

JOYCE  
CAROL  
OATES

"A POWERFULLY IMAGINED NOVEL . . . IT CONTINUES TO HAUNT US."  
—*New York Times Book Review*

BLACK WATER

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JOYCE CAROL OATES

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**B L A C K  
W A T E R**

A WILLIAM ABRAHAMS BOOK



DUTTON

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for the Kellys—

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**PART**

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**ONE**

THE RENTED exuberance by The Senator, was speeding along the unpaved unnamed road, taking the turns in giddy skidding slides, and then, with no warning, somehow the car had gone off the road and had overturned in black rushing water, listing to its passenger's side, rapidly sinking.

Am I going to die?—like this?

IT WAS THE EVENING OF THE FOURTH OF where on Grayling Island, along the northern shore in particular, there were parties, strings of cars parked along the narrow sandy roads leading to the beaches. Later, when it was sufficiently night, there would be fireworks, some of the displays lavish and explosive in brilliant Technicolor like the TV war in the Persian Gulf.

They were in a desolate unpopulated part of the Island, they were very possibly lost. She was framing her mouth, summoning her courage, to say the word lost.

As with the condom she'd been carrying in her purse for, how long. Her kidskin bag, and now her pretty floral-patterned Laura Ashley summer bag. In fact she'd carried it, the identical item, in an earlier bag as well—that big rakish straw bag with the red leather trim that finally fell to pieces she'd had it so long. The condom was neatly and tightly wrapped, it had a chaste pharmaceutical scent, it took up little space. Not once in these many months had she so much as touched it, preparatory to revealing it, preparatory to suggesting to whoever it was, whichever man, friend or professional acquaintance or near-stranger, that he use it, or even contemplate using it. You were prepared for any emergency but finally you could not speak, there were no words.

They were somewhere in the marshlands of Grayling Island, Maine, a twenty-minute ferry ride from Boothbay Harbor to the northwest. They had been talking companionably together, and they had been laughing easily together, like old friends, like the most casual of old friends, and Kelly was trying discreetly to steady The Senator's hand so that the remains of his vodka-and-tonic wouldn't splash over the rim of the plastic cup he held as he drove, and then, suddenly, as in a film when spasms like hiccups begin and the picture flies out of the frame, so suddenly, she would never comprehend how suddenly, the road flew out from beneath the rushing car and they were struggling for their lives sinking in black water splashing across the windshield seeking entry as if the dreamlike swampland on all sides had come now alive reaching up to devour them.

Am I going to die?—like this?

BUFFY HAD BEEN HURT OR HAD SEEMED SO. WITH Buffy, so much was display, you never knew. Saying to Kelly Kelleher, Yes but why leave now, can't you leave a little later?— and Kelly Kelleher mumbled something vague and embarrassed unable to say, Because he wants me to: he insists.

Unable to say, Because if I don't do as he asks there won't be any later. You know that.

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ON ALL SIDES A POWERFUL BRACKISH MARSHLAND odor, the odor of damp, and decay, and black earth, black water. The chill fresh stinging smell of the Atlantic seemed remote here, like memory, borne inland in thin gusts by an easterly wind. And no sound of the waves, here. Only the nocturnal insects. The wind in the stunted vine-laden trees.

Gripping the strap of the shoulder safety-harness Kelly Kelleher who was not drunk smiled thinking, How strange to be here yet not know where here is.

They were hurrying to get to the ferry in Brockden's Landing, which would be leaving for the mainland at 8:20 P.M. It was approximately 8:15 P.M. when the rented Toyota unobserved by any witness plunged into the water—the creek? stream? river?—which neither The Senator nor his passenger Kelly Kelleher had known might be there at the apogee of a hairpin curve.

Approximately thirty feet ahead, unsighted too, was a narrow wooden bridge of badly weathered planks; but there had been no warning sign of a bridge, still less of the dangerous curve preceding the bridge.

Not now. Not like this.

She was twenty-six years eight months old too young to die thus too astonished too disbelieving, to scream as the Toyota flew off the road and struck the surface of the near-invisible water as if for an instant it might not sink but float: as if the trajectory of its flight might carry it, the very weight of it, across the water and into the snaky tangle of rushes and stunted trees and vines on the farther shore.

You would expect water in such a place to be shallow, just a ditch. You would expect the guardrail to be more substantial. You would not expect to be, so suddenly so rudely so helplessly, in the water black as muck and smelling of raw sewage.

Not like this. No.

She was astonished, and she was disbelieving, and it may have been that The Senator too shared this reaction, for the Fourth of July on Grayling Island at Buff St. John's parents' place had been celebratory and careless and marked by a good deal of laughter and spirited conversation and innocent excited anticipation of the future (both the immediate and the distant future—for, surely, one determines the other), thus it was virtually impossible to comprehend how its tone might change so abruptly.

Several times in her life Kelly Kelleher had experienced accidents of a similar abrupt and confusing nature and each time she had been rendered incapable of screaming and each time from the first instant of realizing herself out of control,



the fate of her physical body out of the control of her brain, she had had no coherent perception of what in fact was happening.

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For at such moments time accelerates. Near the point of impact, time accelerates to the speed of light.

Patches of amnesia like white paint spilling into her brain.

SHE HEARD, AS THE rail that, rusted to lacework, appeared to give way without retarding the car's speed at all, The Senator's single startled expletive—"Hey!"

And then the water out of nowhere flooding over them. Over the hood of the car. Over the cracked windshield. Churning in roiling waves as if alive, and angry.

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AT BROWN UNIVERSITY, WHERE SHE HAD GRADUATED *summa cum laude* with a bachelor's degree in American Studies, Kelly Kelleher, baptismal name Elizabeth Anne Kelleher, had written her ninety-page senior honor's thesis on The Senator.

Its subtitle was "Jeffersonian Idealism and 'New Deal' Pragmatism: Liberal Strategies in Crisis."

She had worked very hard: researching The Senator's three campaigns for the Senate, his career in the Senate, his influence within the Democratic Party and the likelihood of his being nominated as his party's candidate for president, and for her effort she had received a grade of A... Kelly Kelleher's undergraduate grades in her major were usually A's... and nearly a page of handwritten commentary and praise from her advisor.

This had been five years ago. When she'd been young.

Meeting The Senator that afternoon, her small-boned hand so vigorously shaken in his big gregarious hand, Kelly instructed herself, Do not bring the subject up.

And so she had not. Until much later.

When, things having developed so rapidly as they had, it would have been to no purpose not to.

Scorpio for the month of July, she, Buffy, and Stacey had read giggling in the new *Glamour* the night before: Too much caution in revealing your impulses and desires to others! For once demand YOUR wishes and get YOUR own way! Your stars are wildly romantic now, Scorpio, after a period of disappointment—GO FOR IT!

Poor Scorpio, so easily bruised. So easily dissuaded.

That sullen haughty look that so annoyed Artie Kelleher, the father: that inward gnawing look that so worried Madelyn Kelleher, the mother. Yes I love you please will you let me alone?

Poor Scorpio, twenty-six years eight months old, yet susceptible, still, to adolescent skin problems! The ignominy of it, the rage. Her thin fair skin that was too thin, too fair. Those mysterious hives, rashes. Allergies inflaming her eyes. Ye and acne, near-invisible but gritty little pimples at her hairline...

When her lover had loved her she'd been beautiful. When she'd been beautiful her lover had loved her. It was a simple proposition, a seemingly tautological proposition, yet it resisted full comprehension.

So, she would not try to comprehend it. She would embark upon a new life a

new adventure a wildly romantic adventure, reckless Scorpio.

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KELLY KELLEHER HAD TACTFULLY SUGGESTED THAT The Senator turn on the Toyota's headlights, and now as they made their way deeper into the marshland following what appeared to be an abandoned secondary road the headlights bounced and careened with the car's speed since The Senator, impatient, muttering under his breath, was driving erratically swinging the car along the bumpy road not minding how the remains of his vodka-and-tonic splashed over the rim of the plastic cup, onto the seat and onto Kelly Kelleher's thigh, the cotton-knit fabric of her new summer shift. The Senator was what is known as an aggressive driver and his adversary was the road, the gathering dusk, the distance between himself and his destination, and the rapidly shrinking quantity of time he had to get to that destination, pressing down hard and petulant on the gas pedal bringing the car's speed up to forty miles an hour, and then hitting the brakes going into a turn, and then pressing down hard on the gas pedal again so that the car's tires protested faintly spinning before taking hold in the sandy glutinous soil, and then hitting the brakes again. The giddy rocking motion of the car was like hiccups, or copulation.

The way, Kelly uneasily recalled, her father had sometimes driven after one of his and her mother's mysterious disagreements the more mysterious and the more disturbing in Kelly's memory for being wordless.

Don't ask. Sit up straight. It's fine. It's all right. You know you're someone's little girl don't you?

They would have a late dinner at the motel. Room service—of course. Impossible to risk the dining room. Any restaurant in Boothbay Harbor at the height of the tourist season.

She was not apprehensive, and she did not think, when the time came, she would be frightened. But she was alert. Sober. Memorizing the adventure.

How the headlights in wild drunken swings illuminated the road that was scarcely wide enough for a single car and illuminated with a beauty that made her stare the swamp water in sheets outspread for miles on every side like bright shards of mirror amid the tangled vegetation.

At dusk, inland, darkness rose from the earth even as the sky retained light. There was a pale-glowing moon flat as a coin. Dyed-looking shreds of reddened cloud in the western sky and in the east at the ocean's horizon a sky shading subtly to night, bruised as an overripe plum.

Thinking, Lost.

Thinking, An adventure.

Thinking coolly even as her teeth rattled in her head as the man beside her ~~braked the car, accelerated, braked, braked harder and accelerated harder,~~ that she was not frightened, what she felt was excitement: that adrenaline-charge: as on the beach, earlier that day, she'd felt the urgency of a man's desire, and vowed to herself, No I will not.

Even as that sly tickle of a thought ran through her head, Yes why not?

Poor Scorpio. Cunning Scorpio.

Thinking of how it had been chance, this Fourth of July on Grayling Island. She had other invitations. She hadn't been desperate for invitations for the long weekend. But she had decided to accept Buffy's invitation, and now she was here now she was here, seated close beside The Senator on this wild wild ride to the ferry at Brockden's Landing, unsure where here was as night came on.

You're an American girl, you deserve to make YOUR wishes known and to have YOUR own way once in a while.

Just before the car flew off the road Kelly Kelleher wrinkled her nose smelling.. was it raw sewage?

Just before the car flew off the road Kelly Kelleher saw that she was gripping the strap at her shoulder so hard, her knuckles had gone white.

Just before the car flew off the road Kelly Kelleher at last said, as tactfully as possible, raising her voice without seeming to raise it—for The Senator seemed slightly hard of hearing in his right ear, "I think we're lost, Senator."

As a little girl Kelly had once spoken loudly to an uncle of hers when the family was seated at Thanksgiving dinner, and though Uncle Babcock was forever asking others to repeat themselves, and was forever complaining of people mumbling, he'd taken offense at Kelly's raised voice. Staring coldly at her saying, "Miss, you don't need to shout: I'm not deaf."

So too perhaps she had offended The Senator, who did not reply, sipping clumsily from his plastic cup and wiping his mouth on the back of his sunburnt hand and peering straight ahead, as if, unlike Kelly Kelleher, he could see through the shadowy swamp-thicket to the ocean that could not possibly be more than a few miles away.

And then The Senator said, a chuckle deep in his throat like phlegm, "This is a shortcut, Kelly. There's only one direction and we can't be lost."

"Yes," said Kelly, very carefully very tactfully, licking her lips which were parched, staring ahead too but seeing nothing except the headlights illuminating the tunnel of road, vegetation, mirror-shards glittering out of the shadows, "—but the road is so poor."

"Because it's a shortcut, Kelly. I'm sure."

Kelly!—her heart tripped absurdly, her face went hot, hearing her name, that

name given her by schoolgirl friends, on this man's lips. So casually so intimately  
on this man's lips as if he knows me, feels affection for me.

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Just before the car flew off the road.

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KELLY-, A NAME THAT SUITS YOU.

Yes? Why?—her hair whipping in the wind.

Green eyes?—they are green aren't they?

How tall he was, how physical his presence. And that dimpled grin, the big chunky white teeth. He made a playful swipe at lifting Kelly Kelleher's dark sunglasses to squint at her eyes and, adroitly, Kelly fell in with the gesture lifting the glasses herself meeting his frank examining gaze (blue: the blue of washed glass) but only for a moment.

And his grin wavered, just perceptibly. As if, for that moment, he was doubting himself: his manly power.

Murmuring, as if in apology, even as, by so doing, he was flattering Kelly the more, Yes, green—lovely.

In fact Kelly Kelleher's eyes were rather more gray than green: pebble-colored she thought them. Of no distinction except they were wide-spaced, large, attractive, "normal." But the lashes so pale, brittle, thin. Unless she used mascara which she disliked, the lashes were scarcely visible.

In fact Kelly Kelleher's eyes had once been a source of great vexation and anguish to her parents, thus to her. Until the operation when things were set right.

From birth, Kelly had had an imbalance in her eye muscles, the name for the defect (you could not escape the fact, it was a defect) strabismus, meaning that, in Kelly's case, the muscles of the left were weaker than the muscles of the right. Unknowing, then, the child had been seeing for the first two confused years of her life not a single image registered in her brain as normal people do but two images (each further confused by a multiplicity of details) unharmoniously and always unpredictably overlapping, the left-eye image often floating about, un-moored; so instinctively the child compensated by focusing upon the stronger right-eye image, thus the left eye wandered the more like a minnow in the eyeball until it seemed (to the anxious elder Kellehers, Artie and Madelyn poor Daddy and Mommy peering into their baby's eyes repeatedly for the first twenty-four months of her life, wagging fingers in front of her nose asking questions trying to keep the worry, the alarm, at times the impatience out of their voices—poor Daddy especially for "abnormalities" really upset him, no doubt it was a family trait, laughingly defensively acknowledged: an emphasis upon physical health, physical well-being and attractiveness, normality) that Kelly was impishly and stubbornly gazing at all times to the left, over your head, beyond your range of vision, even



as, with her "good" right eye she was looking you direct in the face as requested.

One of the doctors said exercise, a strict regimen, another of the doctors said a operation as soon as possible, in some cases the child doesn't outgrow it and in the interim the weaker eye may become permanently atrophied, and Mommy and Grandma Ross (Mommy's mommy) wanted the exercises, give the exercises a chance, and there was a nice therapist, a young woman, wearing eyeglasses herself optimistic about correcting Kelly's problem but weeks passed, months, Daddy could scarcely bear to look at his darling little girl sometimes, he loved her so, wanted to spare her hurt, harm, any sort of discomfort, and what irony, Artie Kelleher complained, laughing, angry, throwing his arms open wide as if to invite as in a TV program the talk-show host so invites, an audience of anonymous millions to share in his bemusement, yes in his resentment too, his bafflement—what irony, things are going boom! boom! boom! in my business, like riding an escalator to the top floor, expansive-economy times these early years of the 1960 in building, construction, investments, you name it it's going up, what irony, my business life is absolutely great and my private life, my life-at-home—I can't control!

Speaking reasonably trying not to raise his voice (for, sometimes, Kelly was within earshot) so Mommy tried to respond in the same way though her voice trembling, hands trembling, you would not notice perhaps except for the beauty of her hands and her rings: the diamond cluster, the jade in its antique gold setting: as Daddy pointed out he was simply looking ahead, suppose the exercises don't work, it certainly doesn't seem that the exercises are working does it, all right use your imagination Madelyn look ahead to when she goes to school, you know damned well the other kids will tease her, they'll think she's a freak or something, do you want that? is that what you want? so Mommy burst into tears, No! no! of course not! no! why do you say such things to me!

So one day, it was a weekday but Artie Kelleher took the morning off, the elder Kellehers drove their little girl into the city, a forty-minute trip from the suburban village of Gowanda Heights, Westchester County, New York, and there in Beth Israel Hospital on leafy East End Avenue, there, at last, Elizabeth Anne Kelleher's "bad" eye was corrected by surgery, and recovery was swift, if not precisely painless as promised; and forever afterward the eye, the eyes, the girl, were, as all outer signs indicated, normal.

"—LOST, SENATOR? THIS ROAD IS SO—"

"I said don't worry, Kelly!"—a sidelong glance, a tight smile puckering the corners of blood-veined eyes—"we'll get there, and we'll get there on time."

As liquid sloshed over the rim of the plastic cup and onto Kelly Kelleher's leg before she could prevent it.

The Senator had been among the three leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1988; out of political prudence he had withdrawn his name, released his delegates in favor of his old friend the Massachusetts governor.

In turn, Dukakis had asked The Senator to be his running mate on the Democratic ticket. The Senator had politely declined.

Of course, there was always the next presidential election, even the election beyond that. The Senator, no longer young, was certainly not old: eleven years younger than George Bush.

A man in the prime of his career—you might say.

Kelly Kelleher envisioned herself working for The Senator's presidential campaign. First, though, she would work for his nomination at the Democratic national convention. In the intimacy of the bouncing Toyota, her senses glazed by the day's excitement, it was possible for Kelly Kelleher, who rarely indulged in fantasies, to give herself up to this one.

The evening before, as if anticipating this adventure, Kelly had taken time, when so rarely she took time, to file and polish her fingernails. A pale pink-coral-bronze. Subdued, tasteful. To match her lipstick.

"There's only one direction," The Senator was saying, smiling, with the air of one delivering a self-evident truth, "—on an island."

Kelly laughed. Not knowing exactly why.

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They were new acquaintances despite their intimacy in the speeding car. Virtually strangers despite the stealth with which they'd slipped away together.

So Kelly Kelleher had no name to call the driver of the Toyota, no name that sprang naturally and spontaneously to her lips as the black water flooded over the crumpled hood of the car, washed over the cracked windshield, over the roof, a

sudden profound darkening as if the swamp had lurched up to claim them.

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And the radio was out at once. The music to which neither had been listening was gone as if it had never been.

New acquaintances since approximately two o'clock that afternoon. By chance meeting at the oceanfront cottage on Derry Road, property of Mr. and Mrs. Edga St. John of Old Lyme, Connecticut, who were not at the cottage at the time of the party; the hostess was Kelly's friend Buffy St. John with whom she'd roomed at Brown—Buffy, Kelly's closest friend.

Like Kelly Kelleher, Buffy St. John was twenty-six years old, and she too worked for a magazine published in Boston; but the magazine for which Buffy worked, Boston After Hours, was significantly different from the magazine for which Kelly worked, Citizens' Inquiry, and it might be said that Buffy was the more worldly of the two young women, the more experienced, the more "adventurous." Buffy painted her nails, finger-and toenails both, arresting shades of green, blue, and purple; and the condoms she carried in her several purses were frequently replenished.

Vehemently, as if her own integrity had been challenged, Buffy St. John would deny speculation that The Senator, a married man, and Kelly Kelleher had been lovers at the time of the accident; or even, before that day, acquaintances. Buffy would swear to it, Ray Annick would swear to it, The Senator and Kelly Kelleher had only just met that day, at the Fourth of July gathering.

Not lovers. Not friends, really. Simply new acquaintances who seemed, judging by the evidence, to have taken to each other.

As others who knew Kelly Kelleher would vehemently insist: she and The Senator had not known each other before that day for of course Kelly would have told us.

Kelly Kelleher wasn't the kind of young woman to be deceptive. To cultivate secrets.

We know her, we knew her. She simply was not the type.

So they were new acquaintances, which is very close to being strangers.

You would not choose to drown, to die, in such a way, trapped together in a sinking car, with a stranger.

Neither were they professionally associated, though it might be said that they shared certain political beliefs, liberal passions. Kelly Kelleher was not employed in any way nor had she ever been so employed by The Senator, his staff, his campaign organizers. It was true, certainly, she'd worked since graduation from college for an old acquaintance of The Senator's, a former political associate from the 1960s, Bobby Kennedy's whirlwind campaign, heady nostalgic days of power, purpose, authority, hope, youth in the Democratic Party—when, disastrous as things were, in Vietnam, at home, you did not expect them to worsen.

Kelly Kelleher had been not quite four years old at the time of Bobby Kennedy's assassination in June 1968. In all frankness, she remembered nothing of the tragedy. In any case her employer Carl Spader had a saying: You're in politics, you're an optimist.

You're no longer an optimist, you're no longer in politics.

You're no longer an optimist, you're dead.

In fact they had listened briefly to the car radio, at the very start of the drive, on bumpy Derry Road turning onto Post Road (a two-lane blacktop highway, one of the Island's few paved roads) and there came suddenly on Kelly's right a badly weathered signpost listing a half-dozen place-names which Kelly had not been able to see distinctly, nor had The Senator, though between them there was the vague impression—

BROCKDEN'S LANDING 3.5 mi.

—at the same time The Senator, in high spirits, was whistling happily through his teeth, big perfect capped white teeth, saying, sighing, with sentimental pleasure, "God! that really takes me back!"—as, on the radio, out of speakers in the backseat of the car though somewhat muffled by the roar of the air conditioner which The Senator had turned on full blast as soon as he'd turned the keys in the ignition, there came a plaintive adenoidal instrumental version of a song not immediately familiar to Kelly Kelleher.

Not reproachfully so much as teasingly The Senator said, with a nudge of Kelly's arm, "Don't suppose you even know it, eh?"

Kelly listened. She would have liked to turn the frantic air conditioner down a notch but hesitated, for this was The Senator's car after all, and she his passenger. One thing Artie Kelleher did not appreciate was a passenger fiddling with his dashboard as he drove.

Cautiously Kelly Kelleher said, "Yes, I think I do. Except I can't remember the title."

"An old Beatles song—'All the Lonely People.'"

"Oh," said Kelly, nodding happily, "—yes."

Except this version had no words, this was New Age music. Synthesizers, echo chambers. Music like toothpaste squeezed very slowly from a tube.

"But I bet you're not a Beatles person, eh?" The Senator said, in that same teasing voice, "—too young," not a query so much as a statement, as, Kelly had noticed, The Senator was in the habit of making queries that were in fact statements, his mind shifting to the next subject, as, indeed, a new subject presented itself now, "Here's our turn!" braking the Toyota and turning the wheel

sharply without having had time to signal so, close behind them, an angered motorist sounded his horn, but The Senator took no heed: not out of arrogance or hauteur but, simply, because he took no heed.

The badly rutted sandy road back into the marshes was known locally as Old Ferry Road though there was no longer any sign to designate it—there had been no sign for years.

Strictly speaking, The Senator was not lost at the time of the accident: he was headed in the right direction for Brockden's Landing, though, unknowingly, he had taken a road never used any longer since a new, paved Ferry Road existed, and the turn for this road was three-quarters of a mile beyond the turn for the old.

At about the time he'd finished his drink, and Kelly Kelleher gave him the one she'd been carrying for him: for the road.

They were new acquaintances, virtual strangers. Yet, what immediate rapport!

You know how it is, basking in the glow of a sudden recognition, his eyes, your eyes, an ease like slipping into warm water, there's the flawlessly beautiful woman who lies languorously sprawled as in a bed, long wavy red hair rippling out sensuously about her, perfect skin, heartbreak skin, lovely red mouth and a gown of some sumptuous gold lame material clinging to breasts, belly, pubic area subtly defined by shimmering folds in the cloth, and The Lover stands erect and poised above her gazing down upon her his handsome darkish face not fully in focus, as the woman gazes up at him not required to smile in invitation, for she herself is the invitation, naked beneath the gold lame gown, naked lifting her slender hips so subtly toward him, just the hint of it really, just the dream-suggestion of it really, otherwise the advertisement would be vulgar really, the perfume in its glittering bottle is OPIUM the perfume is OPIUM is OPIUM the parfum is OPIUM it will drive you mad it will drive him mad it will make addicts of you it is for sale in these stores...

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And, on their hike through the dunes, the wind whipping Kelly's hair, the gulls' wings flashing white above them, the beat beat beat of the surf like a pulsing in the loins, how assured his fingers gripping her bare shoulders, how shy yet eager her response: thinking This can't be happening! even as she was thinking Something is going to happen that cannot be stopped.

...THE THIN RED NEEDLE JOLTING UP BEYOND 40 mph as the Toyota hit a sandy rut and began to skid like an explosively expelled sigh and The Senator braked hard and quickly exclaiming under his breath and the skid continued as if with more momentum, more purpose, as if the very application of the brakes aroused willful resistance in the vehicle that had seemed until now so obedient, such a sort of plaything, a wild roller coaster ride provoking that thrill deep in the groin, and then, how had it happened, the car was off the road, the car was skidding sideways off the road, the right rear wheel sliding

forward and the left front wheel back, the guardrail no sooner flew out of the shadows than it collapsed into pieces and there were seven-foot broom-headed rushes slapping and scolding at the windows, there was a crack! a crack! a spiderweb-crack! of glass and a rude jolting and rocking as in an earthquake and then the car was in water, you would suppose a shallow creek, a ditch, you would not suppose the car would sink beneath the surface sinking and not floating as black water foamy and churning rushed over the crumpled hood, the windshield, the car roof now bent in sharply on the passenger's side, and the door, the passenger's door, buckled in, the way on the beach one of the young guys had squeezed an aluminum can of Miller Lite but still she could not draw sufficient breath to scream nor did she even have a name to call him, a name that flew unbidden and spontaneous to her lips.

WHEN FIRST SHE'D MET THE SENATOR IN THE EARLY afternoon of the Fourth of July, introduced to him by Bully's lover Ray Annick, who was a lawyer-friend of The Senator's and had gone to school with him at Andover, Kelly Kelleher had been guarded, rather reticent. Inwardly skeptical. Observing this famous man shaking hands as he was, vigorously, delightedly, with that breathless air of having rushed hundreds of miles expressly for this purpose: shaking hands with you, and you, and you: standing a little apart, thinking, He's one of them, forever campaigning.

In the subsequent hours, Kelly was to radically revise her opinion of The Senator.

It could not be said that in those six hours Kelly Kelleher had fallen in love with The Senator, nor could it be said that The Senator had fallen in love with her, for such matters are private and unknowable; and what the future may have brought (in contrast to what the events of that night did in fact bring) will forever remain unknowable.

Except: Kelly certainly revised her opinion.

Thinking how instructive, how purifying for the soul (smiling into a mirror in the bathroom of the guest room that was hers at Buffy's, would have been hers again for the night of the Fourth had she not decided so precipitously to accompany The Senator back to the mainland) to learn that you are fallible, to be proven wrong.

Even if it's a merely interior, private proof.

Even if the one you've so carelessly misjudged never knows.

"Kelly, is it?—Callie? Kelly"

It was absurd, wasn't it, that her heart should trip like a young girl's, hearing her name on The Senator's lips, for Kelly Kelleher was a mature young woman who'd had many lovers.

Several lovers, in any case.

In any case, since graduating from Brown, one serious lover—of whom she never spoke.

(Why won't you talk about G-----, Kelly's friends Buffy, Jane, Stacey asked, not meaning to be intrusive but generally concerned for Kelly, misinterpreting her silence for a broken heart, her cynicism about men for depression, or despondency; her angry refusal to answer their taped telephone calls and to keep to herself at certain times for suicidal tendencies of which they dared speak only to one another, never to Kelly herself.)

Yet The Senator was such a physical presence! Climbing out of the rented black Toyota loose-jointed and peppy as a kid, smiling, greeting them all as the murmur passed among them like wildfire It's him—Jesus, is it really him? A youthful ardor shone about him like an aura.

Ray Annick had invited The Senator out to Grayling Island and Buffy had told her guests carefully, I don't expect him really. I'm sure he won't come.

The man was more vibrant, more compelling, there was that tacky word charismatic, than his television appearances suggested. For one thing, he was a big man: six feet four inches tall, weighing perhaps two hundred fifteen pounds. He carried himself well for a man in his mid-fifties who had the fatty-muscled body of a former athlete, with an athlete's wariness on his feet; even when his weight was on his heels (in comfortable scuffed beige canvas crepe-soled shoes from L. L. Bean) there was that air of poise, of springy anticipation. And his broad handsome-battered face, the eyes so transparently blue, the nose just slightly venous but a straight nose, lapidary, like the jaws, the chin, the familiar profile.

Tugging at his necktie, loosening the collar of his long-sleeved white cotton shirt—"I see the party has started without me, eh?"

He turned out to be really warm, really nice, not at all condescending, Kelly Kelleher began to compose her account of that memorable Fourth of July on Grayling Island—spoke to us all as if we were, not just equals, but old friends.

He'd kissed her, too. But that was later.



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sample content of Black Water

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