

"Thriller aficionados will devour this story."
—Robert Dugoni, *New York Times* bestselling author

When You Leave Me

Susan Wingate

Author of *How the Deer Moon Hungers*

WHEN YOU LEAVE ME

A Friday Harbor Novel

Susan Wingate

PRAISE FOR *WHEN YOU LEAVE ME*

“A twisty mystery about love, betrayal, and obsession. In a small town, everyone’s a murder suspect. The ending packs a punch and remains in the reader’s mind long after turning the final page. Thriller aficionados will devour this story.” —Robert Dugoni, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Tracy Crosswhite series

“A cup of hot coffee at my side, I dove into Susan Wingate’s *When You Leave Me*. The coffee was cold when I reached for a sip, so enthralled I was by the storyline. Artfully constructed, melodic, and insightful, *When You Leave Me* is not just a complex, captivating mystery—it’s a poignant reminder to never take love for granted.” —Christopher Rosow, author of the bestselling *False Assurances* and the Ben Porter thriller series

“Susan Wingate grabs you from the very first sentence of *When You Leave Me* and never lets you go. This thriller is a roller coaster ride of tension and suspense, delivered in punchy, elegant prose and with dialogue that provides a window into the personalities of the author’s characters. You’re going to love this one.” —Joseph Badal, award-winning author of *The Carnevale Conspiracy*

“What Susan Wingate does best in *When You Leave Me*, as in her previous novels, is to make human pain palpable to the reader. In this newest offering, threads of pain run through every page. On San Juan Island off the coast of Washington, a husband with dementia goes missing. Then a foot in a sneaker washes ashore amidst a rash of such grotesque discoveries. Thus begins, for Jamie Michaels, the missing man’s wife, a tormented journey as she claws her way through a sea turgid with grief, guilt, and fear. Is Jamie responsible for her husband’s fate? The police seem to think so, and so does she. But that, in the end, isn’t the question. The real questions, as every person knows who has ever cared for a loved one with dementia, are how long must this punishment last? And how can I possibly survive it?” —Randall Silvis, author of the critically acclaimed Ryan DeMarco mystery series

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For Bob

*“It is the extreme situation that best reveals
what we are essentially.”*
—Flannery O’Connor

“And she being desolate shall sit on the ground.”
—Isaiah, 3-26

The Chronicler of the San Juan Islands

Published: 8:36 AM PDT, September 21, 2020

MYSTERY FOOT WASHES ASHORE ON SOUTH BEACH

SAN JUAN COUNTY, Wash.—The San Juan County Sheriff's Office is investigating whether a shoe that washed ashore on a beach contains a human foot.

Deputies say on Friday, a woman in her fifties found what she said on the 9-1-1 call “looks like a foot inside a sneaker near Eagle Cove on South Beach.”

“When we say foot, well, it's kind of iffy at this point,” Det. Sgt. Rob Rimmmler said Sunday. “We don't know, at this point, whether it's human and, if it's human, if it's from a male or female.”

Officials aren't sure if the shoe is connected to an ongoing mystery of detached feet around Port Townsend, Washington, that have occurred during and pre-COVID-19, where five athletic shoes containing human feet have been found since August of last year. A sixth foot found in June turned out to be what officials called “a hoax” and have chosen not to give out further details. “As details might be relevant to this current investigation,” officials said.

The coroner of Washington's San Juan County is trying to determine whether any of the feet belong to a footless body found along Orcas Island in March, an adult male whose estranged wife could not be located for identification. A positive identification was made by the man's neighbor. Authorities have not yet released the man's identity.

Earlier in the summer, San Juan County authorities sent out Search & Rescue for a man with dementia, who had gone missing. The sheriff's office is not confirming or denying if the shoe belongs to the missing man.

Some experts say certain extremities, like feet, often detach from bodies after being submerged in the ocean, and these feet are likely being discovered because they are in laced-up running shoes. Shoes will float but the laces can also serve as ligatures and act to accelerate detachment.

Neither are investigators saying if some feet were actually intentionally cut from the bodies or if they might have been detached due to a shark bite. Nor have investigators stated if they know where the feet are coming from or if they suspect foul play.

SEARCH & RESCUE—Then & Now

CHAPTER 1

THEN—June 20, 2020

A broken wing. A thousand feet above earth. Extreme speed. A frenzied Kingfisher, tumbling down, down, down.

People lose their keys, they lose their reading glasses, hell, they even lose their minds! People, however, do not lose their spouses. At least, they *shouldn't*.

Jamie Michaels had prayed most of the day up to the point when deputies appeared and then, after that, to herself after they finally left the house.

Two things happened the night of the book club meeting. The island where they live suffered a short but massive earthquake, and Larry went missing.

The last time the region had suffered a shocker *that* size and that close to the island was when a quake hit Cumberland, B.C. That one ranked 7.5 on the Richter scale, happening a mere five miles away if traveling a straight shot across the water from San Juan Island's westmost coastline to Vancouver Island's eastmost coastline. It had been seventy-four years ago, in 1946 since white settlers had come to Friday Harbor. In 1853, how had settlers survived a shock that size when Jamie's own home today, in 2020, had bent and creaked under this quake's fury?

"You got home when?"

Oh, God. Please Rob. I told you already.

Her skin went clammy under her clothing. "Not sure of the exact time. I didn't look at a clock." She pushed her sleeves up. She needed to check her attitude. "I was sort of upset. I searched downstairs, then upstairs, outside," she gestured, sweeping her right arm out as though featuring an amazing prize won by a guest on a ridiculous game show, "when I didn't find him in his usual spot."

Jamie and Detective Sergeant Rob Rimmler stood near the front door on a barn red porch that ran well past the length of the house, wrapped around the sides, then disappeared off in the back to a split-level section of the deck. Years of good use had worn holes in the boards but the deck, overall, was sturdy.

Rob pulled out his trademark red-checkered handkerchief from his back pocket, took two swipes, this way and that, at his nose, then re-pocketed the kerchief. The handkerchief took on its own character with a story all of its own around the island. The snot rag developed into something of lore in the years since Rimmler had landed on the island. People gamed that he used the rag to humanize situations. How can a perp feel too scared or too nervous when a cop stops his questioning, slows down, and pulls out a checkered cotton hanky, right? Hell, people imitated him as if they were the ones pulling a guy over for drunk driving or for speeding down a twenty-five-mile-per-hour road. Something Jamie had called him out for several times. Something she loathed, the speeding.

But now, Jamie wondered if his handkerchief was a ploy, a law enforcement technique. Then she kicked the idea in the butt, chalked it up to allergies, and gave him the

benefit of doubt.

She couldn't count the times she'd seen the rag peeking out of his hind pocket—at the grocery store coming up from behind him, while Rob stood on the street talking with locals in front of the movie theater, when he stopped to talk to her those times on her morning run. The rag, his companion of sorts, poking its face out like a grimy boy peeking around a father's hip, clinging to him.

Jamie wondered if he ever laundered it. He must, right?

Different types of DNA flashed across in a mental ticker tape...saliva, snot...*semen*.

She shivered.

Rob re-pocketed the rag. "You cold?" he asked.

She nodded, hoping to hurry him along.

He held a pad of paper in his left hand and took notes with the pen in his right. And although the illumination of the porchlight helped, the pen had a tiny built-in light to aid on dark nights like these. She keyed in on its beam, a gnat to a flame. Suddenly, he scratched an itch on his upper lip with the hand still holding the pen, its light jumping around the porch like a nervous sharpshooter taking shaky aim at a bullseye.

He shifted, moving from one foot to the other, tugging on his belt making his gear rattle—pepper spray, a ring of a thousand keys, the light slap of a phone coil that hooked into his shoulder mic. And when he transferred his weight, that one *frigging* loose board in the deck cried under his load.

At once, the sound made her cringe. Jamie had been wanting to replace their deck for ten years. Instead, they ended up painting it red—barn red—for a more *countrified* look, Larry suggested. "The lesser of two evils," he'd said, with Jamie acquiescing. However, within only a couple years the red faded along with the memory of why they'd thought painting instead of replacing was a good idea. Back then, they still had an overabundance of cash flow. But like with everything, time got away and so did their piles of cash. They weren't struggling. Far from it. Still, it had been an easy slide with scads of cash on hand.

"When was it again?"

Why was he pressing the question? Her neck muscles tightened. She breathed in, and her stomach growled. She talked fast to cover for her stomach. "I guess around eight twenty. It was already dark." She hoped her answer distracted from the creaking board, their disintegrating deck, and from her gut grumbling.

"You're hungry." He wasn't looking at her when he commented.

She rolled her eyes.

Typically, Rob had an easy manner. Officially, Jamie found him unsettling.

He glanced up once, then smiled while continuing to focus on the notepad, new words written under the jerky beam of his penlight. "Ya got some loose nails," he said about the deck.

Good lord. Let it go.

"Everything's loose around here, Rob," she said. But as soon as the words slid from her lips, she wished she could suck them back like a duck swallowing a water bug.

Did it sound to him like it sounded to her—that she was loose, too?

"Ya know, I'm a pretty darned good handyman..." he let his words trail away. The suggestion a tricycle handlebar streamer waffling in a breeze.

"We have someone once in a while." The streamer went limp.

He was still writing something...*Is he making a shopping list?* Jamie's attention

locked onto his right hand. As his pen bounced across a narrow pocket-sized sheet of paper, he was holding his hand stiff. Then she saw why. It was his right middle knuckle. He had it covered in a bulky, skin-colored bandage, one she hadn't initially spotted. He held the finger slightly elevated, hovering over the others as if it stung him to use it.

"Your finger," she said.

Why did I say anything?

She covered her mouth.

He looked at his finger as if noticing it for the first time, then waved it off. "S'nothing. Breaking up a fight with an old drunk."

Did he just wince? And if so, because of the memory? Or because of how harsh his words sounded?

He continued his questioning:

"You said you were at a meeting? The book club?"

Why were these questions irking her so much? She brushed it off to their redundancy.

You're not going to catch me in a lie.

She snugged the blue cardigan tighter around her chest.

A wave crashed out somewhere near False Bay, west of where they stood, rolling heavy onto land, its weight pawing at a sandy shoal on the abutting strip of DNR land. As if on cue, a foghorn mewled out east, warning a ferry's sad approach into the marina, into town. The two sounds reminding, *Hey, you live on a rock in the middle of water*. The remoteness and danger of their islet lurked all around.

A rushing vertigo fell over her. She clenched her eyes, swearing to control her balance while dogpaddling through the dizzying wave. Stumbling was not an option. She didn't want Rob to think she was drunk.

"That right?" he asked again. "The book club meeting?"

"Right." She reached toward the wall. Hadn't she mentioned the meeting already?

"You okay?"

"At the library," she said. Heat rose and pooled around her neck like a too tight muffler. "Fine. I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

"I'm *fine*."

"Okay...did you guys feel the quake?" His eyes brightened like it was the coolest thing, that quake.

Jamie frowned but nodded. "Happened a few hours before the meeting."

"I meant you and Larry," he said.

"Oh." She shivered again. "Yes. We felt it." The dizziness made her queasy. Her hand rose to touch under her nose, but feeling the cool fingerprint on her skin, she decided to place her entire hand over her mouth, then her cheek, her forehead. When she spoke, she gripped both hands together.

"I shouldn't say this, but I love earthquakes," he confessed.

What the hell is wrong with you?

"The lights flickered. Almost went out. The house rolled."

"It was a biggy." He chuckled and kept his eyes locked on hers. "Get the gas turned off?"

"Uh huh."

That's right. No expounding. Yes or no answers only.

“You ever been in one that big?”

“No.” She glanced behind her toward the garage. “We didn’t have earthquakes in Phoenix. It was horrible. Aren’t you going to look for him?” Her question came out too fast, too abruptly.

“Deputies’re outside checkin’ the woods and road. The culverts.” He pointed with his penlight behind him, out to the winding path past the Madrona, past Fox rock, past the mailbox at the entrance of the driveway to the road. Only then, if she squinted, did she notice other flashlights, their beams zigzagging, swinging back and forth like a geisha’s white fan, a siren signaling lost ships, seducing a lacework of Madrona branches trimming the south side of their house. And then, as if aliens were emerging out of some cornfield in a horror movie, one more flashlight appeared, then another—one combing the path leading to the drain field and the other over at her mother’s vacant house.

She spooked when a couple raccoons snarled, attacked each other, then retreated. The loser whimpered off under some fallen tree trunk for cover. She hadn’t yet put out their kibbles. They were hungry.

Rob commented, “Raccoon and people. Funny thing, people’ll crawl into a culvert like a raccoon. Lookin’ for shelter. Like they’re crawling back into the womb.” Their eyes connected in what seemed like an accident. She turned away. Her white SUV grayed under the night sky.

“Search & Rescue team’s on the way,” he said. “Set these guys off lookin’ before I knocked. We felt it all the way into town.”

“I’m sorry?” she said, then realized he meant the earthquake. “Oh. Yeah. It was big.”

“6.7. Knocked out power in town. Here too?”

“No. Amazingly,” she said.

The fanning search lights spraying through evergreens gave Jamie the impression of being at a rock concert.

“Thought about coming out to check on you two, what with Larry’s condition and all,” he said.

Her heart thumped hard. She tried to breathe the maddening patter away. Was she swaying? Maybe she had an inner ear infection.

“You okay?”

She nodded.

“You sure?”

“Larry...” she wanted to cry.

Rimmler glared and locked onto her mouth, then her nose, then each cheek, her eyes finally settling his gaze upon her forehead. Her fingers fluttered up in a dance with his gaze leading her by the hand where to move, finally landing on the edges of her hairline above her eyebrows. She flattened the short stack of bangs, still feeling off-balance. Like teetering at the top of the stairs where she and Larry had argued earlier, right before the quake. Right before everything blurred.

She grabbed for the arm of the deck chair to steady herself.

“You’re not okay,” he said.

“A little dizzy, I guess. I’m okay. Was that a tremor?” she asked, her fingers bent into a strand of the chair’s plastic rattan.

“I didn’t feel anything,” Rob said. He smiled to the point she thought he might chuckle.

“How embarrassing.”

“Not pregnant, are ya?” He smiled.

Is that supposed to be funny?

“Wouldn’t that be the worst possible nightmare...” then she added, “...well, other than *this*,” meaning Larry.

A single moth spun circles near one of their two porchlights at the door, behind Rob’s head, and near the open weave of a spider web. Her body temperature sparked. She pinched at her sweater and fanned herself. First cold. Then hot. Then dizzy. Repeat. Cold. Hot. Dizzy.

When will it all stop?

The moth flitted in circles, orbiting, orbiting its dusty wings attached to its dusty moth body ever closer to the web. She tensed as she watched the beast getting stupidly closer, closer.

When we die, God, do we become like moths, flying stupidly, ever stupidly toward your light, stupidly flying to our end?

Was Larry now some great huge invisible moth soaring in big stupid circles up toward Heaven? Was God a big porchlight in the sky? Where was He now when she needed Him most?

Her body fought the urge to walk over and whisk the bug away to safety because, come on, what would that look like? Rob might think she wasn’t amply upset about her missing husband and somehow more concerned about the life of a soon-to-be-dead moth. *Too easily distracted from the topic at hand*, he’d write on his stupid notepad. Because he was there at that very moment because of her missing husband! People have appeared guilty for lesser reasons than being overly concerned about the near death of a moth. So, she tried to ignore the insect and looked out toward the men in the woods.

From her peripheral, Rob was examining her. When she faced him, he squinted high above her brow line. Again, she touched her bangs.

She wished now more than ever that she hadn’t cut them herself. But with the COVID thing and all...

“I cut them myself.”

Focus.

“I like it. The look.” He wrote again on his pad. His fat finger jumping, the odd man out.

Heat flooded Jamie’s cheeks and she glanced down at their squeaky deck. Was this an investigation tactic? His eyes observing her, piercing as a rusty nail and a shade of green no kid would ever find in a crayon box, watching for a lie. In his spider web. That’s what these guys do, right?

These guys?

But didn’t Jamie know Rob? He was, at the very least, a *sort-of* friend. He was always around when she was in town. They always waved to one another. But that’s the way it was in Friday Harbor. Where most everyone *sort of* knows everyone else. We’re all *sort-of* friends on the rock, a spot one-tenth the size of the largest charted supermall in the US. Jamie knew. She checked once on *Wikipedia*. The mall was somewhere out east, Bloomington, Delaware, or maybe Connecticut. Was there a Bloomington in Connecticut?

Even so...amen.

She tried not to look near the porchlight.

“You in there?” Rob asked.

“Yeah.” The word came out measly. Breathy.

She knew what he was thinking. What they *all* were thinking. Those ones out there with their sodium sparks making a light show all the way to the top of the trees.

Did they really think Larry had climbed a tree?

It's usually the spouse who kills the other spouse in these situations.

Isn't that true? That's what Liv always says about storytelling. “You can angle away from the spouse as much as you want, throw in a red herring here and there, but in the end, the spouse is, nine times out of ten, guilty.” And she would know. Wasn't she a famous *NY Times* bestseller who made her living writing crime novels and thrillers? She'd interviewed dozens of lawyers and detectives about this sort of thing. She'd gotten her training on the job and was well-versed in legalese as well as legal goings-on.

At first, the fame drew Jamie to Liv and later her personality and caring nature. Plus, when you first met her, you would never know she was a knife-wielding woman. She'd learned knife throwing while writing of one of her bestsellers. That book got optioned then made into a film. She figured the knife brought her luck.

Anyway, she never left the house without a seven-inch blade, a fixed throwing knife. Said it made her feel safe. She kept it strapped in an ankle holster. She even wore the damn thing with dresses.

Liv was fun that way. Different. Challenging. Jamie felt they were cohorts in crime, and they became best friends.

Jamie's heart thumped hard again. Just once this time like a grandfather clock striking a shift from lunchtime to one. Yes. She was hungry. How could she be hungry at a time like this? At once, she felt guilty. To eat or not to eat. Was that the question? What about a hunger strike? A hunger strike sounds an apt punishment.

You mustn't lose your people.

She placed her hand just below her breasts but drew Rob's attention. So, she slipped her hand fully around her waist and swiped a quick hand across her bangs, glanced down at her feet hoping to divert Rob's eyes away from her chest, and turned away, again glancing at anything behind her, past the red, metal garage toward the darkened woods edging the property of the neighbors, Rick and Taylor. She wondered if they'd heard her earlier, if they'd heard her crying for Larry. She wondered if Rick had his drone up now after noticing police lights flashing. Or if he'd had them up at all today. Was he taking photos?

Breathe. Will they find Larry?

Just breathe.

She tried to smile. Her cheek muscles twitched. Her teeth bared. Was *that* a smile? Or was it instead the grimace by some evil carnival clown?

The moth had disappeared. Had the spider snagged it?

No, she thought, at first.

But then she saw. A witness to the aftermath of a crime. Its dusty wings must have brushed a strand of silk igniting the spider into action. The predator, unleashed onto its rope bridge, darting straight for its struggling prey.

Was the spider female? And were all female spiders like black widows—killers of their mates? She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.

Breathe it away.

Isn't that how she used to do it?

Wipe the memory clean.

Like when she was a kid and something bad happened. She was so clever at it back then, wiping bad memories away.

Behind the garage, tree frogs were singing in an ad hoc choir, making the woods that banked her property ring like the piccolo section of the Tabernacle Choir. The waxy salal and white trident shaped *Holodiscus discolor*, commonly named *ocean spray*, were the frogs' audience, swaying and cheering in the night breeze. Did the frogs sing for the success of the spider? Or for the death of the moth?

Something slapped the surface of the duck pond. Afterwards, the quacking began. Mallards burst into the air. Probably a fox gunning for one of the ducks. Then more splashing and quacking and then silence. No bursting into air. Just the deathly void of sound.

"Will they search the ponds?" she said. Anyone walking blind might take a header into one of the black ponds surrounding their property.

"Search & Rescue has gear for that."

She nodded and dragged her eyes away from his. And she hoped to God he wouldn't ask the question she dreaded most...

...the one they always do on the cop shows...

...the question if Larry and she were getting along...

...about the sudden sparks and bouts of venom flying between them. Those infrequent, sporadic fits. An epileptic body twisting out of its own control. The cursing. Finding momentary solitude separated in a room.

To any safe room. Shut the door. Lock it.

Put distance between the boxers. To your corners!

Find a safe place to wallow in anger then penance, the shift from penance to an overwhelming pity, and finally to the fights ending the usual way, in face-to-face apologies. Apologies made by Jamie to Larry because, by the time she calmed down, the dementia had wiped clean Larry's memory of the fights.

There was a poem circling the internet once by Unknown about how you're not supposed to yell at someone with dementia. She needed that wisdom so much that she taped the poem on the door of the refrigerator.

One of the stanzas said,

Don't lose your patience with me.

Do not scold or curse or cry.

I can't help the way I'm acting.

Can't be different 'though I try.

Jamie took it to mean: They don't understand what's happening.

Don't yell. Just smile.

Try to smile.

And right then and there, she wanted to be Unknown.

However, their fight today blew a cannonball through the poem. She didn't control her anger like the poem instructed.

The fight ended badly, not in their typical apology. It just stopped dead. Fell into oblivion and shattered on the ground. And now Larry was gone.

A missing spouse, Rob spoke into his shoulder radio. Why not missing person? Why

make the distinction of spouse? Because Liv was right. That's why. Authorities always suspected the surviving spouse in cases where the other had died.

As if all these thoughts had taken form and appeared overhead in some morbid kind of quote bubble, etched in fat white letters against the night's black background, Rimmler, keeping his eyes locked on his notepad (intentionally locked, it seemed to Jamie), he asked, "You two getting along okay these days?"

CHAPTER 2

NOW—September 21, 2020

I'm suffocating. A thick woolen blanket stuffed inside my lungs.

Look, I'm not an arms-length actor in this whole issue. Not distant enough from the problem, let alone clear-headed about this matter, to give it a universal spin. My heart beats every second about this problem, about my husband, about our last day spent together.

Jamie Michaels is *not* my husband's name. It's *mine*. He's Larry. Or was.

I had thrown, as I do until I have time, all my paperwork into the inbox for later dissemination and filing. To say my inbox was full is akin to saying that the hippopotamus over *there* will fit into this golf cart over *here*. Enough said, the inbox was *overfull*.

But back to my point. A person needs to understand how extremely upsetting it is to hear that a foot, which washed up on the shores of your own island, might be the right foot of your husband. *Upsetting*, for a myriad of reasons, as one might suspect, but mostly because both his feet were fully attached to him the last time I saw Larry alive.

The by-product of the article was that it all became real. Up until now, everything felt dreamy. It wasn't really happening. I'd been floating through this abstract fantasy, this horror, but now, like a slap across the face, the article snapped me into the present.

It's not that I didn't expect Larry to be the one to die first. Most women believe they will outlive their husbands. For no other reason but for mere demographic stats.

I'm twenty-one years Larry's junior. People here had a heyday talking about our age difference when we began dating. They got over it after some better gossip circulated through the island grapevine. People either didn't care about the gap in our ages or else they distanced themselves from us or out-and-out told us how wrong it was, using the haggard example of, "When he was twenty-five, you were four!" But as a forty-something adult, I had every right to marry whoever I wanted. But people who hate things like this don't hear you and fall back on the child-adult-pedophilia example...*every single time*.

I called the authorities about Larry going missing a month after our twelfth anniversary.

People still say "missing" so they don't have to say "died." When *Larry went missing* is far more hopeful than when Larry *died*.

He had dementia and the house was getting away from us. But for ten great years, Larry was a vibrant, physical, rational man who loved golfing, riding his bike, and taking walks with me. He was tall, not lean but not heavy, he had the bluest eyes I've ever seen. I could drown in those eyes, and his hair was a shock of white that he kept trimmed à la businessman cut once a month at his favorite barber by the beef jerky shop. I think that barber was his favorite *because* of the beef jerky shop. He always returned sharp and smelling salty with his lips tasting of leather.

His favorite color was red. But he wasn't wearing red that last day. I had dressed him—had been dressing him for about six months.

We hadn't seen the kids, Larry's kids, since the summer of 2019. It had always been a hassle between family members getting together, what with us living on a remote island

and everyone else a simple road trip away from one another. A couple months without seeing family in Washington was normal for us but when COVID hit, we became acutely aware of the extended time separated from our loved ones. Well, Larry's loved ones. And it was more that I became aware because Larry, by then, had started to forget their names. All my family still lived in Phoenix where I grew up. As a middle-aged woman who moved away, I was used to not seeing family for long stretches in between visits.

Larry's kids, Dennis and Michelle, haven't called in months, not since Larry's disappearance. They all but told me that they both thought I'd done something. That his disappearance was my fault. What do you do with that? What do you say?

For a while, we both worked. He at his convenience store in town. Me at insurance investigations—claims, fraud and whatnot. After work, we would set off maintaining a home the way anyone with five acres and a three-thousand-square-foot home manages.

Once a month, my book club friends would meet at our house. It was logistically best for everyone, and they enjoyed our nine-foot-long pine table in the living room. That it was situated near the fireplace didn't hurt either. But we stopped meeting at our home because I couldn't keep up with the house, what with taking care of Larry. We ended up moving the meetings to the library.

My girlfriend, and dare I say *best* friend, Liv, was concerned. She offered to have Paul come over with her and help us around the house. I couldn't ask that of someone. Everyone is busy. I refused. Pride has a funny way of making us think we can manage when, clearly, we cannot.

Still, she persisted in asking to help us. And still, I refused her kind offers. After Larry stopped working, I stepped into his shoes at the convenience store. For a while I tried to manage both my insurance investigations and claims but had to cut back on the hours. Fortunately, we had two managers—one for days and one for nights—who could run the store blindfolded. So, when it got to the point that I couldn't leave Larry alone anymore, they stepped in full-hearted, only needing me for things only a corporate officer could handle. The store did and does well. We had eleven employees including me and Larry, plus we had a nice retirement plan that we didn't want to touch until we had to.

Before Larry got too bad, once a week on Fridays, Benito, our landscaper, worked magic around the grounds with his weed-whacker, clearing off clippings and leaves with his blower, giving us time to straighten the inside after our workday had ended, to fix dinner, drink a glass of wine, and settle into the evening relaxing from our nine-to-fives.

But on weekends and sometimes after work during weeks of nicer weather, Larry pressure-washed mold that had covered paint on the lower part of the house. I cleaned higher, like carving out all the muck that collected in our gutters. That had to be my job. Larry was afraid of heights. And I was too but I guess not as much as Larry, who would freeze at the slightest sense of falling. That's the fear with heights. In extreme cases, with some people standing on flat ground, if they're too high up but can see the ground below, their heads spin, they get dizzy, and feel like they're about to fall.

Even so, I often worried about falling—that if I fell if I would die instantly or languish miserably on the ground, my brains spilled out on a rock, my back broken waiting for death before actually dying, being aware that I would succumb with death's grip pulling me under.

Morbid scenes played out in different ways each time I went up to clean off the shingles.

*I slip on a patch of moss and lose my balance.
I stub my toe, trip, and off I'd go, ass over teakettle.
Murder bees attack and force me to my death.*

Each cleaning brought forth a new death scenario.

So, to prevent any mishaps, I dressed appropriately. I would slip on a headband and pull my hair back in a scrunchy to keep my hair out of my face, and wore tighter fitting pants, like leggings, for less chance of snagging on something or getting tangled around my shoes and causing me to fall.

Over the years, the whole process became tried and true. I would jerry-rig two tethers complete with carabiners and rope, fastening each clip to a thick belt with two ropes—one tied off onto a tree in the backyard to secure me while I worked on the front yard side of the roof, and another tied to a front yard tree while I worked on the backyard side of the roof. There were several lead vent pipes sticking out of the composite tile roof making it easy for tripping. The double ropes were heavy and cumbersome but necessary. After securing myself, I got to work removing moss off the shingles with a landscape scraper. Next, I used a heavy stiff brush to reef out the cracks from every inch of our tiles, and after that I used a blower to remove from two hundred feet of aluminum gutters all that had collected over the previous twelve months, like fir needles, Madrona leaves, and a myriad of other refuse disposed of by the earth. Thank God it was only a once-a-year task.

Home maintenance and projects were sort of our *thing*, for lack of a better word—to manicure fascia and ductwork that edged the eaves on the upper *and* lower roofline. I was actually good at it too. With the tether, I was safe, and I enjoyed being alone up on the roof and often sang an old song by James Taylor about the experience of looking high over a place, viewing it from a spot no one else might ever see...“Up on the Roof.” A place of peace and quiet.

We also did more mundane things as well, like raking decaying leaves into piles that we wheelbarrowed behind a huge Douglas fir where we kept compost. The compost area had three stations, one for new leaves, one for leaves in partial decay, and a third for fully composted material, the stuff we used for landscaping jobs.

We swept the porches and decks, trimmed the boxwood and barberry hedges, and pruned the maple trees in the center of our driveway. Turning the compost from one station into the next as was necessary. Those were my jobs, mostly.

Larry's main job was to jump on the riding mower and take down the grass of several acres between the mother-in-law house, the front yard, and the back field all the way down to the pond.

We hired people for more difficult or skilled jobs like cutting in a new door where there had once been only a window or building a separate garage where there had once been an old shed in the shape of a small barn.

But we weren't special in our maintenance jobs. Everyone on the island was busy futzing around their homes, maintaining them. Until, of course, we couldn't. Well, until Larry couldn't.

It happened slowly. Problems began to arise. Things began breaking down.

The riding mower began to fail *often*, or so Larry said. “The battery's dead.”

“Again?” I'd say.

We called Stan out to charge it. Once it roared to life again, Larry could plow down

the grass, and after two hours he'd come in. But that stopped too. His mowing began to worsen. The ground, from the mother-in-law house all the way to the pond, looked patchy and strange, mazelike, a series of lines cut in between high and low grass, sometimes crisscrossing, sometimes up and back exhibiting a pattern of green earth, large swaths Larry missed entirely, appearing like a *Gulliver's Travels* game for enormous mice.

Too often, he buried the mower, sinking it deep into wet earth in areas he'd miscalculated for safe maneuvering. What I didn't realize is that these were signs of cognitive malfunction. I didn't realize it back, then with everything hindsight allows, the past comes into stark focus. What had been strange and fuzzy became clear and horrifying. My husband's brain was eroding like someone taking an etch-a-sketch to it and making thin lines thick and dull and wide.

We would hear Benito drive in with his gurgling Toyota truck. The thing had to be twenty years old. Larry went out to greet him. That's how it normally happened.

One day, however, after Benito drove in, I heard his truck gurgle around the circular drive and back out onto the street, then leave.

Larry burst back through the door, slamming it behind him, his face glowing with anger.

I hovered over all fourteen steps on the landing. He stood at the bottom of the stairs near the front door. I was multitasking with a toothbrush in my mouth and pulling my hair into a rubber band at the same time. I intended to clean out old seed, straw, and bird droppings from inside our three aviaries where we kept our ringed-neck doves. I wanted to do it while Benito was here so that he could help me move what I would be gutting out of the aviaries. Benito could take them to the compost pile.

"Did he leave?" I said about Benito, my mouth full of paste and brush.

"I fired him," Larry said.

"*What? Why?*" A glob of toothpaste jettisoned and landed on the stair below the landing where I stood. My hair pulled back by then tight enough to take the wrinkles from the crow's feet around my eyes.

"I didn't like what he was doing."

"Like what?" I pressed.

"He was lazy."

"He helped us a lot, Larry."

"We don't need him. I can do everything he does."

I brushed at my teeth a little, then, after a second, I said, "It *will* save us some money." My words foamy and white.

"Right." His face darkened. He rubbed his right hand over his head, took great interest in his shoes, then situated his feet in what I used to know as ballet's first position. It was a thing that became common months later, first position. Finding any corner in the house and situating his feet in the exact ninety-degree angle, like the corner of a rug or a plank in the wood floor.

So, when he fired Benito, we let it go because I figured between the two of us, we could manage. How wrong could I have been? Back then, I didn't realize Larry had fully entered stage one of dementia, that dementia had already begun searing its acid torch into Larry's brain.

Within one year, none of our lawnmowers worked. We had three. Nary a one func-

tioned. At least, Larry couldn't get them to run. The blowing off of leaves and dirt that Benito used to do wasn't getting done either, because now the *blower* was broken. And after the blower, the weed-whacker.

Within two years, the grass had grown hip high. Mold took over the northside paint on the house. The gutters became...well, what I called the "second-story garden." Seeds had filled and established growth into small wispy alders bending their thin shoots with every wafting breeze that came along. Grassy plants wrapped a furry edge all the way around the roof. The moss sandwiched between making mossy loaves on every tile of the upper and lower roofs. The musty scent filled the air every time the wind blew. We were living in a house maintenance nightmare.

I guess it would be redundant to say that things got away from me. Mighty redundant. But they got away from Larry too and not just maintenance projects. His brain had gone AWOL. He could do little more than mutter around the house, sit in front of the TV, and eat when I brought him food. We stopped taking walks together; I never knew if he might mess his clothes.

So, not only did chores get away from him, but so did his physical activity. We weren't taking our usual walks down our street. That's when I took up running. I would get up an hour or two before Larry woke up to take off on a run. At first the runs were short, only halfway down the road, about a third of a mile. After a while I was running a mile, then two, and then I could make the full circle from our front door, west on our road past False Bay, down the long road of the horse ranch, out to Bailer Hill, up to Little Road, out to Cattle Point Road, and back to False Bay Road to our doorstep—a full 6.2 miles in a matter of just over an hour. And I needed to stay fit, as it turned out, to help Larry when he fell out of bed or got stuck on the floor in the bathroom or when he couldn't figure out how to get out of the back of the truck off the tailgate. I needed physical strength. And I had it.

Soon, he was making other mistakes like with his medicine, medicine that if you *do* make mistakes, it can kill you. I took over administering and setting up his weekly A.M.-P.M. pill box. A.M. is purple and P.M. is blue.

He already needed diapers, but we waited because it embarrassed him. After we got those, we called them briefs because the packaging labeled them as "protective" briefs. Briefs was less embarrassing to Larry.

Next, he needed my help getting in and out of bed, up from his chair, off the toilet.

And so now, here we are, up to date, with a foot getting away from someone. Possibly Larry's foot. Probably. Why else would Rob Rimmler call me? Why would he alert me about the newspaper article? Not unless he knew. Right?

By the way, why do feet always wash ashore? It seems far more feet than any other body parts—an oddity, methinks—wash up onto land. Is it some abstract form of final selection? Like, aha! You can take my life, but you can't take my feet!

As I scrolled back and forth through each line of the article, sometimes gazing out the window—once maybe twice—it seemed we were running headlong into a bit of nasty weather. A violence of clouds painted the sky—a violence not lost on me as I sit and read the online local paper. With clouds so dense and the sun—a razzmatazz red dot of crayon color setting its spark outside the lines of the sky, a blush of clouds farther north, near the tip of the island. The clouds scudding by, end over end, for me boded *trouble a-brewing*—a term I picked up from watching old Westerns and spending half my life in

the hot sandy landscape of Phoenix.

And, at once, a one-hundred-ten boiling fever set a flame out of my hypothalamus gland at the thought of that city. That's what post-menopause is like. Just the thought of heat and you're hot. One second your body temp regulator says, *Hey, everything here's just peachy keen!* The next second, your body temp regulator spring goes *Twoing!* And your heat? Haywire.

And as I sat considering the sky, the weather, I realized how similar clouds had rolled in the day Larry picked that fight with me. The day of the earthquake. Yes, that same day he went missing, three months ago, June 20, 2020. His birthday, for God's sake...on his *birthday*.

But he didn't remember it was his birthday. Larry didn't remember much. Just things from long ago. The week before, he thought it was November and got all excited about Thanksgiving dinner. He wanted me to make a turkey with all the fixins—mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet potatoes, green beans. I mean, I *made* it for him because, why not? But Thanksgiving loomed several months off, and a turkey in June is a heck of a lot more expensive at the local market than one nearer Thanksgiving holiday.

I used to wallow in a pigsty of denial about Larry's dementia. I made excuses his decline was a mix of prescription drugs. But after bagging the bulk of those drugs, I researched online for any concerning side effects between the only two remaining and finding none, I decided to take Larry to his cardiologist, Dr. Nickel, like the coin. I explained what was going on because, of course because Larry couldn't explain for himself, and asked if Dr. Nickel knew of any other just-as-effective blood pressure meds out there that didn't cause his runny nose or the gurgling congestion he was now suffering from. The frustration I felt, and how Larry must have felt, was all part of Larry not being able to express himself.

So many physical and mental failings, things that began slow, were now avalanching at breakneck speed and sweeping away my sweet husband in the wake. And when he forgot what month it was, well, the mud in the pigsty dried up. I couldn't deny any longer. I called Gigi and said, "I'm not in denial anymore." She made a sad sound and let me talk. I told her how I wouldn't fool myself into thinking his dementia was going to get better.

Again, Gigi made another sad sound, then again said, "I know." And what was behind that I know was a community *we know* and possibly *we've all known all along and you're the only one on the planet who is stupid enough to not know*.

It was nothing Gigi ever experienced—to care for an ailing husband or child or parent, for that matter. And that was the turning point. When I shifted my role from deeply concerned wife to deeply concerned caregiver. I remember praying about it and emerging from one morning prayer meditation aware and bright with insight that Larry was Larry just not the same as when we first dated eighteen years before or when we married seventeen years before or, hell, even three years ago. He was Larry but now Larry with dementia.

Married for eighteen years! A nano-fraction on the yardstick of eternity. A microsecond in the winds created off the drag of our planet as it hurtles through space and time. Barely an atom in a baby's breath.

Larry had moved in a couple years after I bought my place, a country home on a five-acre plot. Five acres, mostly wooded and uninhabitable with the acreage split in half by a long, wide crevice of rocks ranging from man-size to boulders all edging the crack scar-

ring the earth torn and jagged as if when the earth rent away it opened its mouth and heaved from its belly a vomit of earth and boulders.

The previous owners had crisscrossed several boards over the gap then topped it off with the a few pieces of inch-thick plywood to prevent animals from falling in, he'd said. He'd also said he did it because of his daughter. She *made* him do it. After buying the land ten years before and after a day spent exploring the land with the girl, she made the previous owner promise, "Daddy, promise me! Please." She begged him.

He'd said, "She was so upset about animals, mostly deer falling in." He also said that the crevice had been there since ancient times, but the daughter was so unnerved by the width and depth of the crevice that he knelt to her wishes.

And I wondered how he knew about the age of the crevice but forgot to ask about that point. I was swept away by the story of his daughter. After, he led me off to other parts of the land he was hoping to sell me. He talked about things we didn't have in Phoenix. Things like the septic tanks and the septic drain field. Those sat back on the other side of the crevice. We needed to drive to get to them. On our walk around the land, pink surveyor flags appeared every few yards. The flags demarcated the lot boundary line from the neighbor's.

At the end of our back field, sat a ten-acre pond with opalescent winged mallards that burst into flight when we approached.

And, I assumed association with the ducks when he said, "And a fox. We have fox too. One we call 'Foxy. she's a resident here, has had several litters of kits—cute as the dickens."

And I almost didn't buy the place. With the crevice boarded up like that, well, it made an impression on me. Let's just say to me it was like sacred ground, that if the daughter was correct, many hundreds, if not thousands, of animals' carcasses, bones, and remains, maybe even human, were already forming fossils in whatever material lay at the bottom—another point the owner made...how no one had ever been able to tap the bottom. A severe wave of the heebie-jeebies coursed over my skin, raising hair like little military men standing at attention. He'd said that no matter how long a shaft they used...and let his words drift down to the depths of the crevice.

"How long?" I pressed. I needed to know. It sort of freaked me out.

"They got the well guy out. He could only go down six hundred feet."

"Good God," I said, and touched the gold crucifix around my neck.

By ten years and the daughter long gone, gaps had grown between the crevice and his makeshift covering. What if an animal, a deer or my *cat*, fell in or got stuck struggling, thrashing between boards, squealing for their lives? The thought tormented me. That's when I decided to keep the cat in. Back then the cat was Winky. Winky had been a city cat and not well-equipped to live in the country anyway, so in she stayed. I mean, what if she or any animal, for that matter, got a leg caught? Had to chew it or wrench it off as they struggled to break free to save their lives?

Which brings me back to the lost and now found human foot. Was it Larry's? It had to be.

It was obvious from the article that authorities hadn't yet abandoned Larry's investigation. In fact, it appeared it was very much heating up.

My Larry was part of the news cycle. He was possibly "a man's foot." All that's left. But you have to understand, there was so much more to Larry than what they found

washed up on South Beach. He was a gentle, genteel elderly man with all appendages attached last time we chatted. Yes, before the book club meeting at the library. Except for his sudden and rare bouts of confusion and anger. The Larry I knew was charming and funny. He loved to laugh. He loved for me to tickle him. He loved his tee shirt that said: *IF YOU TICKLE ME, I'M NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR INJURIES*. A tee shirt that made me tickle him even more for no other reason but the dare. And I *bought* him the shirt!

Am I still holding out hope for my Larry? Holding out hope for something known to be impossible? Isn't that some obscure definition of insanity? No. I know for a fact he's dead. And I will not let my mind sink into some quicksand of misplaced hope that he's alive. I know Larry's not alive.

Anyway, when one thinks about it, if the foot *does* belong to Larry, how could he *not* be dead?

Denial has no claim on me. It won't sweep me into fantasy. Larry is dead. For anyone to believe otherwise, well, they're simply kidding themselves. He's long dead. Three months dead. No one can walk away one foot detached and survive.

I hope I don't cry tomorrow. I hate to cry in front of people.

They'd understand. Three months isn't a long time after the loss of one's husband. I mean, Gigi still grieves, and her husband has been dead since 2008. Twelve years seems an awfully long stretch for grieving. Brian's was so sudden—a widow-maker, the doctors had told her. He was alive one second, and boom! The next? Dead.

I suppose Larry's was similarly sudden. In the house one moment in time for the earthquake, before the book club. Then neatly absent the next moment when I came home. Never to be found. Lost somewhere on the island.

Everyone knew. People listened to the deputy radio station.

The news flashed through the island like a heat-seeking missile.

And now, this foot turns up. It's all over Facebook on the "What's Up, Friday Harbor?" page.

The day he went missing repeats and repeats, each crucial second sequenced with little variation in scene setting, dialogue, facial expression, *combustion*.

"You're killing me!" he'd yelled. It was a couple hours before I had to leave for the meeting that day. His statement harkened back to something funny I'd heard before like "You're killing me, Smalls." But Larry wasn't laughing. Larry was exhibiting full-on, out-and-out fury.

I was putting out some food for him. Snacks and drinks enough from then until I returned from our book club's monthly meeting. I'd left him alone before. He'd never gone missing before. Never ventured out. Was happy to putter to the kitchen and back with snacks and drinks.

But this night when I returned and they showed up to help, well, it reminded me of so many news reports about old men in Bellingham or Burlington, in Seattle—ending up lost and never to be found. Because on the mainland, there's room to wander.

But our island? Where we live a captive audience by the island's surrounding water? No. If you go missing here, chances are pretty high someone will find you.

So, when he screamed at me that I was going to kill him? Kill my Larry? Good lord. Well, I didn't mean to glance away. I honestly can't remember if I rolled my eyes but must have. Probably did. Yes, I did. I take full responsibility because what else would

have sparked such outrage?

He fumed.

I tried to explain.

I scanned the counter for his medicine. He needed a citalopram tablet. I didn't like giving them to him regularly because of the numbing effect. But for times like this? Hell, yeah. The citalopram was an anti-anxiety-anti-depressant winning combination that worked like a gem—a saying from Dad when he was alive. “That worked like a gem, Jamie,” he'd say. That saying always made me laugh even when I knew he was about to say it. He got this look. His *tell*. He was so funny.

But I'd been rushing around, getting ready to leave for the meeting and had little patience that day, I admit. And even though it was a couple hours before, I needed to get a few things done around the house—Lester's cat box, another load of Larry's soiled laundry. I figured I could squeeze in a bit of weed-whacking. The edges of the garden around the front steps up to the porch were looking weedy and dry. It was a good day too. I had a few minutes I could squeeze it in. Time was something I had been short on since segueing into this new lifestyle with Larry.

I have time. That's the sort of thing we tell ourselves. That we have time.

I needed him to take his pill and have some snacks, needed to add two items to my notes on the book we were discussing that night—a great story called *The Gretchen Question* by Jessica Treadway—her throwaway sentences that were not throwaway at all but metaphorical and landmarks within the story.

And I still needed to take a shower and fix my hair. Screw makeup. I didn't have time for that. Lipstick would be enough.

Instead, here's Larry affronting me, saying that I was trying to *kill* him.

“What are you talking about?” How could he think I wanted to kill him? All I did was *care* for him. But before I could contain it, my anger bubbled. It flashed. Suddenly, like Larry's.

Thinking back, I should've known. Asking questions like, *What are you talking about?* to someone with an addled brain about what or why he was thinking this or that might easily plunk the questioner into the pool of dementia alongside the demented.

He barreled up at me, away from where he was standing at my desk, and brandished a printout in my face—an article I had downloaded for a client who used to live on Orcas Island but who had moved north to Bellingham. The article was in reference to life insurance policies on missing persons. He'd found my research for a *client* thinking it was about him. Then he shoved the papers into my chest and knocked me back a step.

But when I gathered the papers, our hands brushed against each other's. His were icy. Mine were hot.

My anger sat its ass down and my caregiver stepped up. “Are you cold?”

“Don't act like you give a damn about me! *Me!* Your husband. Remember? The one you're trying to kill!”

During previous bouts of psychoses, Larry had never once become this violent. I mean, of course I'd read about wives of dementia patients waking up with their husband's hands around their necks and fighting for their lives—a sign of dementia escalating. This had to be that.

After studying reams and reams of online information, I came across one that referred to seven distinct phases of dementia and its progress. With phase one--the sneakiest phase

and most insidious phase—there are no warning signs of any problems. Everything seems hunky-dory in phase one of dementia.

In phase two, however, a person experiences an awareness, a sense that something feels different and might be wrong. They question their own mental stability in this phase which usually goes undiagnosed because they or, like in Larry's case, their loved ones, think they're being silly. Worrying about nothing. Denial in others is a key factor why treatment doesn't begin sooner. It's the family's hesitation to believe the patient has dementia.

With phase three, people around the patient begin to notice deficits in the person's ability to perform demanding job situations. Difficulties concentrating on tasks at hand. Often getting sidetracked and unable to command a single thought. They're still conversational in phase three but they bounce around, ping-pong, if you will, between several topics sometimes during a single conversation.

In phase four, people require assistance performing complicated tasks such as handling finances and traveling. And this is key—I found real problems with our finances when I took over managing the bills and our money. We were headed backwards, not forward on our home equity line of credit. He'd been tapping into the HELOC regularly without me knowing. And with our short trip back to Phoenix for only three nights, Larry had an accident in the Everett terminal. He couldn't keep his pants up as he walked. The pantlegs dragged under his shoes with him holding his belt to prevent them from falling off completely. An extra difficult task with him rolling luggage behind him, luggage that kept squirreling out of control and often tipping over. Something I kept yelling at him about because, as I screamed, "we're going to be late." Standing fifty feet ahead of him, yelling. Who does that? Then, finally, doubling-up my own luggage onto his and holding up his pants in the back so they wouldn't fall off all the while wheeling our carry-ons into the terminal and up to a sharp-suited flight attendant at the desk.

Hindsight offers clarity and wisdom for the future. It also offers up a whole bagful of guilt.

During phase five, a person begins a decline to the point he requires assistance choosing clothing. They often appear wearing clothing they had on several previous days which, if unchecked, could go on for weeks. That had become commonplace with Larry. All these things occurred within three years of Larry's first suspicions that something was going wrong with his brain.

Of course, I wouldn't dare allow Larry to go weeks in the same outfit, the same socks, and probably briefs for more than a few days. I took up my caregiving mantle in small bites and began laying out new socks, new underpants, new shirts, and trousers while he took a shower and removing the worn clothing to the laundry hamper.

Phase six shows a more drastic decline. The patient needs assistance the way a child might need assistance. Like with bathing and going to the bathroom (or "toileting" as the article read). During phase six, the patient might experience urinary and fecal incontinence. That's where Larry had been for a quite a while when he went missing.

But the final phase, phase seven, is the cruelest of all other phases. It's the phase when a patient loses his ability to speak, his vocabulary declining to fewer than twelve intelligible words. In this final, seventh phase, he will also lose the ability to walk, sit up, smile, or hold up his head.

I used to keep the article under my notebook—a journal I scribbled into now and

again. You know, thoughts of the day, some poetry, ideas, Larry's progression into this slow terrible death. I kept it in my desk drawer, so I knew how to prepare for things to come. If anyone can prepare for something like that—preparing to keep a vegetable alive. The cruelest of all phases. For the patient and the caregiver because, truly, how can one prepare the witnessing of a human being turning back into a fetus?

I didn't want Larry to suffer through this final stage. If there was a God, and I knew then and know now that there is, He would set out a plan to prevent Larry from having to suffer this last and most horrible of phases. This was my prayer: "Please God, don't let him suffer. Don't let him be scared. Make it fast."

I thought we had more time. A child's whimsy.

We did not.

"Evidence!" he screamed at me. "Evidence you're trying to kill me!"

I need to make clear how angry he was. He was boiling at me.

He must have gone through the files in my inbox. The printout was research for a client whose husband fell overboard off their yacht near Lummi Island but whose body they never recovered and deemed lost at sea, until a few months later when his body washed ashore. The article relayed in gruesome detail how a man's body, partially eaten away by sea creatures, had floated up onto shore near Doe Bay on Orcas. Like he was trying to get home. I envisioned his zombie-like body swimming in a choppy sea taking choppy strokes, fighting off seals and sea lions, kicking at them as his zombie form swam back to his home island.

He'd been missing over six months before the authorities deemed him dead. Then the body showed up. I'd pulled the file again, printed it out to show the research I'd done, and was intending to send it along with a past due notice of her invoice.

So earlier that day, the same day Larry went missing, the day he flipped out on me, I flipped out on him in response. I'd had it. There's only so much a wife can take. I was running my own company, assisting the managers who now were running Larry's store, I was taking care of him and the house. I was ragged and tired and ready for a break. I decided to set up an appointment with Dana—a well-respected caregiver—to help me out with Larry a couple days a week. We decided on a date two weeks later. Two weeks, as it turned out, too late.

In my defense, Larry *knew* he wasn't supposed to go through my work files. As an insurance investigator, some of the information is confidential. Everything—all my frustration, all my exhaustion, all my sadness—bubbled up at once in the form of anger with Larry but also in anger with me. Because I was supposed to be able to keep it together. My mind wasn't the addled, squishy brain as was Larry's. A person should be able to control themselves when dealing with someone in need of care.

Anger flashed between us with him railing at me and me railing back. It was frightening. His screaming, his hulking form on the landing at the top of the stairs, him trying to intimidate me. Him going through my *work*?

I yelled back, knowing you're not supposed to yell at someone with dementia. It confuses them further. Makes them feel inadequate. Their normal flight-or-fight systems broken, they become further flustered, and instead of remaining angry or hurt, they become lost or find all of it funny—forgetting entirely why they are upset or frustrated or why they were yelling in the first place. Their emotional responses get muddy and become a flotsam of memories, a soup, all mixing into each other.

Anger becomes humor. Sadness becomes happy.

But I didn't stop. God help me. "You stupid old man." My lips curled around each word. "You have dementia! You don't even know if you had eggs this morning but you're sure. Oh my God. You're sure I'm trying to *kill* you?!"

It was heartless. As soon as the word flew out of my mouth, I prayed I could take them back. If for no other reason than for telling someone you love that their brain is failing. That information should never be spoken.

My throat tightened and my sight blurred when his expression changed after hearing the word *dementia*. And I prayed again, that his condition would cause him to forget that I told him he had dementia.

CHAPTER 3
THEN—June 20, 2020

“You two having any issues?” Rob had to repeat the question.

Jamie tried to appear nonchalant but not so much that he would doubt anything she said. “You mean, issues like living with someone who has dementia?” But she didn’t stop there. “You mean, like caring for them morning, noon, and night, showering them, feeding them, changing their diapers, making sure they take their pills, driving them to the doctor and back, hoping they don’t fall down,” she took a breath in, then continued, “and then helping them up when they do? You mean, issues like that?” She couldn’t, didn’t want to control her accusatory tone. “Nah, Rob. We got no issues.”

But they always suspect the spouse.

“Check,” he said, seemingly forgiving her rude response. Then, “It’s a real shame about Larry. Everyone feels bad for yo—” he stopped short and corrected his words, “for him. Ya know, for you both. ’Specially, right after your mom and all. Just seems like a lot.”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. They had no idea. Unless you live through it...no idea.

“I appreciate that, Rob,” she said. Then after a pause, added, “It’s been tough. To say the least.”

“You gonna sell?”

“Sell?”

“The store.”

What the hell business is it of yours?

“No. I don’t know. I’m not sure. Not yet.” Her eyes fluttered. “I need to sit.” She backed up but stumbled. Rob caught her by the elbow and helped her to one of the two rattan deck chairs.

He was about to ask her if she was okay, and said, “It were me? I’d...” But he got distracted by one of the two deputies with flashlights. He waved the beam of light in front of him as he walked the curved driveway, the light bouncing with each step like a ball over words of a sing-along song. He didn’t get the chance to tell her what *he’d* do if the tables were turned. Like *that* was any of his business either.

“Sarge!” The deputy called.

“Jus a sec, Alec!” With his attention broken, Rob turned back.

“Wait here,” he said to Jamie, then skipped down three rock stairs, and met Alec half-way down the circular driveway. They kept their voices low.

Too low for Jamie to hear clearly but not low enough for her to hear him say *the gorge*.

CHAPTER 4

NOW—September 21, 2020

Can skin really crawl?

I had scrolled down past the article to read people's comments. Some were gross while others were compassionate. One of the grosser ones posited that the body parts might be some serial killer either on or around the island.

When my phone jangled, I nearly jumped out of my skin and dribbled coffee onto a few keys of my laptop, which I still had open to the article. A morphing pool of beige spread ever near my phone. Without thinking, I inadvertently set the mug right back down into the spill and began fumbling, choosing between saving the laptop or saving the phone. The laptop won. The phone got a little wet but nothing my sweatpants couldn't absorb.

It was Afon. He was probably checking on me again. With all his bad points, and believe me Afon had plenty, he was still kind to check on me. Still, I didn't want to speak with him. I didn't want to be bothered. He'd already called. When is it okay to tell someone that they're bothering you? Is it ever? I couldn't contain my attitude. Nor did I want to contain it.

"Hold on, Afon." I kept my tone as cool as possible given the mess on the table and the fact he was calling *again*.

Leave me alone, Afon.

"Okay," I heard him say, even with the phone facedown a foot or so from the spill.

"I spilled tea. Hold on." I was sort of yelling so he might hear. He did.

The muffled, facedown voice said, "Okay." Then he laughed.

After I found a hand towel and mopped up my mess, I snapped up the phone. The back of it still felt slightly damp. "What's up?"

Keep your voice level like you don't care.

"Have you seen the news?"

Boy, oh, boy. Just jump right in, will ya, Afon? And I refused to say, *about the foot?* And instead said, "I was just reading when you called."

"I sure would like to see that foot."

"God, Afon."

Just hang up!

He chuckled but then added, "You know, *I* could tell if there was foul play...afoot!" He laughed at his own lame joke and at my expense.

"I'm sure they have *experts* for that." Why was I engaging him? Why was I emphasizing certain words? "By the way, Afon, it's my husband you're joking about."

Afon had been a successful orthopedic surgeon in Seattle before retiring to our islands. He was single after one failed marriage, but at fifty-eight, he could pass for someone in his late forties. Something he liked to flaunt at the book club meetings. Always wearing a tighter than necessary shirt to show off his arms and tighter than necessary pants to show off his *athletic* form. It had always niggled at me that someone—and in Afon's case, the only guy in the club—would come to the meetings trying to look sexy. I mean, we read in sweatpants and a tee shirt, right? And it seemed to bother me more lately since we

bumped into each other on a run that day.

He was now telling me how he was able to determine if an appendage was severed or torn from the body and I just...wanted...him...to *shut up!* He could be so flipping insensitive.

“Why don’t you go ask to help if you’re so curious?”

“Hmm.” He was actually considering my suggestion. He went silent while he thought about the prospects—his garden variety repartee, spilling over with his special brand of wit, stalling.

Before I could stop myself, I said, “Might be...*fun* for you.”

You freak of nature.

“Maybe I will.”

Of course, you will.

He went on, “So...you okay? Need anything? *Company?*”

Oh. God. Please. I should have been an actor.

“No. I’m good. Thanks. I just want to, uh...”

“Wait?”

“I guess.”

“How long?”

“God, Afon. It’s only been three months.”

“You think there’s a chance he’s still alive?”

“Who knows?”

Three months. Could time hang up that long without finding his body? Pain burned behind my eye sockets. I wanted desperately to stop thinking about him lying under a rock in a watery grave. But with the foot showing up on shore...that’s what everyone would expect. Right?

“You think there’s a chance he’s not and if not, do you think there’s a chance, well, you and me?”

“Look.” The word came out sharp. “I have to go,” I said, and ended the call without saying goodbye.

I called Liv. She could always talk me down.

Was Afon simply trying to help me feel better? If he was, he had a stupid way of showing it. He didn’t need to be so pushy.

Part of me wished *he* were dead and not Larry.

YOU HAVE REACHED THE END OF THE SAMPLE BUT YOU
CAN GET THE FULL STORY ON AMAZON

AFTERWORD

As I write this novel, I feel compelled to explain a few things...

I've taken some freedoms regarding island facts. Such as, the San Juan County Coroner's Office doesn't have a morgue. All pathologies are shipped and examined off-island on the mainland. There is no huge crevice on our property. And most importantly, Bob, my husband is still alive and well. Thank God.

I've set some of the action on days that coincide with my husband, Bob's birthday, which is June 20th. I'm writing this story in 2020 and we just celebrated his 73rd birthday. So, yes. Bob is alive and well at the writing of this fictional tale. And we celebrated his birthday with the usual gift-giving, special dinner and cake. The 21st was Father's Day. His son called and made Bob's eyes fill with tears of joy.

His youngest daughter called too. Again, he got emotional but talked with her more than he did with Mike because they've had more time together.

And in between those calls from his kids, we mowed the lawn. A great Father's Day activity, don't you think? But one that exhausted Bob. The following is my attempt to explain some important history about our family.

Those who may not know me all that well will be better informed by the fact that from June of 2015 to December of 2016 my mother lived with us. Doctors diagnosed her medical condition as COPD—Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease in 2003. On June 10th, when she was whisked away to the hospital in Bellingham, Washington. We live on San Juan Island in Washington State, so I had to make a few trips off-island to visit but the docs there said, if she doesn't quit smoking, she'll be dead in five to ten years. She didn't quit smoking until 2007 when they put her on oxygen. By 2010, my mother began showing signs of mental decline—hallucinations, paranoia, the inability to properly care for herself or her cat and dog, an incapacity to clean her house or feed herself well. I say *well* because she existed, I now know, for several years on hamburger patties and ice cream bars. By 2015, when she finally moved in with us, Mom was completely incapable of caring for herself. It took four months to after we moved her into our home for me to understand. I was distracted by her violent outbursts, anger and hallucinations. Another story entirely.

Fast forward to 2017 and six months after my mom died...

Bob began showing problems with word-finding. He'd told me once while we were prepping for Mom's move in with us that he felt like he had Alzheimer's. He'd said it in reference to one of Mom's diagnoses. I pish-poshed Bob's concerns away. My sister, Lizz was helping us fix up the attached studio apartment where Mom would live. Between all my concerns about Mom's segue into our home, I had little capacity for anyone else's problems. Certainly not Bob's and certainly not another case of Alzheimer's.

So, after Mom died, with his word-finding issue—getting those words off his tongue—we decided to contact a neurologist who did some tests and who ultimately sent Larry to see a neuropsychologist. The neuropsychologist diagnosed Bob with Aphasia. But what she and the neurologist did not diagnose was the underlying cause of the Aphasia which we now know is dementia, frontotemporal dementia, to be exact.

The reason I'm explaining all Bob's and Mom's sicknesses is because in writing this

novel, *When You Leave Me*, I decided to blend both my Mom's and Bob's symptoms together. Both suffered similar problems at times. However, most often, my mother's symptoms exhibited far worse than Bob's. The reason? Bob's physical health isn't nearly as critical as my mother's was. Her physical health was in rapid decline by the time she moved in because of the COPD. I mean, without oxygen getting into those lungs of hers, little if any oxygen got into her blood. And as most of us know, if no oxygen in the blood, there's none getting to the brain. She was extremely frail and sick.

For Bob, it's opposite. He looks healthy and, at the completion of the writing of *When You Leave Me* could still push our new electric lawnmower around, albeit with a little help from me holding the electrical cord as he goes. But still...

He eats well, walks a little, and he's happy and sweet. Still, he has heart issues and because of those heart issues, he has oxygen issues which means mental decline, which means he cannot have a desperately needed heart operation because of the mental decline and the wheel goes round and round.

They gave him five to seven years mid-2019 and I count the minutes with a sense of gratefulness but also with dread. I don't want my husband to die. I'm heartbroken that he has dementia because if he didn't, we could get his heart repaired. I go round and round on this ugly wheel almost daily. And daily, I end up heartbroken by the fact that we're playing a waiting game. My heart goes out to others in similar circumstances, to those who have been diagnosed with terminal illnesses, and to their families and friends. It's the worst wait imaginable.

I'm not sure if Bob remembers the doctor's prognosis about his life expectation. I think he might, but hope the dementia deleted that information from his databank. Because, as I prayed for my mom, I don't want him to be afraid. I don't want him to worry that today might be *the* day. I just want him to live and be happy, even if we only have a few more years together, I want to revel in those years and keep each moment as close to my heart as possible.

Which brings me to this story, *When You Leave Me*. It began as a charting of the progress of Bob's health issues caused by dementia but soon spun into a fictional tale.

And for those people who might be going through a similar experience and who are caring for a loved one with dementia or Alzheimer's, I say this: Forgive yourself of your thoughts. Forgive yourself of tomorrow. Forgive yourself of things you think you did wrong and cannot change. You only have today. Cherish today.

God bless us all.

—Susan Wingate

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Usually, no sooner do I finish one novel, I turn around and start another. Stories come fast and furious. Not after this one. Because the story hits so close to home, with Bob's dementia in what, if you read the online literature about the disease, he appears to be in stage six moving into stage seven.

Glenn, one of his best friends, came up not long ago. He said, "I was looking at ALZ.org and reading through the stages. You said he's in six moving into seven." Then, he paused and when he did, I said, "Yes." Then he added, "There's no stage eight."

It was a heartbreaking admission, his realization that his best buddy would be alive, if the experts were correct, no more than five years. So, first I want to acknowledge all of Bob's best friends—Glenn, Jim B., Jim C., Greg, Johnny, and Ralph—for their undying dedication to visits and talks, for simply being faces on the other side of Skype chats or in person. Although he's mostly silent, I can see how happy you make him. You see, it's all in his blue eyes, his joy lives in those eyes.

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To everyone at The Little Store who keep the business afloat. Without you, Bob's baby wouldn't be. You're the reason the doors are still open.

To this island. God, I love this place.

To Bob's kids: he loves you more than life itself.

To Bob's brothers: he often sees your spirit brother these days. Time is of the essence.

To my sister who ran after me with a hanger when I got her in trouble and then who got in trouble again because she was running after me with a hanger...we were terrible kids. We owe Mom and Dad a big apology when we see them again in Heaven.

Mostly, I want to say "thank you" to the man who changed my life but who cannot read words anymore and can barely say any. I love you more than breathing. More than waking. I wish it were me instead of you. I worry day and night that if anything would happen to me, what would happen to Bob? A torment no one should ever bear. I will love you to the end of the universe and back. I will love you for eternity. Thank you for choosing me, for choosing us. Thank you for being my best friend ever.

The journey has been awesome. I wouldn't have it any other way.

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SUSAN WINGATE writes about big trouble in small towns and lives with her husband on an island off the coast of Washington State where, against state laws, she feeds the wildlife because she wants them to follow her. Her ukulele playing is (as her Sitto used to say) coming along.

Susan Wingate is a #1 Amazon bestselling and award-winning author. Her story *How the Deer Moon Hungers* has won eight book awards, including a first-place award in the 2020 Chanticleer Somerset Awards, a Silver Award in the 2021 eLit Book Awards, the 2020 SABA Book Awards for the Judge’s Selection “Best Fiction Author,” Best Fiction in the 2020 Pacific Book Award, a Silver Award in the 2020 Moonbeam Children’s Book Award, and July 2020 Book Cover in the Book Cover of the Month Awards.

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