Animal Farm. Of all our children, she is the most gregarious, and her laughter sounds the same as Jane's. Like Anna, she liked to visit me in my den, though she was happiest when I gave her my full attention. As a youngster, she liked to sit in my lap and pull on my ears; as she grew older, she liked to wander in and share funny jokes. My shelves are covered with the gifts she made me growing up: plaster casts of her handprints, drawings in crayon, a necklace made from macaroni. She was the easiest to love, the first in line for hugs or kisses from the grandparents, and she took great pleasure in curling up on the couch and watching romantic movies. I was not surprised when she was named the homecoming queen at her high school three years ago.

She is kind as well. Everyone in her class was always invited to her birthday parties for fear of hurting someone's feelings, and when she was nine, she once spent an afternoon walking from towel to towel at the beach because she'd found a discarded watch in the surf and wanted to return it to its owner. Of all my children, she has always caused me the least worry, and when she comes

to visit, I drop whatever I'm doing to spend time with her. Her energy is infectious, and when we're together, I wonder how it is I could have been so blessed.

Now that they've all moved out, our home has changed. Where music once blared, there is nothing but stillness; while our pantry once shelved eight different types of sugared cereal, there is now a single brand that promises extra fiber. The furniture hasn't changed in the bedrooms where our children slept, but because the posters and bulletin boards have been taken down—as well as all other reminders of their personalities—there is nothing to differentiate one room from the next. But it was the emptiness of the house that seemed to dominate now; while our home was perfect for a family of five, it suddenly struck me as a cavernous reminder of the way things ought to be. I remember hoping that this change in the household had something to do with the way Jane was feeling.

Still, regardless of the reason, I couldn't deny that we were drifting apart, and the more I thought about it, the more I noticed how wide the gap between us had become. We'd started out as a couple and been changed into parents—something I had always viewed as normal and inevitable—but after twenty-nine years, it was as if we'd become strangers again. Only habit seemed to be keeping us together. Our lives had little in common; we rose at different hours, spent our days in different places, and followed our own routines in the evenings. I knew little of her daily activities and admitted to keeping parts of mine secret as well. I couldn't recall the last time Jane and I had talked about anything unexpected.

Two weeks after the forgotten anniversary, however, Jane and I did just that.

"Wilson," she said, "we have to talk."

I looked up at her. A bottle of wine stood on the table between us, our meal nearly finished.

"Yes?"

"I was thinking," she said, "of heading up to New York to spend some time with Joseph."

"Won't he be here for the holidays?"

"That's not for a couple of months. And since he didn't make it home this summer, I thought it might be nice to visit him for a change."

In the back of my mind, I noted that it might do us some good as a couple to get away for a few days. Perhaps that had even been the reason for Jane's suggestion, and with a smile, I reached for my wineglass. "That's a good idea," I agreed. "We haven't been to New York since he first moved there."

Jane smiled briefly before lowering her gaze to her plate. "There's something else, too."

"Yes?"

"Well, it's just that you're pretty busy at work, and I know how hard it is for you to get away."

"I think I can clear up my schedule for a few days," I said, already mentally leafing through my work calendar. It would be tough, but I could do it. "When did you want to go?"

"Well, that's the thing . . . ," she said.

"What's the thing?"

"Wilson, please let me finish," she said. She drew a long breath, not bothering to hide the weariness in her tone. "What I was trying to say was that I think I might like to visit him by myself."

For a moment, I didn't know what to say.

"You're upset, aren't you," she said.

"No," I said quickly. "He's our son. How could I get upset about that?" To underscore my equanimity, I used

my knife to cut another bite of meat. "So when were you thinking about heading up there?" I asked.

"Next week," she said. "On Thursday."

"Thursday?"

"I already have my ticket."

Though she wasn't quite finished with her meal, she rose and headed for the kitchen. By the way she avoided my gaze, I suspected she had something else to say but wasn't quite sure how to phrase it. A moment later, I was alone at the table. If I turned, I could just see her face in profile as she stood near the sink.

"Sounds like it'll be fun," I called out with what I hoped sounded like nonchalance. "And I know Joseph will enjoy it, too. Maybe there's a show or something that you could see while you're up there."

"Maybe," I heard her say. "I guess it depends on his schedule."

Hearing the faucet run, I rose from my seat and brought my dishes to the sink. Jane said nothing as I approached.

"It should be a wonderful weekend," I added.

She reached for my plate and began to rinse.

"Oh, about that . . . ," she said.

"Yes?"

"I was thinking about staying up there for more than just the weekend."

At her words, I felt my shoulders tense. "How long are you planning to stay?" I asked.

She set my plate off to the side.

"A couple of weeks," she answered.

Of course, I didn't blame Jane for the path our marriage seemed to have taken. Somehow I knew I bore a greater por-

tion of the responsibility, even if I hadn't yet put together all the pieces of why and how. For starters, I have to admit that I've never been quite the person my wife wanted me to be, even from the beginning of our marriage. I know, for instance, that she wished I were more romantic, the way her own father had been with her mother. Her father was the kind of man who would hold his wife's hand in the hours after dinner or spontaneously pick a bouquet of wildflowers on his way home from work. Even as a child, Jane was enthralled by her parents' romance. Over the years, I've heard her speaking with her sister Kate on the phone, wondering aloud why I seemed to find romance such a difficult concept. It isn't that I haven't made attempts, I just don't seem to have an understanding of what it takes to make another's heart start fluttering. Neither hugs nor kisses were common in the house where I'd grown up, and displaying affection often left me feeling uncomfortable, especially in the presence of my children. I talked to Jane's father about it once, and he suggested that I write a letter to my wife. "Tell her why you love her," he said, "and give specific reasons." This was twelve years ago. I remember trying to take his advice, but as my hand hovered over the paper, I couldn't seem to find the appropriate words. Eventually I put the pen aside. Unlike her father, I have never been comfortable discussing feelings. I'm steady, yes. Dependable, absolutely. Faithful, without a doubt. But romance, I hate to admit, is as foreign to me as giving birth.

I sometimes wonder how many other men are exactly like me.

While Jane was in New York, Joseph answered the phone when I called.

"Hey, Pop," he said simply.

"Hey," I said. "How are you?"

"Fine," he said. After what seemed like a painfully long moment, he asked, "And you?"

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. "It's quiet around here, but I'm doing okay." I paused. "How's your mom's visit going?"

"It's fine. I've been keeping her busy."

"Shopping and sightseeing?"

"A little. Mainly we've been doing a lot of talking. It's been interesting."

I hesitated. Though I wondered what he meant, Joseph seemed to feel no need to elaborate. "Oh," I said, doing my best to keep my voice light. "Is she around?"

"Actually, she isn't. She ran out to the grocery store. She'll be back in a few minutes, though, if you want to call back."

"No, that's okay," I said. "Just let her know that I called. I should be around all night if she wants to give me a ring."

"Will do," he agreed. Then, after a moment: "Hey, Pop? I wanted to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"Did you really forget your anniversary?"

I took a long breath. "Yes," I said, "I did."

"How come?"

"I don't know," I said. "I remembered that it was coming, but when the day arrived, it just slipped my mind. I don't have an excuse."

"It hurt her feelings," he said.

"I know."

There was a moment of silence on the other end. "Do you understand why?" he finally asked.

Though I didn't answer Joseph's question, I thought I did.

Quite simply, Jane didn't want us to end up like the elderly couples we sometimes saw when dining out, couples that have always aroused our pity.

These couples are, I should make clear, usually polite to each other. The husband might pull out a chair or collect the jackets, the wife might suggest one of the specials. And when the waiter comes, they may punctuate each other's orders with the knowledge that has been gained over a lifetime—no salt on the eggs or extra butter on the toast, for instance.

But then, once the order is placed, not a word passes between them.

Instead, they sip their drinks and glance out the window, waiting silently for their food to arrive. Once it does, they might speak to the waiter for a moment—to request a refill of coffee, for instance—but they quickly retreat to their own worlds as soon as he departs. And throughout the meal, they will sit like strangers who happen to be sharing the same table, as if they believed that the enjoyment of each other's company was more effort than it was worth.

Perhaps this is an exaggeration on my part of what their lives are really like, but I've occasionally wondered what brought these couples to this point.

While Jane was in New York, however, I was suddenly struck by the notion that we might be heading there as well.

When I picked Jane up from the airport, I remember feeling strangely nervous. It was an odd feeling, and I was relieved to see a flicker of a smile as she walked through the gate and made her way toward me. When she was close, I reached for her carry-on.

"How was your trip?" I asked.

"It was good," she said. "I have no idea why Joseph likes living there so much. It's so busy and noisy all the time. I couldn't do it."

"Glad you're home, then?"

"Yes," she said. "I am. But I'm tired."

"I'll bet. Trips are always tiring."

For a moment, neither of us said anything. I moved her carry-on to my other hand. "How's Joseph doing?" I asked.

"He's good. I think he's put on a little weight since the last time he was here."

"Anything exciting going on with him that you didn't mention on the phone?"

"Not really," she said. "He works too much, but that's about it."

In her tone I heard a hint of sadness, one that I didn't quite understand. As I considered it, I saw a young couple with their arms around each other, hugging as if they hadn't seen each other in years.

"I'm glad you're home," I said.

She glanced at me, held my eyes, then slowly turned toward the luggage carousel. "I know you are."

This was our state of affairs one year ago.

I wish I could tell you that things improved in the weeks immediately following Jane's trip, but they did not. Instead, our life went on as it had before; we led our separate lives, and one unmemorable day passed into the next. Jane wasn't exactly angry with me, but she didn't seem happy, either, and try as I might, I was at a loss as to what to do about it. It seemed as though a wall of indifference

had somehow been constructed between us without my being aware of it. By late autumn, three months after the forgotten anniversary, I'd become so worried about our relationship that I knew I had to talk to her father.

His name is Noah Calhoun, and if you knew him, you would understand why I went to see him that day. He and his wife, Allie, had moved to Creekside Extended Care Facility nearly eleven years earlier, in their forty-sixth year of marriage. Though they once shared a bed, Noah now sleeps alone, and I wasn't surprised when I found his room empty. Most days, when I went to visit him, he was seated on a bench near the pond, and I remember moving to the window to make sure he was there.

Even from a distance, I recognized him easily: the white tufts of hair lifting slightly in the wind, his stooped posture, the light blue cardigan sweater that Kate had recently knitted for him. He was eighty-seven years old, a widower with hands that had curled with arthritis, and his health was precarious. He carried a vial of nitroglycerin pills in his pocket and suffered from prostate cancer, but the doctors were more concerned with his mental state. They'd sat Jane and me down in the office a few years earlier and eyed us gravely. He's been suffering from delusions, they informed us, and the delusions seem to be getting worse. For my part, I wasn't so sure. I thought I knew him better than most people, and certainly better than the doctors. With the exception of Jane, he was my dearest friend, and when I saw his solitary figure, I couldn't help but ache for all that he had lost.

His own marriage had come to an end five years earlier, but cynics would say it had ended long before that. Allie suffered from Alzheimer's in the final years of her life,

and I've come to believe it's an intrinsically evil disease. It's a slow unraveling of all that a person once was. What are we, after all, without our memories, without our dreams? Watching the progression was like watching a slow-motion picture of an inevitable tragedy. It was difficult for Jane and me to visit Allie; Jane wanted to remember her mother as she once was, and I never pressed her to go, for it was painful for me as well. For Noah, however, it was the hardest of all.

But that's another story.

Leaving his room, I made my way to the courtyard. The morning was cool, even for autumn. The leaves were brilliant in the slanting sunshine, and the air carried the faint scent of chimney smoke. This, I remembered, was Allie's favorite time of year, and I felt his loneliness as I approached. As usual, he was feeding the swan, and when I reached his side, I put a grocery bag on the ground. In it were three loaves of Wonder Bread. Noah always had me purchase the same items when I came to visit.

"Hello, Noah," I said. I knew I could call him "Dad," as Jane had with my father, but I've never felt comfortable with this and Noah has never seemed to mind.

At the sound of my voice, Noah turned his head.

"Hello, Wilson," he said. "Thanks for dropping by."

I rested a hand on his shoulder. "Are you doing okay?"

"Could be better," he said. Then, with a mischievous grin: "Could be worse, though, too."

These were the words we always exchanged in greeting. He patted the bench and I took a seat next to him. I stared out over the pond. Fallen leaves resembled a kaleidoscope as they floated on the surface of the water. The glassy surface mirrored the cloudless sky.

"I've come to ask you something," I said.

"Yes?" As he spoke, Noah tore off a piece of bread and tossed it into the water. The swan bobbed its beak toward it and straightened its neck to swallow.

"It's about Jane," I added.

"Jane," he murmured. "How is she?"

"Good." I nodded, shifting awkwardly. "She'll be coming by later, I suppose." This was true. For the past few years, we've visited him frequently, sometimes together, sometimes alone. I wondered if they spoke of me in my absence.

"And the kids?"

"They're doing well, too. Anna's writing features now, and Joseph finally found a new apartment. It's in Queens, I think, but right near the subway. Leslie's going camping in the mountains with friends this weekend. She told us she aced her midterms."

He nodded, his eyes never leaving the swan. "You're very lucky, Wilson," he said. "I hope you realize how fortunate you are that they've become such wonderful adults."

"I do," I said.

We fell into silence. Up close, the lines in his face formed crevices, and I could see the veins pulsing below the thinning skin of his hands. Behind us, the grounds were empty, the chilly air keeping people inside.

"I forgot our anniversary," I said.

"Oh?"

"Twenty-nine years," I added.

"Mmm."

Behind us, I could hear dried leaves rattling in the breeze.

"I'm worried about us," I finally admitted.

Noah glanced at me. At first I thought he would ask me why I was worried, but instead he squinted, trying to read my face. Then, turning away, he tossed another piece of bread to the swan. When he spoke, his voice was soft and low, an aging baritone tempered by a southern accent.

"Do you remember when Allie got sick? When I used to read to her?"

"Yes," I answered, feeling the memory pull at me. He used to read to her from a notebook that he'd written before they moved to Creekside. The notebook held the story of how he and Allie had fallen in love, and sometimes after he read it aloud to her, Allie would become momentarily lucid, despite the ravages of Alzheimer's. The lucidity never lasted long—and as the disease progressed further, it ceased completely—but when it happened, Allie's improvement was dramatic enough for specialists to travel from Chapel Hill to Creekside in the hopes of understanding it. That reading to Allie sometimes worked, there was no doubt. Why it worked, however, was something the specialists were never able to figure out.

"Do you know why I did that?" he asked.

I brought my hands to my lap. "I believe so," I answered. "It helped Allie. And because she made you promise you would."

"Yes," he said, "that's true." He paused, and I could hear him wheezing, the sound like air through an old accordion. "But that wasn't the only reason I did it. I also did it for me. A lot of folks didn't understand that."

Though he trailed off, I knew he wasn't finished, and I said nothing. In the silence, the swan stopped circling and moved closer. Except for a black spot the size of a silver

dollar on its chest, the swan was the color of ivory. It seemed to hover in place when Noah began speaking again.

"Do you know what I most remember about the good days?" he asked.

I knew he was referring to those rare days when Allie recognized him, and I shook my head. "No," I answered.

"Falling in love," he said. "That's what I remember. On her good days, it was like we were just starting out all over again."

He smiled. "That's what I mean when I say that I did it for me. Every time I read to her, it was like I was courting her, because sometimes, just sometimes, she would fall in love with me again, just like she had a long time ago. And that's the most wonderful feeling in the world. How many people are ever given that chance? To have someone you love fall in love with you over and over?"

Noah didn't seem to expect an answer, and I didn't offer one.

Instead, we spent the next hour discussing the children and his health. We did not speak of Jane or Allie again. After I left, however, I thought about our visit. Despite the doctors' worries, Noah seemed as sharp as ever. He had not only known that I would be coming to see him, I realized, but had anticipated the reason for my visit. And in typical southern fashion, he'd given me the answer to my problem, without my ever having had to ask him directly.

It was then that I knew what I had to do.