

**THE  
SACRIFICE  
ZONE**

Also by Roger S. Gottlieb

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**THE  
SACRIFICE ZONE**

A NOVEL

**Roger S. Gottlieb**

*atmosphere press*

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The Sacrifice Zone  
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To Miriam  
For your wisdom  
Thank you

And (once again)—  
To the Earth  
Without whom this book  
could never have been written



**“Sacrifice Zone”:**

a place so polluted it can never be cleaned up



## Present as Prologue

The five days off had been wonderful for Sarah. Though she made a point of going into some kind of wilderness at least three times a year, it always felt like it had been too long since the last trip. In the spring she had been to the Utah canyon lands, barely escaping a flash flood in a narrow slot by climbing up to a six-inch ledge and holding on for dear life as the immense force of liberated water streamed past for two hours. It had scared the hell out of her, but the purple and yellow wildflowers blooming in the desert, and the way the light created strange patterns on the water, colored by the sandstone and the glowing twilight sky, made it more than worth it.

This time she'd hiked a mild thirty-six miles in five days, hitting the ridges for the autumn views from the Presidential range of New Hampshire's White Mountains in the day and walking back down below the tree line to sleep in her cozy little tent. Together her gear made around thirty-five pounds, enough to give her a slight burning sensation between her shoulder blades, as if someone were pushing tiny needles into her skin. Her arches cried out for ice at the end of the day and the muscles in her ass complained that her pack straps had been too loose and her back hadn't carried nearly enough weight. Halfway up a three-hour climb, balancing on a series of medium size boulders damp from the rain, she would occasionally wonder why in hell she was doing this if she

didn't have to.

But she knew. On the third morning the shockingly cold clear air invited her eyes to open by themselves, without the grogginess that often afflicted her in the city. The whispers and rustlings as forest twilight turned to night made her feel safe and loved, like being at a family reunion with people who actually cared about her. On other trips she'd watched mountain goats finding their way down near ninety degree slopes in the Weminuche Wilderness; heard a coyote howling his joy at being who he was after she'd crossed a pass at twelve-five on the Continental Divide; seen a perfect Harlequin duck, with its chaotic white and black and brown markings, floating on a perfectly still lake up against the sheer face of a mountain in Glacier Park, with a waterfall leaping sixty feet down the cliffs into the water as a mist cleared.

She paused at the overlook, pretty much the last place she'd get a vista before entering into the first stunted and then gradually larger pine and birch and maple forests. Taking off her pack and sitting on a large round rock, she gazed long and hard, taking in the brightly colored trees stretching far into the distance, the mammoth hulk of Mount Washington to the north, the smaller ridges of mountains spreading out to the west. She marveled at how much of New England's woods had returned, even though this meant that the destructive agriculture and manufacturing had just moved south, or to places like Guatemala and Bangladesh. A lot of the scars on the land that the hardy pioneer stock of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had made were overgrown by small, but flourishing, woods. If they could recover here, maybe the black marks being made today, and which would, she knew, be made for a lot of tomorrows, could be overgrown as well.

She bowed her head slightly to the sky, the colored leaves ("Who thought of this leaves changing colors business?" she laughed to herself. "My compliments to the designer!"), and

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the two hawks riding the thermals. Then she shouldered her pack, relishing its lightness with all the food gone and the way even a few days seemed to strengthen her upper body, and headed down the trail. Down to the car, back to Jamaica Plain, and to the work, the all-important work. She laughed out loud, feeling with pleasure the crunch of her thick soled, worn hiking boots against the stones, carefully stepping over the roots and gently, almost dancing, past the muddiest bits and the treacherous wet leaves on top of slippery small logs on the trail.

Hours later, nearly back to the flat that would lead to the trailhead, the sound of a stream fifty yards to the side playing with the last of the season's bird calls, she heard a weak voice. "Help, please, help" filtered through the trees. Dropping her pack, she ran down a well-worn spur trail to see a man sprawled on the ground, pain set in his lips and eyes, clutching at his left knee with both hands. He had ruffled gray hair, a scruffy beard, new looking equipment and clothes, and seemed to be holding back tears with each jerky breath.

What was this?



# PART I



# Chapter 1

## Daniel

Daniel kept shifting his wineglass from one hand to the other and back. He pretended to study the framed photos of desert sunsets and the watercolors of tropical flowers, and he tried to interest himself in what people were saying. On the surface, he hoped, he was just another mild-mannered, jolly party guest. One more politely smiling spouse at the same old holiday get-together for the folks from Amy's office.

He nodded to Phyllis, slender and well preserved at fifty-four, wearing elegant slacks, a gold beaded blouse and a lilac batik scarf, talking about the failure of the Democratic Party to do anything serious for the white working class. There was Cal, aiming for the neo-hippy look in a black Indian styled tunic, studying the appetizers, perennially aggrieved about immigration reform. Sylvie had a Black Lives Matter button conspicuously pinned to her large, multi-handled leather handbag. And Abe, the senior partner, who often made it clear he didn't buy all this exercise-health-perfect-diet-purity crap, contentedly worked on his third scotch and his fourth smoked salmon and brie.

Daniel knew what good people they were, at least as good as he was. Together they all hated Donald Trump and Fox News, sympathized with the downtrodden and, like Amy, spent a fair amount of time helping folks who were far too

poor to get decent attorneys. They lamented the changing climate and then got on with their lives.

And it was all he could do not to start screaming at them about what growing their coffee did to the hillsides. And the children forced to pick it. And what it cost in greenhouse gases to transport it from Kenya or Sumatra.

When he went into the beautifully decorated kitchen—with its obligatory granite countertops, oversized Sub-Zero gleaming stainless fridge and stove, view of the open floor plan and adjoining family room littered with toys for his hosts' far above average children—he noticed the recycling bins. Thick sky-blue plastic, slightly worn around the handles, half full of empty wine bottles, finished cans of artichoke hearts, and used tin foil. They just made him feel worse. How much more was there in this house, in all the houses, that wouldn't get recycled? And besides, he knew all too well that recycling was a sham, that staggering amounts of energy were used to produce what got recycled, and package it, and ship it, and melt it all down to start again.

The party was well catered—tiny appetizers of avocado and prosciutto, curried carrots glazed with honey, crisp crackers covered in flax seeds, turkey slices and spiced chicken wings; then a whole ham surrounded by three different potato dishes, pilaf, and a mountainous salad; even blackened tofu for anyone who had doubts about meat. There was enough liquor to drown a college fraternity, and desserts that would cure any latent problems with low cholesterol. It was a beautiful spread, decorated with slender crystal vases filled with bouquets of irises and lilies. But as Daniel munched on the few clearly vegan choices and sipped what he hoped was organic rosé, he saw the long check out rows of all the supermarkets, both the endlessly inviting overpriced ones that called themselves 'natural' and the huge warehouse-style ones for regular people staffed by underpaid, sullen minorities. And

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then he saw all the stores, in all the countries. And he cringed inside.

Byron and Steven, with whom they occasionally socialized, drifted over. They were a strangely similar couple, both tall and thin, both wearing wire rimmed glasses and neatly pressed open neck tailored shirts. Both spoke in hushed tones, conveying studious, serious attentiveness, a tone that helped them get anguish-filled divorce cases or the task of defending reckless teenage sons of wealthy families who'd had a little too much to drink before driving. Byron asked Daniel about his teaching, and Steven inquired after Sharon's health. They were pleasant and well-intentioned, but Daniel could see Byron's hand fiddling with his watchband as he waited for Daniel's reply, and Steven barely let Daniel finish his usual "Yes, Sharon's doing fine, at least seems to be, thanks" before he nodded, smiled, nodded and excused himself to get another glass of white.

They needn't have worried. He would behave. Not raise his voice, pound on a handy table, and accuse all of them, including himself, of the unforgivable crime of which they were all a part.

For he had promised Amy. She'd asked, practically begged: "Daniel, *please*, not again, o.k.? You know what I mean. Just enjoy Ralph's food, and the lovely house Beth has decorated so nicely, and don't, *don't*. And if you could, please Danny, put on something other than. That." She gestured at the wrinkled and stained jeans, the pullover Greenpeace sweatshirt that had, after far too many late nights of research fueled by chocolate covered peanuts, grown tight around the inevitable mid-fifties male pot belly. So he'd brushed what was left of his thin and graying hair, trimmed his unruly beard and mustache, and switched the jeans for gray khakis with a slightly elastic waist and one of the blue dress shirts he hardly ever used.

"Oh, much better, thank you, thank you," said Amy,

reaching up to stroke his face in a gesture that made him feel both loved and small, like a child. “Danny, I’m really worried about you. You know how I feel,” (and indeed she recycled, and never forgot to bring cloth shopping bags to the supermarket), “but it won’t do any good to get crazy about it.”

He loved her, there was no doubt about that. And he was deeply grateful that she had forgiven him, far more than he’d forgiven himself. He admired her intelligence and how, as a hardworking liberal lawyer, she’d saved more than a few people from unjust prison terms. Yet as much as she cared about “the rights of the oppressed,” and she’d smile at the corny phrase even as she used it, she could leave it alone when the day was done. She’d put on sweatpants and an old t-shirt, make herself a giant bowl of popcorn, watch some disease of the week movie on cable, cry a few tears as a mother saw her son die or some middle aged professional woman give up her career to care for her mom with Alzheimer’s, and then go to bed happy.

He couldn’t leave it alone. Or go to bed happy. Ever since they finally understood what had happened to Sharon—actually, what he had done—he’d become obsessed. Mono-maniacal. Insufferable. There were the times he stared into his computer screen feeling like the mercury residues were entering his lungs with every breath; the dying fish from the polluted rivers in Chile were covering the surface of the nearby pond. He felt his heart wrenching in his chest, a pressure on his eyes, a sadness so heavy he wasn’t sure if he could lift his body out of the chair. But he wouldn’t share those moments with anyone, and could only tolerate them for a few minutes before he switched websites, did some more research, and felt the comforting flow of anger once again.

When an acquaintance said, “Daniel, you’re becoming a real drag,” he smiled and agreed. Then his smile faded, his voice rose, his finger pointed. “If you want to see a real drag,

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check out the effects from uranium mining on some native reservation in Utah, where the cancer rate is eighteen times the national average.”

Yet there was still a part of him that didn't want to make Amy unhappy, or more unhappy than he'd made her already. She looked forward to these parties, and he didn't want to spoil it. So he gave a brief smile, leaned over to kiss her cheek, and walked back to his tiny writing room to collect his wallet and keys. But quietly enough so that she wouldn't hear him, or at least so he thought, he whispered furiously to himself, “Who's crazy? The guy on the Titanic who runs around telling people they've hit an iceberg? Or the people who keep on playing bridge and waltzing to the string quartet?” He could see how trite the analogy was. But that really wasn't the point, was it?

So he'd come to the party. And so far had kept the peace.

Until Sally came over. Sally whom they'd known for years, who'd baked them lasagnas after Sharon was born, who'd divorced her husband years ago and flowered into a national spokesperson against capital punishment. Sally who seemed to never miss a hot yoga class, forget a friend's birthday, or gain an ounce in twenty years; and who seemed to think it was her God-given responsibility to cheer up anyone who looked down at the mouth.

Which certainly meant, at this relentlessly cheerful party of relentlessly good people, Daniel. So Sally came over, with her perfect black slacks and dark green silk blouse, some kind of brightly colored vest with tiny mirrors on it, a necklace of honey hued Moroccan amber and neatly trimmed jet black hair framing her flawless complexion, clear blue eyes and shortened nose.

Daniel nodded a wary hello and tried, with little success, to smile. Given what was going on in the world, what was the point of all this perfection?

“Just the man I need,” Sally said, with a pseudo-conspiratorial wink. “Amy’s told us about how you’re really into the environment.” Daniel resisted the emotional recoil that sought to make his mouth turn down and a curse come out of his mouth.

“Into it, yeah that’s me. Of course, you could say we are all really *into it* all the time, right?” His forced chuckle fooled no one, and he knew it.

“So,” said Sally, sounding a little confused by Daniel’s poorly hidden hostility but not one to be put off that easily, “I thought since you’re all for nature, you might give me a little tip about where to go snorkeling and see the coral reefs. There’re so many places, but I thought, Daniel, maybe he’s been, maybe he knows. So, nature boy,” she smiled at her own charming silliness, “got any tips?”

He could see she was trying and deserved a polite brush off. He knew Amy was listening to see if he would do what he’d promised. But the words just wouldn’t come. If only Sally hadn’t made her little ‘nature boy’ comment, as if any of them weren’t part of this vast and mysterious thing, even as they were doing it in. And then, with the finality of a door slamming shut or a window being violently smashed, he didn’t care.

“Snorkeling. Coral reefs? Here’s the thing,” his false jollity and the mean edge to the smiley tone made her head, which had been leaning in for the presumed intimacy, snap back. “The thing is. The thing is,” he repeated, then paused, using an old professorial trick to get the undergraduates to wait for the punch line, “the coral reefs are dying, bleaching white. Go to Australia, St. John, Belize. Go anywhere. Thirty, forty, some places fifty percent or more. And the fish: angelfish, puffer fish, the ones that look like boxes and the ones with snouts like swordfish. Getting wiped out because they can’t feed on the coral. So if a funeral is your idea of a great vacation, check it out.”

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“How awful. But, why?” asked Sally; and it was hard to tell if she was upset by what he was saying—or upset that he hadn’t played along with her generous attempt to engage him in light party talk.

“Ocean temperature too warm from global warming. Seawater too acidic from, oops, there it is again, global warming. Sewage from the hotels from all the folks who want to, you know, snorkel and see coral reefs.” He mimicked her tone, not much but just enough so that she felt the contempt. “Why? Because of us.”

Sally pressed her lips together, tilted her head to one side. She was, it was quite clear, considering what she’d heard. Daniel knew what was next.

“Terrible, just terrible. It must be so upsetting.” Daniel recognized the strategy. First you empathize, then offer the fix. “But there must be people working to help, yes? Groups, like, I don’t know their names, but so many of them ask for contributions and have ads on TV. I mean that French guy, Cousteau and, what is it? Oh yes, Greenpeace. Right?”

“Yeah, sure,” answered Daniel. “Good folks. Doing their best. But it doesn’t come close.” Sally had unconsciously moved further back and now he leaned in, fixing her blue eyes with his own watery brown. “Look Sally, imagine you’re attacked by something big and mad—like a pit bull defending its owner or a wolf whose pups you’ve come too near. And they rip into your thigh, from here,” he tapped his leg near his hip, then just above his knee, “down to here. And someone wants to help.” His voice was rising, and he knew it, and didn’t care. “Really help, you know. And they offer you, you see,” almost shouting now, “They offer you a band-aid, for that huge gaping wound that’s bleeding you out.” Down to almost a whisper. “A band-aid.”

The party had hushed and he immediately felt like a fool, and knew how angry Amy would be, because, after all, he’d

promised. But he couldn't help it.

\*\*\*

For a while he'd wanted to be a great novelist. And write he did. A long, tedious saga about his emotionally distant father, depressed mother, and Alzheimer's afflicted grandfather. His first sexual experiences had figured prominently, and so had his love-hate relationship with his graduate school mentor—a man universally recognized by himself as one of America's greatest writers.

It had turned out to be a carbon copy of dozens, if not hundreds, of similar novels by smart, untalented English grad students. Everyone else who looked at it, from the agents and big publishers who turned him down to the critics, almost all of whom didn't bother but when they did noted a few good scenes in which the hero was in the woods, or the beach, or just strolling about a city park, but dismissed him as “derivative, tediously familiar, and very far from the cutting edge.” The general public passed him by on the way to mild-mannered erotica for middle-aged women, sword and sorcery sagas that went on for thousands of pages, sweet—and thankfully short—spiritual memoirs, and stories about India or Rio or turn of the century Paris.

The biggest surprise was that after a while he saw it too. And it was kind of a relief. All those years of thinking he had to write something great, and almost but not quite concealing from himself the deeper knowledge that he simply didn't have it in him.

So he wrote some articles on other people's books, became review editor of what another colleague called a “very good second rate journal,” got tenure, and tried to communicate a little bit of what he loved about Tolstoy and Conrad to his students. He could have grown old with some grace, watched his daughter finish college and move on with her life, maybe

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give him grandchildren or maybe not. Even being a public interest lawyer, Amy made enough money for them to be comfortable, to have decent cars and the occasional self-indulgent vacation in the Caribbean or Tuscany. They shared childcare when Sharon was younger, and worries about her when she became a teenager. He'd have retired, maybe developed his gardening and written some poetry, grown old, and died.

But something happened.

## Chapter 2

### Daniel

There was only the faintest glimmer of light in the eastern sky, but the local robins and cardinals were singing anyway. They flitted from tree to tree in the orchard, hoping to find a careless insect, or a particularly tender piece of grass, or a twig shaped just right for their nests. From the small farm at the other end of the narrow country lane, a rooster crowed, feeling, no doubt, that if he was up everyone else should be too. Daniel shifted his weight on the thin, lumpy mattress which barely protected him from the plain wooden floor of the little room he and Amy were sharing for the weekend. Then he stretched out his legs, pointed his heels, and hoped that by pulling on his spine he could lessen a particularly thick morning fog.

“No,” he thought, “not right. Just focus on what is here, no judgment, no striving for something different.” If he was tired, just investigate the fatigue and take it for what it was, without wanting it to be something else. Such wanting was the root of suffering. To overcome suffering, all that was necessary was to accept it, without judgment. “Don’t even accept it,” The Teacher had said. “To say you accept it is to suggest that you might reject it. But how can we reject what is? Just let it be, and let yourself be.”

“Let it be, let it be, let it be,” Daniel whispered to himself,

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waiting for a little of the promised detachment to kick in. But it wouldn't. Not for him. His half-shut eyes that wanted to close, the pressure behind his forehead, the way his legs felt almost too weak to stand, the jolt of cold dawn air on his neck and his nipples—these were what they were and no matter what The Teacher said, he wanted them to be different.

He pulled on a black sweatshirt over the tattered white t-shirt he'd slept in, slipped on an old pair of sandals and shuffled to the communal bathroom, averting his eyes from the other students in the hallway. "Do not engage with the other students during your time here," The Teacher had instructed them. "This is not a social scene, but a time when all the games your ego plays are stopped. This is no time to be cute or charming or smart or nice. It is not time to be anything or anyone. If you have questions you can ask me during the dharma talks every day between one and one forty-five. The rest of the time, silence. No media of any kind, certainly,"—she had paused, looked each of them directly in the eyes—"no phones. Just yourself. No escape."

From the bathroom, Daniel hurried to the meditation hall, hoping to get there a few minutes before five so that he could stretch his back and thighs before the first session began. Each practice was an hour—and there were ten of them during each day. The rest of the time was spent in labor—in the kitchen, the gardens, the tool shed—making the Buddhist Center of Pomfret, Vermont run smoothly. He and Amy had paid \$400 for the privilege of three days of silence, bad vegetarian food, and sleeping on a lousy mattress without a pillow. "In our tradition," The Teacher had said softly, "we do not eat meat or sweets, watch television—or use pillows. Luxury and attachment go together, like the horse and the cart."

It was six minutes to the hour when he got to the hall—wooden floors and a high arched ceiling with thick wooden beams running its length. In the corner was a pile of round

zafus—meditation pillows of faded blue and red and black, well-worn from thousands of hours of pressure from hundreds of plump and boney and muscular asses all connected to people who thought that watching their minds in silence would ease their pain. Along the sides of the hall were a few Tibetan thangkas, painted silk images of the saints and sages of Buddhism. One, Samantamukha Avalokiteshvara, represented compassion. Daniel wasn't sure how five heads of blue and red and yellow, above a graceful torso from which four arms extended on each side, would take away his suffering, but he liked the lotus blossom the saint stood on, and the puffy white clouds that framed her downcast eyes and gentle expression.

“Like, dislike, like, dislike.” On and on his mind went. And that was the problem. The Teacher had been clear—“Let it all be. Let yourself be.” Daniel was not unfamiliar with the basic Buddhist mantra: *because we want, life is suffering; so stop wanting*. And even if he didn't believe it, he'd promised Amy, really promised this time, to try. If this didn't work—well, his marriage had been headed on a long downward spiral for some time now, and it wasn't likely to come up. Unless he could relax? Chill? Take it all in stride? Trust someone to make it better?

There you go again, he inwardly chastised himself. Try, for Amy. For Sharon. For your marriage. Just look at the damn painting, and the beams, and the stars through the dirty windows, and huge yellow candles on the altar and incense holders covered with ash and the single huge picture of Buddha looking down with detachment and wisdom and God knows what else. Just look and don't notice the wrinkles in the fabric, the black stain, the.

Then The Teacher's voice again: “No judgement, no preferences. Let everything be. Let yourself be.”

But he couldn't. The meditation sessions were agony, even

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though The Teacher had, with what might or might not have been a little grimace of judgment, made it clear he could use one of the rickety straight-backed wooden chairs at the ends of the hall rather than sit cross legged on a meditation pillow. And the daily instruction sessions—“dharma talks” they were called here—left him alternately bored and irritated.

“Why,” he’d asked the first afternoon, “why is being here”—he gestured at the small teaching room where other students sat on cushions and he and Amy sank back awkwardly on an ancient, frayed and tilted green couch, “better than being anywhere else? And why is meditating better than not meditating.”

“Better?” The Teacher had seemed just slightly amused, “who said better?”

“But then why should I do it?”

The Teacher’s mouth turned up slightly, her pale face, narrow lips, slender nose, tilted slightly to the side, as if to bring her ear close to Daniel’s mouth and hear him more clearly. Then she straightened, returned her lips to their usual inexpressive straight line. “I do not believe in ‘should,’ for ‘should’ tells us to be something different. I believe we should let ourselves be.”

“But,” interrupted Daniel, who had a good four reasons as to why this made no sense.

“But,” The Teacher continued, her even tone never altering, her complete lack of response to his interruption more effective than any raised tone or rebuke, “While I have not said you should, I do not believe you, or anyone else, will live a life of contentment unless you come to know your own mind, and that requires meditation. So that we learn to recognize the mind’s tricks and lies: the vast promises it offers and how little it can deliver on those promises.”

Not so subtly Amy elbowed Daniel, demanding silence. This was not, he could hear her voice, yet another place for a

rant about dead lakes and the carcinogens in the blood of newborn babies. This was a place to calm down, to lower the noise in his head that he compulsively shared with everyone.

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Amy had sat down with him in the living room, reaching over to take his hand for the first physical contact they'd had in a long time. Her voice was subdued, even. This was way beyond shouting, and he knew it. "This is it, Daniel," she told him. "I cannot live with you like this. Either this works or." She couldn't finish the thought. But they both knew what it was. "I thought maybe Dr. Emerson would help, but you wouldn't listen to him either."

"But, I'm right!" Daniel yelled so loud that Amy's eyes widened with her own anger — anger stoked by the steadily gathering storm of Daniel's near screaming about air pollution in Los Angeles and lowered sperm counts from toxins in toothbrushes. Of Daniel alienating every friend they had and too many family dinners ruined by impromptu lectures about lead in inner city drinking water or the rights of chickens. Of Amy biting her lip, offering consolation even though it had been his fault, not hers. Of trying to change the subject, act interested, be sympathetic. Of Sharon storming off to her room, hands covering her ears, screaming at her father to "Give it a rest, Dad. It's bad enough what happened to me. We've heard it all before!"

That time, as Sharon stormed out, Daniel's voice had dropped to a whisper. He tried to call her back, but only a stuttered mumble came out. His chin fell onto his chest, a slight tremble ran through his hands. What had he done? Why had he done it? To Sharon, whom he adored, the light of his life. Before he had failed her with what he hadn't taken care of; and now by inflicting bitter stories of polluted beaches and

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dying species. These stories, too, were a kind of poison. Why couldn't he stop?

He wanted to tell her, her and Amy, whom he loved so much. He wanted to tell them that it was because he loved them so much that he had to do this work, take in all the details—like the lead in the air in Manila from the old taxis, poisoning kids like Sharon but who could never go to the great doctors they had here. That he couldn't bear the thought of Sharon growing older in a world wracked by storms and droughts, with ever fewer birds in spring. And that when he looked at Amy, or felt her breasts press against his chest, the sweetness of her flesh made him think not of caresses and sex but of the way pesticides caused the plague of breast cancer in women.

But when he tried to talk about the love, and the deep, unending fear, it just came out as rage and bitterness. That was the best he could do. That—and the reading, and thinking, and broadcasting what he learned in any way that he could think of.

Amy raised her voice, pointed a finger at his face, demanding he be different. “Do you want to be married or to be right? I want my life back. My life that you have stolen, yes, *stolen*, with this endless crusade. We are here, all of us,” she gestured to the two of them, to Sharon's room, to the tree lined street outside on which families and joggers and old ladies with their dogs walked toward the nearby pond, “and you act like we and everything else are already gone.”

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It was Sunday at one, time of the program's last Dharma talk. The Teacher sat on the slightly raised platform at the front of the room, her legs gracefully arranged in a full lotus, her right leg on top of her left, the back of her right hand gracefully

resting in her left palm, her arms fully relaxed in the middle of her body.

She was a gaunt woman who must, Daniel thought, have had a full head of hair like everyone one else at some point. But now her scalp was shaved bare. The skin was taut between her temples and jaw, as if it might snap at any moment, exposing the hard, uncompromising bones beneath. Any soft, unnecessary flesh that might have made breasts or a plump ass was long gone. Dark brown eyes looked carefully at each person, her mouth moved only to speak and her lips almost never expressed either appreciation or displeasure.

“And this is why we say the ‘middle way.’ Do not deny your basic needs for food or shelter or companionship. And do not indulge them. Do not cling to your appearance, to your possessions, to your career, to your...” she hesitated for moment, and seemed perhaps to have given out a barely perceptible sigh, “family. Live with what is, with what you are, with how you and the world are connected, and always changing. Notice how your mind creates the reality around you. The purer the mind, the purer the reality. If you purify your mind through meditation, through self-knowledge, you will know reality for what it is: a series of moments, each one leading to the next. That is why everything that lives will pass away. Each moment is like a death—and a birth. So. This is what is. Let it be.”

Daniel raised his hand, and next to him on the old couch he could feel Amy’s body stiffen, hear her rapid intake of breath. The Teacher nodded in his direction.

“I’m trying to understand.”

She cut him off. “Perhaps you do not need to try. Simply let the words be,” she rotated her right hand so that the palm faced the ceiling, then tilted it slightly towards him, invitingly, “and whatever happens will happen. With understanding, or without. The words are there, as are you. The trying is an

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extra effort. Do you want to make it?"

"No. Look, I'm sorry."

"There is no need to be."

"No!" Shouting now. Heedless of Amy's hand gripping his knee with increasing force. "I'm trying to understand what all this *means*," he raised both hands and rotated them in quick circles. "This place and these pictures on the wall and the candles and..." his voice a little lower, for there was still some part of him that had no wish to be any nastier than necessary, "you. But surely you know what is going on." He pointed with two fingers toward the window, the woods and fields outside the building, the entire world beyond.

"Look," he started again, and perhaps there were tears in his eyes and his voice was moist, but he was talking fast. "I had a friend, known him for years, lost touch because I thought his wife was boring. Then she died, young, really young, from breast cancer. Turns out she was a really special person, did work for battered women while raising four kids, treasured by everyone who knew her. So I drove six hours to the funeral, listened to all these people, hundreds of them, talking about 'Leah was such a wonderful person' and 'What a tragedy.'" And I wanted to scream, fought the words down so hard I thought my throat would snap. I wanted to say to them all," his voice raised again, he stood without realizing it, and he moved his head from side to side, looking at The Teacher, and the other students, and Amy and the trees outside the window: "It's not a tragedy. It's murder. You think it was her damn genes? Or bad luck? What do you think is in the water? The food? The air? Don't you know? And if you do know, why don't you say something?"

He looked around, saw that he was standing, and realized he'd been nearly screaming. Now, voice so low they have to strain to hear him, "Do you want me to let that be? Just get to know my mind while that is happening?" His mouth twisted

down, his eyes squinted, tears flowed from his eyes and his hands clenched. There was confusion in his voice, a hunger to escape that which he knew to be inescapable. “Really, is that what you are saying?”

The Teacher waited, spoke calmly. His outbursts did not seem to have registered. “Your outrage and your fear are burdens. Do you wish to carry them?”

Daniel’s head snapped up. He stared at The Teacher, eyes wide, studying the woman’s face as if to see into her soul as deeply as he could. And then he looked away. The tension left his body. His voice cleared; all sound of tears was gone. It was over. He had tried with this woman. As he had tried with Amy. He couldn’t try anymore.

He squeezed Amy’s hand once; was it a goodbye? Then he stood, and spoke quietly, the grief and anger were gone, replaced by a cold, uncaring distance.

“It’s not about what I want. There’s something else here. Something much bigger.”

He looked down at Amy. “I’ll be waiting in the car.”

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The Teacher was silent. Calm. Unmoved. This display, the ego’s desperate need for flight when it is challenged, she had seen countless times. A fantasy of changing others, of making them better—how it grips you and won’t let go, and leads to nothing—all too familiar. She nodded to him, neither encouraging nor irritated. “We will be here,” she added, “if you see things differently in the future.”

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They no longer sat on the couch together, watched old movies before bed, or talked about the news. Communication had

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dried up like a once bubbling stream after a drought. “Pick up Sharon at three.” “The refrigerator needs to be fixed.” “Please pay the electric bill.” Daniel had an old single mattress laid out in his small study. They hadn’t slept in the same bed for months. And now they no longer ate together. If Daniel walked into a room, Amy would stare at him, layers of hurt, anger, and deep confusion in her eyes. And he’d walk out.

Then, on a rainy Saturday morning when Sharon was away on a school trip, Amy asked Daniel to come into the living room. He was more disheveled than usual, beard untrimmed, his wrinkled and not particularly clean flannel shirt half in and half out of his sweatpants. What now? he wondered. And was pretty sure he knew. Still, his eyes widened in fear and expectation, seeing a vastly different future than anything he’d expected, clouded over with fear.

Her tone was even, as if reading from a book that she would soon close, whose plot had ended badly, but in which she no longer had any emotional investment. “This is no life. Not for me. Not for Sharon. She’s nearly fifteen, and we will have to work out where she stays until she goes to college. But we need some relief.”

“Relief?” his voice cracked, as he moved back to the familiar terrain of anger, and of a desperate need for someone, for *her*, to understand. “Ask the people who...”

“NO!” she stopped him. Then, with less force, “Don’t bother.” He silenced himself, wondering for a moment if there was any way not to fall into the dark hole that was opening up under his feet. But, as it always did when his own suffering arose, he moved outward, and could see only the endless suffering of the forests, the dolphins, the coughing children. Compared to all that, what did his loneliness matter—meals eaten alone, no one to listen to his ever more frequent nightmares, or even to share some brief pleasure about seeing a pretty cloud in the sky. He would be alone; it would hurt. But

so what? It was just pain, and so small in the scheme of things he couldn't let it move him.

Amy reached out to touch his face, then pulled her hand back. She stood, stepped away, fixed her eyes on his. "I love you, Danny, and I always will. But I won't live in a non-stop funeral, not when there's so much life left. In me, and in the world."

Later, when he thought about it, he missed her terribly. But he didn't think about it too often. There were too many other things on his mind.

# Chapter 3

## Anne

When she talked, her hands moved slowly, rising and falling with her deliberate, measured speech. Palms up, she would lift her hands almost to her shoulders as she talked of familiar Buddhist virtues: awareness, detachment, compassion. And then they would turn over and gently sink down as she pointed out the inevitable suffering that came from clinging, dislike, and ignorance. Her low, even tones were not so much soothing as expressionless. You could read anything you wanted into them, but there wasn't much there—except the simple ideas which she believed had saved her, and she was sure could save anyone else. Do not seek, do not avoid, know your own mind so that you do not deceive yourself. Be kind without attachment to anyone else's happiness. Do not resist fatigue or pain or frustration. Do not want something different than what is. Such wanting is the root of suffering.

Her office was a study in understatement. An old wooden desk that might have come when the property was first acquired, left over from the small private school that had gone bankrupt in the 1950s, sat in the corner. In front of the desk there was a simple armless wooden chair. A small laptop sat in the center of the desk, and folders neatly marked stood in metal racks on one side. The walls were bare except for one picture of a Buddha statue, and under it, printed in large,

round letters, the Four Noble Truths: *life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, desire can be overcome, by the 8-fold path.* A small bookcase, filled with compilations of sutras and commentary from India, Tibet, China, and Burma rested unevenly against the wall, the bottom of one of its legs having worn down. There was no further decoration, and the only other furniture was a second wooden chair, also armless, placed by the side of the door.

Show time, she thinks, preparing for the daily question session, tightening a wrinkled tunic around her waist with an old cloth belt, slipping her feet into sandals so worn they seemed more like cardboard than the wood they'd started out as, briefly wondering yet again if the absence of a mirror indicated real modesty or just a flair for exaggerated self-denial. The middle way, Buddha had taught, the middle way, no extremes. But who could know what an extreme was anymore? Go into the drug store and they had twenty-three different types of shampoo and two million apps for the cell phone that she needed to keep in touch with the people who made donations to the Center. But she'd tossed the mirror out years ago, thinking that the less she noticed how she looked the less other people, namely her students, would too. Was she right? Or did they just notice that she looked like shit?

There it was, again, the ego that never ends. She almost laughed out loud, then patted herself soothingly on her chest, just above her tiny breasts, and finally gently caressed the top of her shaven head. And then, with a harshly different emotional tone, the interior words: *Time to do your wise teacher imitation.* Once again, she wondered if she would ever let go of her silent, private cynicism, the posture of doubt and denial she never shared with anyone and that years ago she'd named The Voice.

Never! My only rebellion. Haven't I done everything else? Celibacy and poverty, non-violence and kindness to animals

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and to depressed middle-class women who came to complain about their failed love affairs or problems getting pregnant. And to those who came because their children were drug addicts, they had breast cancer, their fathers had raped them for years, or their husbands were screwing their best friends.

She didn't have sex with her students the way many other teachers did. Didn't indulge in writing the same book six times in a row and getting a "following." Had given up coffee, alcohol, sugar, and meat, even though she occasionally had dreams about bacon cheeseburgers. She was kind to the volunteers who helped out, took almost no money for herself, walked when she could rather than driving, kept her heat at sixty-two degrees during the brutal winter and never, ever used air conditioning.

But to give up the little voice that would mock herself, the teachings she lived by, and all the seekers who brought their desperation to her door? *Lovely clothes you're wearing, another thrift store special?* as she pulled on faded corduroys and a threadbare flannel shirt with a slight rip at the elbow and two missing buttons. *Is that what you're doing?* it would whisper, as she instructed a student in how to watch the breath and let thoughts come and go. Then it would laugh. And in the privacy of her office she, too, would laugh, thinking of the images of the laughing Buddha, of the jokes contained in Zen teaching riddles. And once in a great while, as a quiver spread from her lower back to her shoulders and then her gut, she would hear The Voice, and hear own laughter, and wonder to whom they belonged.

Lately The Voice had been more active, a nasty tone coloring its usual mild irony. She had noticed, with a glimmer of interest and a touch of distaste, this spiteful turn of her own inner mockery. Interrupting her meditation, even once trying to crowd out her own voice during a Dharma talk, seeking to defile her deliberate, undeniable truth.

It was a fairly typical group at the center this weekend. A few middle-aged women facing divorce or dying parents. Two millennials who'd been on anti-depressants for years and were trying to replace Wellbutrin with meditation. A smiling, genial, grandmother who'd learned meditation at her progressive church, and who kept sighing, with a small smile, at how easily her mind wandered.

And then there was Daniel—angry at the world and covering over what she could easily see was anger at himself. The way he kept biting his lip, clenching his hands, and then slumping into a poorly hidden despair. And his wife, checking him out with hidden glances, her own mouth occasionally turning down in exasperation, or worse, when he asked The Teacher a hostile question.

His agenda was clear: save the world, make it all better, while not knowing anything about his own mind. She could see that without a very long practice he would go nowhere, just alienate his wife, make himself miserable, frighten everyone he talked to, and never gain the basic insight: you couldn't change others, you could only change yourself. If you did that, if you cured your obsessions and desperation and crippling fears, then others might learn something from what you had done and undertake the journey themselves. That was what she had accomplished. That was why she was The Teacher. Easy? Surely not. And she had the scars to prove it. But it was the only way. Only when countless people undertook that difficult, painful journey would the world not be ruled by fear and greed and rage. Only then.

As the session wound down, Daniel started in once again. Telling a long story about a friend's wife dying of cancer. Looking alternately lost and angry, angry and lost. Unimpressed and unmoved she watched him lose control, yell at her, make a fuss, tell her she didn't understand. To her faint satisfaction she managed to get the last word, spoiling his

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grand exit, his drama filled stand-against-the abyss, with her firm, unarguably authoritative, “We will be here if you see things differently in the future.”

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And yet that night, once again, she couldn't sleep. She would focus on her breath and view reality simply as a temporary constellation of what Buddhist philosophy called *skandas*: the heaps of sensations and beliefs, emotions and desires and physical forms that made up the illusion people trapped in ignorance and illusion called “self.” She would observe how when she thought of Daniel the muscles in her upper back would tighten, and she would feel a burning desire to lecture him on the futility of his anger and self-importance. But then, as she simply experienced the back spasms, without judgment or resistance, they would gradually subside; and so would the desire. This was a mental process she had mastered years ago.

But The Voice, louder than ever and increasingly insistent, kept interrupting. *Back spasms?* And it would laugh. *You got a lot bigger problems than your back.* She would answer with the teaching: firm, gentle, unalterable, dissolving the Voice into a collection of cynical, angry beliefs, and perhaps some unresolved fears or guilt from her now distant past—plus some indigestion. Then it would dissipate, like smoke from a small campfire doused by a steady downpour.

But the flames she thought extinguished would rise again. *You really think there's nothing to be done?* And so they wrestled, the teaching and The Voice, each seeking victory in a battle she'd thought long ended.

Once she had taken this life to heart, she did not expect happiness. Indeed, the very idea of happiness made her vaguely uneasy, and if it had ever arrived, she would have felt like the host of a small family gathering if perfect strangers

walked in and asked for a drink. But calm, acceptance, above all equanimity. Were these not guaranteed by the teaching? The inevitable fruit of a life of moderate asceticism, attention to duty, and endless hours of meditation?

Yet as the days and weeks after her encounter with Daniel passed, much of what she'd mastered seemed to slip away. She would open her eyes ten minutes into what was to be an hour of personal meditation, get up and walk outside into the surrounding woods. There she would pick up fallen oak branches from the forest floor and slam them into tree trunks, or throw stones across the nearby meadow, once wrenching a muscle in her shoulder with the force of her throw.

She had trained her mind like the most obsessive triathlete trained her body, but now it rebelled. Endlessly, to no purpose, it poured over her past. What had gone wrong with Lily? Why did nothing ever work? What were Joffrey's last months like, as he succumbed to a vicious, fast-moving pancreatic cancer during her third year in California? Or Patricia's, after the stroke? She had ignored their illnesses and their funerals, never returned to the house on the hill. Stayed away, even though her plain brown shirt would be wet with tears after each meditation session, and even though she had dreams of their shrill voices and their tormented faces and The Voice would ask, *What are you doing?*

Was she losing it because of what she had seen Daniel go through? Because she had to watch him throw away what he had to try to make people behave differently, because he thought he could lessen the pain. Who was she to make such a harsh, uncompassionate judgment? Daniel had his path; he would have to face the truth of life. Why was she so angry with him?

For angry she was. She had unbidden fantasies of grabbing his shirt, shoving her face up against his, and shouting: "Don't you see what a waste this is? You can't help people." And

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occasionally the anger would leak over. She got impatient with Lyrna, the soft-spoken volunteer who had been doing unpaid labor for months just for the privilege of being at the center. “No, not at all,” The Teacher had said in a clipped, stern tone of obvious impatience and negative judgement, “by now you should know how the room is to look,” when some of the meditation cushions were askew in the main hall, and two chairs had not been properly placed against the far wall. She saw Lyrna’s face turn white, her eyes hug the floor, and heard a mumbled “I am so sorry, Teacher,” as she ran to make things right.

*What are you doing?* The Voice whispered. *Do you have any idea?*

And then the rage would subside and she would sit, staring out the single, unwashed, dusty window in her office, not really seeing the trees or the sky. Of course there were environmental problems, global warming and the rest. What could be wrong about doing a little bit to help? And why was she angry at him for leaving early—it was obvious he needed weeks, months, years of her teaching. *A great loss, no doubt,* mocked The Voice.

What was anger but fear and vulnerability hidden, covered over by enough energy to make you feel less alone and afraid? But what did *she* have to be afraid of? After all, the key, the heart of The Teaching, was that her *self*, this icon that virtually everyone carried around, bowed down to, and was willing to do unspeakable things to protect and enhance, this *thing* that people everywhere made such a fuss about—this was just an illusion, something thrown up by the heaps. To be taken no more seriously than the image on the screen in a movie theater—crack the lens on the projector, turn on the lights, cut the wires to the twenty-seven overpowering speakers—and all the drama would fade away.

But it didn’t. *What have you done?* The Voice repeated,

until the backs of her hands were raw as she scratched them with her own nails, usually trimmed and now far too long. If the self was nothing, an emptiness, what could threaten it? Why—underneath her simple brown tunic, the plain white t-shirt she wore for modesty over her miniscule breasts, her skin that she washed when it needed to be washed and almost never touched otherwise, beneath the muscles and ribs, why did her heart—the heart she'd turned her back on so many years ago—hurt?

And then there was something else, something trivial, even nonsensical, but in a way more deeply unsettling.

She wanted some ease, and she wanted some pleasure. Nothing big, like illicit sex with a good-looking student. Nothing expensive, like the kind of house she'd grown up in. Just a pillow when she slept to support her neck; a meditation cushion, quite small really, to make the long sessions less uncomfortable and ease her no longer young hips and knees. A heavy fleece sweater to put on first thing in the morning when the inside thermometer read under sixty degrees and the chill seemed to penetrate her skinny body from all sides. Things she had cautioned against, and forbidden herself and others, for years.

But most of all, and this was truly bizarre—she wanted sweets. She had intense images of imported Belgian chocolate, the kind that came in flat boxes with each piece—caramel, covered almond, nougat center, and best of all, the rectangular cubes with three different colors of chocolate in neat slabs—nestling in ribbed brown paper cups. She could see them, lying on the coffee table in the house on the hill, gifts from grateful European investors who had made out quite well in one of Joffrey's schemes. Wrapped in gold paper, with the name of a European capital embossed in raised letters, and the legend "chocolatiers to the crown" on the sides. Huge boxes, with over a hundred pieces insides, just waiting for the eager

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fingers of the family, as they all—Lily and Joffrey, Patricia and Anne—gorged themselves.