

Epilogue

I arrive home, out of breath with a decent glistening of sweat on my face, under my arms. On the front step is Olivia, our six-year-old daughter.

"Daddy!" she calls as she runs to me. I swoop her up in my arms and immediately scold her for being up past her bedtime.

"But I missed you. Where did you go?"

"I had a meeting, honey. Where's Mommy?"

"She's in the kitchen, eating peanut butter right out of the jar!"

"I see, well, you need to get to bed."

"A story first?"

Her blonde curls and innocent smile convince me to read to her. Sometimes I read something I wrote, but tonight, and for the past several nights, Huck Finn has been the feature.

Tonight's section is the feud section, and I am reluctant to read her the part about the boy's death right before her bedtime, so I call it over before we get there, and Olivia is just as pleased; she, like Fred Flinstone, would need toothpicks to hold her eyes open any longer.

I replace the book on the shelf, and remove the one to its right.

It is an old book, a hardcover edition, and I have no right to own it. I hold it in my hands.

"Hi Virgil. How'd it go?" Hannah joins me.

"Not bad, I guess." Again, as I have a dozen times in the past minutes, I glance at the front door to see if the little woman from the meeting is there.

"Well?"

"Oh Hannah, there were all these--these--whacko's there. People who haven't a clue. People who have all these problems."

"So different from you, huh?"

I never laugh at her jokes. It's in her delivery.

"Hey, I tried, really. I told them about my father, and I listened. I can't get over the feeling that the answer to my problems is so close that I can almost touch it."

She looks at my hands, and I follow her gaze downward, and together we see the book. I remembered the first time I read it all the way through, how I couldn't put it down.

"I'll be in bed, sweetie." And she kisses my forehead.

I watch her glide out of the room and recall the first time she said goodbye to me, in that elevator on the top of the world. I love her so much. I am in awe of her.

Opening the book, I have to laugh.

The Great Gatsby, by F. Scott Fitzgerald. I look at the signature and go back to the guest book at the Pack Memorial Library in Asheville, where I saw his signature and knew that the one in this book was authentic.

Thumbing through the pages I have memorized, the long months that came before and after the book and I rendezvoused pounded in my aching head. It was as if the book was trying to tell me something. If I would only pay attention. I think I identified more with Nick, the narrator, than Gatsby himself. Nick seemed like a sponge, a naive young man in way over his head, struggling just to keep it above water while the rich people just walked past, shaking their heads.

The newspaper clipping falls out and onto my lap. Yellowed, dog-eared, it speaks to me. I unfold it for the thousandth time and read the headline of the small, almost an afterthought:

BIZARRE TWIST IN GUARDSMAN'S DROWNING

Bizarre, yes. I read on.

Athens, Ohio. The mother of a Coast Guardsman who drown off the coast of Maine sixteen months ago has discovered what appears to be a suicide note from him that is dated only days prior to the November 12, 1975 accident. Although the details of the note are not completely known, one source, who spoke on the guarantee of anonymity, disclosed that the man, Petty Officer First Class Peter N. Heflin, was despondent over his romantic feelings for a fellow crew-member. Apparently Heflin was homosexual. The identity of that crew-member is not known, although members of the crew who were questioned after the incident indicated that Heflin was friends with many members of the crew.

The drowning, which occurred while the seaman was attached to the Cutter Aggressive, stationed here in Portsmouth, happened while the ship was in the

midst of a hurricane carrying hundred-mile-an-hour plus winds.

The serviceman's body was never recovered...

I remember the first time I read it, the first time I realized it, the first time I accepted it.

Now, for the thousandth time, I close my eyes and relive those harrowing moments again.

I see Hef enter the mess deck, his uniform splattered with vomit. We speak to one another, and he heads for the door, opens it and goes outside. I see Hogan teetering across the deck to help Hef, to drag him back in.

For the thousandth time, I see Heflin push Hogan away from the rail. For the thousandth time, my eyes meet those of my friend, out there in the wind, the water. For the thousandth time, I see his hand raise at the elbow, his palm facing away from his body as he slowly waves goodbye.

And, for the thousandth time, as hard as it is to just stand there and watch, I see my best friend, because he wanted me to be more, turn and dive, head-first, into the sea.

My father would have left it at that. Written it off as the actions of a sick, perverted mind.

But I can not.

This fundamental of differences clearly defines the space between me and him; perhaps I wasn't becoming the man. Immediately I begin to feel less afraid. I feel the stirring of the story that has simmered within me

for over twenty years, and now, now the urge to write it down slowly replaces the fear of doing so. My instinct is to run into my study and begin hammering away at the keyboard.

But, I reason, I have my whole life ahead of me. Mine. There's plenty of time.

I decide to walk.