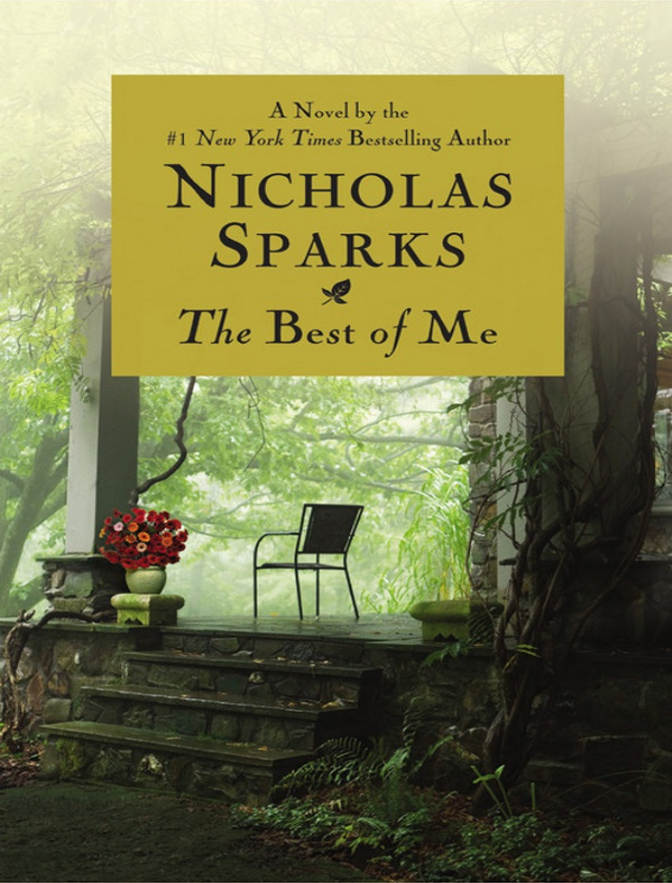


The background of the book cover is a photograph of a garden. In the foreground, there is a stone wall with a built-in stone bench. On top of the wall, to the left, is a white ceramic pot filled with red and orange flowers. To the right of the pot is a black metal chair. The garden is filled with green plants, ferns, and trees, with a misty or foggy atmosphere. The text is overlaid on a yellow rectangular background in the upper half of the image.

A Novel by the
#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

NICHOLAS
SPARKS



The Best of Me

NICHOLAS SPARKS

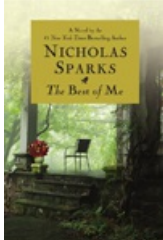


The Best of Me



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For Scott Swimer
A wonderful friend

Acknowledgments

Some novels are more challenging to write than others, and *The Best of Me* falls into that category. *The Best of Me* was difficult to write—I won't bore you with those reasons—and without the support of the following people, I'd probably still be working on it. So, without further ado, I want to offer my thanks.

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fifteen years that I've been associated with all of you.
Thanks for everything!



For Dawson Cole, the hallucinations began after the explosion on the platform, on the day he should have died.

In the fourteen years he'd worked on oil rigs, he thought he'd seen it all. In 1997, he'd watched as a helicopter lost control as it was about to land. It crashed onto the deck, erupting in a blistering fireball, and he'd received second-degree burns on his back as he'd attempted a rescue. Thirteen people, most of them in the helicopter at the time, had died. Four years later, after a crane on the platform collapsed, a piece of flying metal debris the size of a basketball nearly took his head off. In 2004, he was one of the few workers remaining on the rig when Hurricane Ivan slammed into it, with winds gusting over a hundred miles an hour and waves large enough to make him wonder whether to grab a parachute in case the rig collapsed. But there were other dangers as well. People slipped, parts snapped, and cuts and bruises were a way of life among the crew. Dawson had seen more broken bones than he could count, two plagues of food poisoning that sickened the entire crew, and two years ago, in 2007, he'd watched

a supply ship start to sink as it pulled away from the rig, only to be rescued at the last minute by a nearby coast guard cutter.

But the explosion was something different. Because there was no oil leak—in this instance, the safety mechanisms and their backups prevented a major spill—the story barely made the national news and was largely forgotten within a few days. But for those who were there, including him, it was the stuff of nightmares. Up until that point, the morning had been routine. He'd been monitoring the pumping stations when one of the oil storage tanks suddenly exploded. Before he could even process what had happened, the impact from the explosion sent him crashing into a neighboring shed. After that, fire was everywhere. The entire platform, crusted with grease and oil, quickly became an inferno that engulfed the whole facility. Two more large explosions rocked the rig even more violently. Dawson remembered dragging a few bodies farther from the fire, but a fourth explosion, bigger than the others, launched him into the air a second time. He had a vague memory of falling toward the water, a fall that for all intents and purposes should have killed him. The next thing he knew, he was floating in the Gulf of Mexico, roughly ninety miles south of Vermilion Bay, Louisiana.

Like most of the others, he hadn't had time to don his survival suit or reach for a flotation device, but in between swells he saw a dark-haired man waving in the distance, as if signaling Dawson to swim toward him. Dawson struck out in that direction, fighting the ocean waves, exhausted and

dizzy. His clothes and boots dragged him down, and as his arms and legs began to give out he knew he was going to die. He thought he'd been getting close, though the swells made it impossible to know for sure. At that moment, he spotted a lone life preserver floating among some nearby debris. Using the last of his remaining strength, he latched on. Later, he learned that he was in the water for almost four hours and had drifted nearly a mile from the rig before being picked up by a supply ship that had rushed to the scene. He was pulled on board, carried belowdecks, and reunited with other survivors. Dawson was shivering from hypothermia, and he was dazed. Though his vision was blurred—he was later diagnosed with a moderate concussion—he recognized how lucky he'd been. He saw men with vicious burns on their arms and shoulders, and others bleeding from their ears or nursing broken bones. He knew most of them by name. There were only so many places for people to go on the rig—it was essentially a small village in the middle of the ocean—and everyone made it to the cafeteria or the recreation room or gym sooner or later. One man, however, looked only vaguely familiar, a man who seemed to be staring at him from across the crowded room. Dark-haired and maybe forty years old, he was wearing a blue windbreaker that someone on the ship had probably lent him. Dawson thought he looked out of place, more like an office worker than a roughneck. The man waved, suddenly triggering memories of the figure he'd spotted earlier in the water—it was him—and all at once, Dawson felt the hairs on the back

of his neck rise. Before he could identify the source of his unease, a blanket was thrown over his shoulders and he was ushered to a spot in the corner where a medical officer waited to examine him.

By the time he sat back down, the dark-haired man was gone.

Over the next hour, more survivors were brought aboard, but as his body began to warm, Dawson started to wonder about the rest of the crew. Men he'd worked with for years were nowhere to be seen. Later, he would learn that twenty-four people were killed. Most, but not all, of the bodies were eventually found. While he recovered in the hospital, Dawson couldn't stop thinking about the fact that some families had no real way to say good-bye.

He'd had trouble sleeping since the explosion, not because of any nightmares but because he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. He felt... *haunted*, as ridiculous as that sounded. Day and night, he occasionally caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his eye, but whenever he turned there was never anyone or anything there that could explain it. He wondered if he was losing his mind. The doctor suggested he was having a posttraumatic reaction to the stress of the accident and that his brain might still be healing from the concussion. It made sense and sounded logical, but it didn't feel right to Dawson. He nodded anyway. The doctor gave him a prescription for sleeping pills, but Dawson never bothered to fill it.

He was given a paid leave of absence for six months while the legal wheels began to grind. Three weeks later,

the company offered him a settlement and he signed the papers. By then he'd already been contacted by a half-dozen attorneys, all of them racing to be the first to file a class action suit, but he didn't want the hassle. He took the settlement offer and deposited the check on the day it arrived. With enough money in his account to make some people think he was rich, he went to his bank and wired most of it to an account in the Cayman Islands. From there, it was forwarded to a corporate account in Panama that had been opened with minimal paperwork, before being wired to its final destination. The money, as always, was virtually impossible to trace.

He'd kept only enough for the rent and a few other expenses. He didn't need much. Nor did he want much. He lived in a single-wide trailer at the end of a dirt road on the outskirts of New Orleans, and people who saw it probably assumed that its primary redeeming feature was that it hadn't flooded during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. With plastic siding that was cracked and fading, the trailer squatted on stacked cinder blocks, a temporary foundation that had somehow become permanent over time. It had a single bedroom and bath, a cramped living area, and a kitchen with barely enough room to house a mini refrigerator. Insulation was almost nonexistent, and humidity had warped the floors over the years, making it seem as if he were always walking on a slant. The linoleum in the kitchen was cracking in the corners, the minimal carpet was threadbare, and he'd furnished the narrow space with items he'd picked up over the years at thrift stores. Not a single

photograph adorned the walls. Though he'd lived there for almost fifteen years, it was less a home than a place where he happened to eat and sleep and take his showers.

Despite its age, it was almost always as pristine as the homes in the Garden District. Dawson was, and always had been, a bit of a neat freak. Twice a year, he repaired cracks and caulked seams to keep rodents and insects at bay, and whenever he prepared to return to the rig, he scrubbed the kitchen and bathroom floors with disinfectant and emptied the cupboards of anything that might spoil or mold. He generally worked thirty days on, followed by thirty days off, and anything that wasn't in a can would go bad in less than a week, especially during the summer. Upon his return, he scrubbed the place from top to bottom again while airing it out, doing his best to get rid of the musty smell.

It was quiet, though, and that was really all he needed. He was a quarter mile off the main road, and the nearest neighbor was even farther away than that. After a month on the rig, that was exactly what he wanted. One of the things he'd never gotten used to on the rig was the endless noise. Unnatural noise. From cranes continually repositioning supplies to helicopters to the pumps to the endless pounding of metal on metal, the cacophony never stopped. Rigs pumped oil around the clock, which meant that even when Dawson was trying to sleep, the clamor continued. He tried to tune it out while he was there, but whenever he returned to the trailer he was struck by the almost impenetrable silence when the sun was high in the sky. In

the mornings he could hear birdsong drifting from the trees, and in the evenings he'd listen to the way the crickets and frogs sometimes synchronized their rhythm a few minutes after the sun went down. It was usually soothing, but every now and then the sound made him think of home, and when that happened he would retreat indoors, forcing the memories away. Instead, he tried to focus on the simple routines that dominated his life when he was back on solid ground.

He ate. He slept. He ran and lifted weights and tinkered on his car. He took long, wandering drives, going nowhere in particular. Now and then he went fishing. He read every night and wrote an occasional letter to Tuck Hostetler. That was it. He owned neither a television nor a radio, and though he had a cell phone, only work numbers were listed in the contact list. He picked up groceries and essentials and stopped at the bookstore once a month, but other than that he never ventured into New Orleans. In fourteen years, he'd never been to Bourbon Street or strolled through the French Quarter; he'd never sipped coffee at the Café Du Monde or had a hurricane at Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop Bar. Instead of visiting a gym, he worked out behind the trailer beneath a weathered tarp he'd strung between his home and nearby trees. He didn't go to the movies or kick back at a friend's place while the Saints played on Sunday afternoons. He was forty-two years old and hadn't been on a date since he was a teenager.

Most people wouldn't or couldn't have lived their lives that way, but they didn't know him. They didn't know who he

had been or what he had done, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Then, out of the blue on a warm afternoon in mid-June, he received a phone call, and memories of the past rose anew. Dawson had been on leave for almost nine weeks. For the first time in nearly twenty years, he was finally going home. The thought made him uneasy, but he knew he had no choice. Tuck had been more than just a friend; he'd been like a father. And in the silence, as he reflected on the year that had been the turning point of his life, Dawson saw a flash of movement once more. When he turned, there was nothing there at all, and he wondered again whether he was going crazy.



The call had come from Morgan Tanner, an attorney in Oriental, North Carolina, who informed him that Tuck Hostetler had passed away. "There are arrangements best handled in person," Tanner explained. Dawson's first instinct after hanging up was to book his flight and a room at a local bed-and-breakfast, then call a florist and arrange for a delivery.

The following morning, after locking the front door to the trailer, Dawson walked around back, toward the tin shed where he kept his car. It was Thursday, June 18, 2009, and he carried with him the only suit he owned and a duffel bag he'd packed in the middle of the night when he hadn't been able to sleep. He unlocked the padlock and rolled up the

door, watching sunlight stream onto the car he'd been restoring and repairing ever since high school. It was a 1969 fastback, the kind of car that turned heads when Nixon was president and still turned heads today. It looked as if it had just rolled off the assembly line, and over the years countless strangers had offered to buy it from him. Dawson had turned them down. "It's more than just a car," he told them, without further explanation. Tuck would have understood exactly what he meant.

Dawson tossed the duffel bag onto the passenger seat and laid the suit on top of it before sliding behind the wheel. When he turned the key, the engine came to life with a loud rumble, and he eased the car onto the gravel before hopping out to lock the shed. As he did, he ran through a mental checklist, making sure he had everything. Two minutes later, he was on the main road, and a half hour after that he was parking in the long-term lot at the New Orleans airport. He hated leaving the car but had no choice. He collected his things before starting toward the terminal, where a ticket was waiting for him at the airline counter.

The airport was crowded. Men and women walking arm in arm, families off to visit grandparents or Disney World, students shuttling between home and school. Business travelers rolled their carry-ons behind them, jabbering on cell phones. He stood in the slow-moving line and waited until a spot opened at the counter. He showed his identification and answered the basic security questions before being handed his boarding passes. There was a single layover in Charlotte, a little more than an hour. Not

bad. Once he landed in New Bern and picked up his rental car, he had another forty minutes on the road. Assuming there weren't any delays, he'd be in Oriental by late afternoon.

Until he took his seat on the plane, Dawson hadn't realized how tired he was. He wasn't sure what time he'd finally fallen asleep—the last time he'd checked, it had been almost four—but he figured he'd sleep on the plane. Besides, it wasn't as though he had much to do once he got to town. He was an only child, his mom had run off when he was three, and his dad had done the world a favor by drinking himself to death. Dawson hadn't talked to anyone in his family in years, nor did he intend to renew their acquaintance now.

Quick trip, in and out. He'd do what he had to do and didn't plan on hanging around any longer than he had to. He might have been raised in Oriental, but he'd never really belonged there. The Oriental he knew was nothing like the cheery image advertised by the area Visitors' Bureau. For most people who spent an afternoon there, Oriental came across as a quirky little town, popular with artists and poets and retirees who wanted nothing more than to spend their twilight years sailing on the Neuse River. It had the requisite quaint downtown, complete with antiques stores, art galleries, and coffee shops, and the place had more weekly festivals than seemed possible for a town of fewer than a thousand people. But the real Oriental, the one he'd known as a child and young man, was the one inhabited by families with ancestors who had resided in the area since

colonial times. People like Judge McCall and Sheriff Harris, Eugenia Wilcox, and the Collier and Bennett families. They were the ones who'd always owned the land and farmed the crops and sold the timber and established the businesses; they were the powerful, invisible undercurrent in a town that had always been theirs. And they kept it the way they wanted.

Dawson found that out firsthand when he was eighteen, and then again at twenty-three, when he finally left for good. It wasn't easy being a Cole anywhere in Pamlico County, Oriental in particular. As far as he knew, every Cole in the family tree going back as far as his great-grandfather had spent time in prison. Various members of the family had been convicted of everything from assault and battery to arson, attempted murder, and murder itself, and the rocky, wooded homestead that housed the extended family was like a country with its own rules. A handful of ramshackle cabins, single-wide trailers, and junk barns dotted the property that his family called home, and unless he had no choice, even the sheriff avoided the place. Hunters gave the land a wide berth, rightly assuming that the TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT sign wasn't simply a warning but a promise. The Coles were moonshiners and drug dealers, alcoholics, wife beaters, abusive fathers and mothers, thieves and pimps, and above all, pathologically violent. According to an article that had been published in a now defunct magazine, they were at one point regarded as the most vicious, revenge-driven family east of Raleigh. Dawson's father was no exception. He'd spent most of his