

## Hunters

Kate answered his personal ad in late summer, soon after she'd been told for the second time that she was dying. She had always thought of herself as shy, not the type even to peruse such ads. But the news had been jolting, if not altogether unexpected, and had allowed her to act outside her old ideas of herself.

The first time her doctor told her she would die had been two years before. The cancer had started in her left breast and moved to her brain. She'd had a mastectomy and undergone a full course of chemotherapy to no effect. A divorcee, she was close to only a few people: her sixteen-year-old daughter, Melissa, her widowed mother, who was now dead, and one good woman friend, all of whom she'd told. She'd worried about what to do with Melissa, then fourteen, whose father had been out of touch since he'd left them years before. And then, after worrying, weeping, raging, and undergoing the storm of insanity that, by all reports, was supposed to end in acceptance, she learned that her cancer had mysteriously retreated and that she would live. Her doctors hesitated to use the word "cured." Cancers such as hers were rarely, if ever, cured. Yet they could find no signs of carcinoma cells in her system. She returned to work, got her hair done, went on shopping sprees, and thought about the possibility of reconstructive surgery for her

left breast. Even a nipple, her plastic surgeon had informed her, could be convincingly improvised. In trying to explain her restored health to her daughter, her coworkers, her friends, she could find no other word than “cured.” And now, once again, the doctors were telling her she had tumors about the size of peas in her liver and spine. She would die in a matter of months.

The news silenced Kate. This time, she told no one.

She selected his ad because of its unthreatening tone. Others had intimidated her with their loud enthusiasm and confidence: “Young vital fifty-something looking for lady with love for life.” Still others sounded sleazy—“Master in need of pet”—or psychotic, even murderous: “Quiet, mysterious Lone Ranger looking for that special horse to ride into the night.” By contrast, his sounded distinctly meek: “Like books and munching popcorn in front of TV.” He tended toward “shyness with a goofy edge.” He sought “sex, but more, too. Tenderness without attachments.” That caught her eye. She wanted sex. She wanted “tenderness without attachments.” In the years since her diagnosis, she’d kept her maimed body to herself. Now a feeling of bodily coldness and desolation had come over her, and she wanted to be brought back to life. She wanted to be touched—maybe for one night, one week, one month.

Kate’s daughter heard his message on the answering machine first. “There’s a guy on the machine for you,” she said when Kate got home from work. Melissa stood next to her in the kitchen while she played it. “Kate,” a heavy male voice said, “Charles here. I look forward to meeting you. Gotta say I’m just a bit nervous. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never done this before. Not to say that I don’t want to. I do. I’m going on, aren’t I? Sorry. You’ve got other messages to hear, I’m sure.” He paused, and

Melissa laughed. Kate wasn't sure what to make of this halting message, though she liked the fact that he was obviously nervous; his voice was nearly trembling. "I guess I should tell you what I look like. I'm tall and have a mustache. See you on Saturday."

"A mustache?" Melissa smiled suggestively. "I didn't know you were looking for someone."

"I'm not," Kate said. Her daughter had the wrong idea. She'd assumed Kate was searching for a companion, was healing and moving on with what would be a long life. It wasn't fair to leave her with false impressions, but Kate couldn't go through all the tears again. She wanted her privacy for now. "Don't, please, get any ideas."

"No ideas," Melissa said, laughing. "I think it's great. I think it's what you should be doing."

Kate hardly expected to be afraid. She took every precaution. She'd chosen a popular coffee shop, often crowded on Saturday afternoons, which seemed the safest time to meet a stranger. Ann Arbor was hardly a dangerous town. It was clean and wealthy and civic-minded, she reminded herself. It was an especially hot September day, over ninety degrees, but the air conditioning in the café was crisp and bracing. Kate selected a table in a sunny corner, beside two elderly women wearing pastel sweat suits and gleaming white orthopedic tennis shoes; they made Kate feel still safer. One of the silver-haired women was babysitting an infant and kept her hand on a baby carriage, now and then looking down into it with a clownish face. Students sat at other tables and read books. A toddler ran past Kate, its father in pursuit.

She heard him before she saw him. "Are you Kate?"

She stood, and he presented her so quickly with a red carnation that it startled her—the redness of it, the sudden, bright presence of it in her hand—and she giggled.

“I’m Charles,” he said. He wore nice slacks, a button-up shirt, and a blazer; and was suffering—his forehead glistened—from the extremely hot day. His face was thin, his bony nose and cheekbones complex and not immediately attractive. But it was his hair that surprised her most. Thick, gray, nicely combed: it was the hair of a pleasant, not unattractive older man, a man in his fifties, as his ad had said. Kate hadn’t dated for more than six years; her divorce and then her illness had made sure of that. And now, at forty-five, she was shocked to think that this middle-aged man might be her romantic prospect.

When they sat down, Kate noticed the rapid thudding of her heart. She picked up her coffee and watched it tremble in her hand before she took a sip. For some reason, the table was shuddering beneath her. “I’m sorry,” Charles said, putting a hand on his knee to stop it from jiggling. “I’m terrible at handling my nerves. I’m no good at meeting people. It’s not one of my skills.” He took a folded white handkerchief from his back pocket and neatly wiped the sweat from his forehead.

His obvious fear assured Kate that he was harmless and maybe even kind. “I meant to say thank you for the flower.” She looked down at the wilted carnation.

“It’s not very original of me.”

When she picked her coffee up now, her hand was steady. Clearly one of them needed to be calmer. “I liked what you said in your ad about tenderness,” Kate said.

“That’s why I called.”

“I’m not usually this adventurous.” He looked over his shoulder and then at her again. “I’m still getting over a divorce. I guess that’s why I’m so jittery about all this.”

Things weren’t going well, Kate knew. And for some reason, she wanted them to go well with this timid man, and so she continued to be brave, to say what she was thinking. “‘Tenderness without attachments.’ That sounded nice. None of the other ads talked about that. I thought that was original.”

He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief again. “I just don’t want anything serious. But I don’t want it to feel, you know, like just an exchange of . . . of . . .”

“Bodies?” Kate said. He sat back in his chair, as if struck, and she felt her face deepen in color. The thought that they were here, in large part, for the prospect of sex was out on the table now. It was a bold and raw motive, for which neither of them, middle-aged and awkward, seemed well suited. But the awkwardness and shame were refreshing, too; Kate hadn’t blushed in years.

“I guess,” he said. He patted his mustache gently, as if drawing composure from it. “Not that we have to ever get there. We might just become friends. We might just enjoy each other’s company.”

“Sure,” she said, though in fact she felt an unexpected pang of rejection. Was this skittish man already running from her bed?

She changed the subject then, telling him about her job as a loan officer, a serious job that had always suited her rather too serious character; her love for fresh food and cooking; her sixteen-year-old daughter, who right now was a little too absorbed in her boyfriend. “I wish my kid would fall in love,” Charles said, smiling. “He’s angry. His mother gave him up when she gave me up. I understand the anger. I’m angry, too. But

there's something mean in him that I'd never seen before this." Ryan, Charles's son, had a mohawk that changed colors—purple, yellow, blue—at least once a month and a lizard tattoo on his forearm. Charles owned an office furniture and supply store. "It sounds boring, I know. But I actually sort of enjoy it."

It did sound boring to Kate, who was much more interested to learn that Charles enjoyed hunting. It hardly seemed like something this concerned father and furniture salesman would do. "You kill things?" Kate asked. "You enjoy it?"

He confessed that he did, though he didn't hunt large game. "Deer and elk are beautiful animals and too much of a mess. Field dressing a deer can take the better part of a morning."

"Field dressing?" she asked.

"Gutting them, removing the organs. You need to do that soon after a kill, before you cure and slaughter it. It's a real mess. I used to hunt large game as a boy with my dad. It's not for me anymore." He shook his head in a way that allowed Kate to picture this mess: the blood, the entrails, the carcass. "I just hunt upland birds now: pheasant, woodcocks, grouse. It's not so much the killing as it is the stalk, the chase. Being out in the open air, seeing the land."

"But you do kill them?"

He nodded. "I suppose you're against that sort of thing."

Kate thought about it a moment. "Not really. Though I'd say I'm not for it either. I find it odd."

Two hours later, when they walked out of the café, a hot wind was blowing down Washington Street, and the concrete beneath her felt as if it were baking through her thin-

soled shoes. She felt lightheaded, buzzed from three cups of coffee, and nervous about what would happen next, how they'd say good-bye. Would they kiss? She couldn't imagine it and was relieved when he reached out with his sweaty hand and shook hers softly. "I enjoyed meeting you," he said. A train of running children shot between them, and they both took a step back. She half thought he'd turn away then and walk off, and she'd have to wonder why he put her through two hours of conversation about his divorce, his son, about slaughtering and field dressing deer. But then he asked her if he could call again, and she couldn't—hard as she tried—suppress a smile and the obvious eagerness in her voice when she said, "I'd like that."

Kate didn't feel sick yet. She'd felt healthy now for months, light of body, energetic, strong. She tried not to think of the fatigue and pain to come. But the week the heat wave lifted and the first cooler days of fall arrived, Kate succumbed to fear.

She'd been approving a loan for a pregnant couple when it happened. The woman wore a purple maternity dress that said "Mommy" at the place where her belly showed most. She carried her weight with an intimidating, ungraceful physicality, and her face glowed with acne and oil and a smile that was almost aggressive. The woman's scent of flowers and sweat filled Kate's small office, the air suddenly feeling close and tropical. She kept saying "we" in a way that left Kate feeling bereft and excluded. "*We're* looking forward to our first home. This is just what *we* need right now." The woman looked down at the roundness where she had just placed her hands. "Four more months," she said. The thoughts came to Kate before she could anticipate them. Would she be bedridden by then? Would she be gone? Could she already feel the beginning of fatigue? Would the

symptoms she'd experienced last time—the headaches, the facial paralysis, the double vision—begin that very day?

Claiming illness, she left work early that afternoon only to discover Melissa and Mark in her bathroom. The shower had been on, which was no doubt why they hadn't heard Kate climbing the stairs. When she walked into her room, Kate saw steam curling out the open bathroom door before she saw her sixteen-year-old daughter, naked save for the pink strip of her Calvin Klein panties, balancing on her knees and giving pleasure with too much skill, too much expertise, to her standing boyfriend. She took it in for a moment: the bodies moving together in practiced motion, the flayed brown and white of tan lines, her daughter's breasts, mouth, and hands, the curve of her back. "Melissa," Kate said.

Melissa stopped, and Mark grabbed his crotch and turned his shuddering backside to Kate. "Mom!" Melissa's naked body lunged at the door and slammed it in Kate's face. "I can't believe you, Mom!"

"Put your clothes on now!" Kate shouted at the door.

"We can't," Melissa said. "Our clothes are all out there."

Kate turned then and noticed the storm-strewn boxer shorts, Levis, soiled white socks, Melissa's blouse and bra, even her pink Keds. Why were Melissa's shoes on Kate's bed? She picked them up, tossed them to the floor, and then started crying. She hardly knew why, though it had something to do with the pregnant woman and the surprise of her daughter, her body so womanly, full in the hips and breasts, more beautiful than Kate had ever been, engaged, absorbed in what Kate could only think of

now as an adult activity. Her loss of control left her feeling even angrier at Melissa. “I want to talk to you both downstairs in five minutes!” she shouted.

After doing her best to cover up all signs of tears, Kate sat across from Melissa and Mark in the living room. They had a messy, post-sex look about them, their hair mussed and their clothes, if secure and in place, somehow looser on their bodies. “I don’t know what to say,” Kate began.

“We’re being careful,” Melissa said. “I’m on the pill, Mom. I’ve had my first pelvic exam. We’ve both been tested. I’m doing everything I should be doing.”

“You were in *my* bathroom,” Kate said. These words made Mark, a tall, good-looking boy, broad in the shoulders and not usually meek, look down at the floor.

“You have the large shower,” Melissa said. “We were going to clean things up. You weren’t supposed to be home yet.”

“Your clothes were all over *my* bed. Your shoes were on *my* bed.”

Melissa smirked and flashed her blue eyes at Kate. This was her most charming and practiced gesture, and though it usually made Kate fall instantly in love with her daughter, she resisted it now. “Well,” Melissa said, “we were in a hurry.”

Kate felt her face go red. “You should have been studying.”

“We still have time to study,” Melissa said.

“You need all the time you can get. You have to apply to schools and prepare for the college boards.”

“That’s next year,” Melissa said.

Kate took a deep breath. She was about to do something she had been afraid to do for months. “I don’t think what you did was wrong. I’m more concerned about the

irresponsibility of neglecting the rest of life so that you could do . . .” Kate couldn’t name what they’d done, nor could she keep pretending to herself that it didn’t bother her. How could her child, her teenaged daughter, take on this responsibility? How could she lie on her back in a doctor’s office with her legs in stirrups so that she could, as safely as possible, give herself to a boy? A boy who made her lose so much presence of mind that she would throw her dirty shoes on her mother’s bed, use her shower, and maybe even afterwards use her bed. Kate had terrifying visions of what would become of these two after she was gone. They’d end up in ten months with a baby and stuck in subsidized housing somewhere. It was possible. But what frightened Kate most was the fact that she herself was responsible for pushing these kids—and they certainly were no more than kids—into each other’s arms with her own desperation, her own intensity.

Two years before, when Kate thought she was dying for the first time, she’d panicked. She couldn’t sleep. She couldn’t stand the aloneness, the waiting, the nights of insomnia. Kate clung to Melissa and made her go everywhere with her—the doctor’s office, the grocery store, the post office, the accountant’s. It didn’t take long for Melissa to disappear. She joined the swim team, the debate club, and the school newspaper. In the meantime, Kate kept dying. She suffered from headaches, double vision, loss of balance so extreme that she’d have to lean against the nearest wall to stay upright. Kate saw Melissa only in the late evenings when she’d sit at the kitchen table, her hair stringy from chlorine, wolfing down cereal, toast, and cookies. And so when Kate woke at night and the hours alone in the dark became intolerable, she walked down the hallway to her daughter’s room, gently moved aside the large stuffed bear her then fourteen-year-old child slept with, and got into her bed. She tried not to cry, but failed. Melissa said

nothing, just stiffened and moved to the edge. At first light, Kate quietly got up and returned to her room.

Kate slept with her daughter as often as three times a week. She slept with her until one night she opened the door and saw in the dimness a boy next to Melissa. She had met Mark only once before then and knew that he was on the swim team and played tenor saxophone for Central High's jazz ensemble. His thick curly hair was on the pillow, his muscular back was turned to her, and his bare arm was wrapped around Melissa, protecting her from her sick mother.

After that, Kate stayed away from her daughter's room. She might have put an end to Mark's sleepovers if she hadn't been sick and, later, if Melissa and Mark hadn't cooled off soon after the cancer disappeared. Mark no longer slept over, so far as Kate knew. But her cancer was back, and she could only expect the worst when her daughter found out. So she was finally going to put her foot down, never mind that what bothered her most was not so much their having sex—she had assumed as much before this afternoon—as her having seen the sex, and having seen Melissa's dirty tennis shoes—that image returned now and made her wince—on her clean bed. Thrown, tossed with no concern whatever for her mother. “You two need to see less of each other,” she said. “It would be better for both of you. You can go out on Friday and Saturday nights. But weekday afternoons and nights are off limits. Got it?”

Melissa looked at Kate with childish fury. “No,” she said.

“Don't say no to me.” Kate hardly recognized herself. She'd always been tolerant and open with her daughter. She'd always laid out options, pros and cons, and let her daughter make her own decisions.

Melissa shook her head. “No. I’m saying no. We’re not going to do it.” She stood, took Mark forcefully by the hand, and led him up to her bedroom, where she slammed the door. Kate should have done something. She should have stood at the foot of the stairs and yelled. She should have gone up there and shouted through the door. But she was too tired to go on playing the role of parent. In any case, she wouldn’t be a parent much longer.

Her second meeting with Charles took place at 7 A.M. at a small restaurant across from the university hospital’s cancer center, where, among other procedures, she’d had her mammogram done seven times in one sitting. Kate had wanted to suggest another breakfast place, but she kept quiet. She didn’t want to have to explain herself. Not yet. A line of scarlet sunrise had just begun to wipe out the last few morning stars when they stepped out of the cold. All the same, waiting to be seated, Kate felt the presence of the black glass façade across the street and couldn’t help remembering the pink walls of the waiting booth where she’d spent almost eight hours with plastic pads stuck to her breasts. Only a floor above the mammogram clinic, she would lie on her back weeks later while a physician’s assistant slid a needle deep between two upper lumbar vertebrae to draw out the spinal fluid in which, it turned out, carcinoma cells were actively dividing. She was told to expect double vision, speech impairment, dizziness, partial paralysis, and any number of random sensations due to the tumor that was growing in her brain. And then there was the chemotherapy, the woman named Meg who’d died in the waiting room while reading *Vogue*. It was hardly an appropriate magazine for a cancer ward, Kate had been thinking when Meg slumped over in her chair and stopped breathing. Kate was

amazed at her calm as she broke Meg's fall, sat her upright, and held her in her chair until someone arrived and took her away.

Once she and Charles sat across from each other in a booth, she was able to forget the hospital. A sheet of Levolor-sliced sun fell over their table, and billows of steam rose from their coffee cups in the brightness. He was jumpy, tapping his fingers against his cup, then running them through his hair. She was already getting used to the angularity of his face and finding it vaguely attractive. His blue eyes she noticed for the first time—faint, shallow—after the waitress set their menus down. “Aren't you nervous?” he asked.

She wasn't, and she told him so.

“I am,” he said, and she could hear it in his voice. “Doesn't it bother you to see a grown man afraid?”

“Apparently not.” She laughed, reached across the table, and took his hand for the first time. But when he didn't loosen to her touch, she let him go.

The next week, she dropped into his furniture store just before closing. Charles seemed to have a great deal more courage as he walked briskly through the endless rows of desks, filing cabinets, and computer tables to meet her. “Welcome,” he said, smiling, at ease in his suit and tie. He led her around and made her sit in multiple styles of waiting-room chairs and ergonomically designed stools for typists and receptionists. The repetition and sameness of objects—chair after chair after chair—spooked her a little. “You think it's terrible,” he said. “What I do.”

She denied it at first. Then said, “It does seem a little . . . lonely. All these human objects without the humans.”

“You want to see lonely?” he said. He walked her into the back: a gray, dimly lit storage facility, in the middle of which stood a forklift surrounded by towers of boxes. The place was remarkably vacant of warmth and life, and a soft roar of wind and emptiness seemed to hum at its center.

She admired his comfort here, his sense of dominion. “I don’t mind it. It’s quiet. It’s like going to the park. It’s an escape.”

Later that week they strolled through the arboretum, where the trees had begun to turn and where they lingered beside a glassy, shallow stretch of the Huron River, the pink, unmarked evening sky laid out over its mirror. Two hippie kids in loose clothing sat on a log, holding each other, kissing, giggling. A muddy-colored dog with a red handkerchief knotted around its neck leapt into the river and began drinking. When Kate took Charles’s hand and pulled herself close to him, he was trembling. And somehow, just after Kate kissed his cheek lightly, she caught it, too; a rush of fear shook her. She was breathing shallowly when Charles bent down and kissed her on the lips. “I hope that was all right,” he said.

When she nodded, he seemed immensely relieved, his step lighter now as they walked hand in hand, swinging their linked arms, up a dirt path until they came to a clearing in the trees. Startled, a deer sprinted through the high grass, dove into the trees, and was gone. In the orange evening light, Charles looked larger, less meek, and Kate couldn’t help wondering what this gentle man would be like with a gun. “What’s it like to kill something?” she asked.

“You might not like me as much if I told you the truth.”

Kate laughed and squeezed his hand. “I promise I’ll still like you.”

“OK,” Charles said. “It’s thrilling. It’s why you go out there. It’s the fun part.”

“It’s fun to kill?” If she didn’t like him less, it still wasn’t the most pleasant answer, nor one she understood.

“Perhaps ‘fun’ isn’t exactly the right word.”

On their walk back, the temperature dropped sharply, and Kate was shivering so violently that she had to wonder if her vulnerability to the cold had to do with her illness. Was she weaker than she’d suspected? When they parked in front of Kate’s house, she kissed him once, but pulled away when he wanted to continue. “I should tell you something,” she said, still shivering. The dark inside the car, the fact that she could see only the outline of his face, made it easier to lie to him. “I’m recovering from cancer. Breast,” she said, stopping so that odd word stood alone. “Recovered, I mean. I wouldn’t mention it, but I need to tell you that I have a scar.”

“A scar?” he said.

“I had a mastectomy. My left breast.” She hated the feeling of shame that accompanied what she had just said. It was merely a fact, and she should have had the presence of mind to treat it as such.

There was a pause before he said, “I’m sorry.”

Kate couldn’t see the expression on his face, but she sensed that something was different between them. An ease, an excitement was gone. “Does that change things?” she asked.

Again, he took time in answering. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?” The anger in her voice half surprised her. She didn’t know him well enough to be angry with him.

“It’s just that . . .” He stopped himself and reformulated his thought. “This was supposed to be a light thing. No commitment. Nothing serious.”

“What does this have to do with commitment?”

“I don’t know,” he said. Then he bumbled out, “It seems serious. It seems . . .”

“All right,” she said. She got out of his car, and before she’d closed the front door behind her, she heard him say, “I’ll call you.”

Inside, she found Melissa and Mark on the couch watching a movie in the dark. It was a school night, and they were openly defying the rule she’d set down. She turned the lights on, and they looked at her, squinting in the brightness. “Mark has to leave now.” Her anger was too pronounced, too obviously out of proportion. Their response to it was to remain frozen in each other’s arms. Kate wanted to throw something at them—a shoe, a book, even her purse would have worked. “I said now,” Kate said. Mark finally sat up and rushed to put his shoes on.

“Did something happen on your date?” Melissa asked.

“I didn’t have a date.”

She expected a fight from Melissa. But instead her daughter sat up slowly and kept her eyes cautiously on Kate.

Charles called all week and left pleas on the answering machine that Kate tried her best to ignore. He was blunt. He stuttered and repeated himself. He admitted that he’d been thinking of her. He regretted the words he’d spoken that night. “I’m calling from the back of the store,” he said in one message. “From the warehouse phone. You were right. It is lonely back here.” In another, he became almost desperate. “I guess I just miss you.

I hope I'm not saying too much. I realize this is just an answering machine. I realize that I'm begging." He sounded as hurt and alone as she had felt in the car that night.

Nonetheless, she was done with him, until he made what was obviously his final call, the sad base-tone of resignation in his voice. "I'm sorry things didn't work out," he said.

When she picked up the phone, he began once again to express his regrets, and because she couldn't listen to one more simultaneously rambling and halting apology, she said, "OK, Charles. Apology accepted."

He wanted to see her as soon as possible. That afternoon he and his son, Ryan, had planned to shoot skeet at the gun club. And so Kate ended up on the edge of town, shouldering a shotgun for the first time in her life and wearing wax earplugs as she blasted away at a "clay pigeon," a little black disk, and tried to follow the instructions Charles shouted out at her to lead the pigeon by at least a foot. The gun club was in the center of an abandoned field, which looked dead, yellow, and already ravaged by winter. It was a gray day, the air like white smoke, and Kate was surprised by the pleasing and substantial weight of the weapon in her hands, the delicious, earthy odors of cordite and gunpowder after each blast, the sense—there was no mistaking it—of power and control the weapon gave her when she finally obliterated her target. She did so twice, then three times, awed as the disk disintegrated in the air. Behind her, a small boy of about ten, who wore a camouflage baseball cap and chewed a huge wad of pink bubble gum, pressed a button that released the pigeon every time she shouted the word "Pull!" She handed the shotgun, its barrel hot as a stovetop, to Charles and stood behind him—"Always stand behind the shooter," he'd told her earlier in a grave voice—and watched now as he meticulously hit pigeon after pigeon. She hadn't anticipated her excitement at seeing

Charles's skill, the quickness with which he trained the barrel on the target and destroyed it. His arms seemed thicker, more powerful, his shoulders broader. There was no sign of weakness, of hesitancy or doubt, and she was awed to see this unexpected competence in a man who, as she was seeing that afternoon, could barely keep his son in check.

Ryan was a tall kid with deep-set eyes that seemed on the edge of rage every time he looked at Kate. His mohawk, high and stiff and died salmon pink, and his multiply-pierced ears, lined with studs and hoops, made him seem menacing, especially when he took the shotgun in hand. On the way out to the club, when Charles had stopped for gas and left Kate and Ryan in the car alone, the boy resisted her every attempt at conversation, and then, after she had given up, he smiled at her and said, "Are you fucking my dad yet?"

"I'm not going to answer that question."

"None of my business, right?" he said. "You've probably already seen that he's a wimp. He lets people do whatever they want to him. He just takes it."

"I'm not that kind of person," Kate said.

Ryan nodded. "Sure you're not."

Whenever Ryan missed his target that afternoon, he cringed and swore, sometimes under his breath, though more often out loud. "Fuck me," he half shouted once, to which Charles merely responded with a warning glance. Kate would have sent him to the car at the very least. Ryan had certainly been right about his father: He did seem willing to take just about anything.

Kate was relieved when they dropped Ryan at home later and went out to a pleasant dinner with wine. When late in the meal Charles sighed and said, "I'm too easy on Ryan. I let him get away with everything," Kate lied.

"I'm not so sure that's wrong," she said. "Every kid needs a different approach."

He shook his head. "My motives aren't that noble. I just want him to like me again."

They joined hands across the table now. Kate felt terrible for this worried father, this man who just wanted to be liked, and her pity quickly transformed into attraction. She knew already that she wanted to sleep with him that night. She was blushing when she stammered out an invitation. "You can say no," she added.

But he didn't say no. Kate hardly knew how she'd imagined herself behaving then, though she hoped that passion and desire would take over, that she'd know what to do. Instead, she and Charles waited for the bill in utter silence, which persisted as they drove toward Kate's place, the black trees and the proper Victorian homes rising on either side of them in the dark. "Let's talk," Kate said.

"OK," Charles said. But they didn't say another word until they stood facing each other across Kate's bed. For a change, Kate was relieved that Melissa had once again defied her and was out that night. "We don't have to do this," she said.

"I want to," he said, though he didn't sound as if he did.

When she came out of the bathroom wearing a man's white T-shirt that fell to her thighs, she didn't feel at all attractive. Charles sat on the edge of the bed in his tank top and boxer shorts, his legs skinnier, paler, more covered in thick, dark hair than she'd

imagined. His arms were crossed, as if protecting himself from her. “I don’t care about your scar,” he said.

Kate knew he’d meant to say something that would sound nicer, more romantic. “I want to keep this on,” she said, pointing to her shirt.

In the dark, everything became a little easier. He began to kiss her—her face, her neck, her arms—all the while carefully avoiding the place of her absent breast. His mustache tickled. She found his erection without meaning to. It was just suddenly there in her hand, and she couldn’t help but think of the shotgun she’d been handling earlier that day. Guns and penises. She let out a silly, adolescent laugh. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“I haven’t done this in so long.” Now that she held him, she didn’t quite know what to do with him. She tried the very act she’d seen her daughter perform only weeks before, but she was indelicate and Charles let out a whelp of pain and then began to laugh.

“Is this all right?” he asked when he finally mounted her.

Her left thigh began cramping, but she nodded as the pain gathered into a dense ball. “It’s all right,” she said. His caution, his concern moved her. If not passionate, it was deeply tender, just as he had promised, and she lifted herself a little to kiss his shoulders, his neck and cheeks. It took him a while—Kate could have hoped for a briefer first time—but as soon as he was finished, he rolled over and said, “You didn’t, did you?”

“I will next time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was . . .” She paused, looking for a word, and when she finally said it, the fullness and enthusiasm in her voice embarrassed her, “Lovely.” She felt a deep and heavy laziness of body. Their legs were tangled. Off in the darkness beside her, the fingers of her hand caressed Charles’s neck. She had forgotten for a moment what was happening to her. She was dying, she remembered now. Again. For the second time. And for some reason, it was easy to know. She wasn’t afraid, even as she was certain that the fear would return soon. For now she lay next to a man who must have been as spent and physically oblivious as she since he let out an enormous, accidental belch. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Half asleep, Kate giggled lazily. “I’m happy,” she said.

The next morning, she was dizzy and experiencing double vision. In her bathroom mirror, she saw that her left eye had fallen toward the lower outside corner of its socket. She looked monstrous, and she wanted Charles, who lay slumbering in her bed, out of the house. When she prodded him awake, he rolled over and smiled at her, seeming to expect the kisses and friendliness of a lover. His breath was less than pleasant and his hair was lopsided. She kept a hand over her eye, and when he asked about it, she said something about an infection and eye drops that he didn’t question. “I’ve got to get to work,” she said, after which she stood by him while he dressed.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, standing on the porch in a warmish rainy morning. One of his shoes was still untied, and his shirt was partially untucked. He waited in the drizzle until Kate gave him a peck on the cheek. “Something’s wrong,” he said. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I’ll call you,” she said, and then closed the door.

Kate stayed home from work for the next few days. With the house empty, she thought of Charles more than she wanted to: his ease with a shotgun, his pale, gangly nakedness, his post-coital belch, his laughter and patience in her bed. He left four messages on the machine, but she didn’t call him until two days later. It was three in the morning, and she’d woken with a dull, throbbing pressure in her head that verged on pain. She was hot, drenched in sweat, a side effect, her doctor had explained, of rapidly growing tumors, and opened her windows, but the breeze moving in the curtain sent shadows rushing through the dark of her room—walls of blackness falling on top of her. “Kate,” he said sleepily.

“Would you consider coming over here . . . now?”

He was in her bed in fewer than twenty minutes. She could only cuddle that night, and he seemed more than happy to oblige her. “This isn’t going to be serious, right?” she asked.

He kissed her ear. “OK.”

“It will be pleasant. It will go until one of us says enough,” she said.

He moved in closer, sealing their bodies together. “Sure. I mean, unless we decide otherwise.”

“I’m pretty sure that I won’t decide otherwise.”

“That’s fine,” Charles said.

On subsequent nights, they returned to their lovemaking, vigorous, athletic, more skilled and certain. They did everything they could think of with the eagerness of discovery and the fumbling skill of those who’d done it before. Charles took her from

behind with an enthusiastic brutishness—his arm hooked around her neck and his pelvis pounding into her—that left her feeling pleasantly ravished. Kate remembered how to come, straddling Charles and using her thigh muscles to focus on the pleasure. Charles became, at times, almost too fearless, letting out loud howls so that Kate put a hand over his mouth and whispered, “My daughter will hear.” In moments of physical exuberance, Charles tried to lift her shirt, but she grabbed his arm forcefully and pushed it back down.

After a week or so of adventurous nights together, Kate was exhausted. Her body felt leaden, fatigued, not exactly sick, but not well either. She wanted closeness, not pleasure, which Charles sensed easily. He spooned her, the weight of his arm folded over her—a good, blanketing weight—and fell asleep more often than not hours before Kate, who lay awake watching the lunar sweep of headlights pass through the room. Charles spoke out of his dreams, which were sometimes comforting, as when he asked repeatedly for more gravy, please. “Delicious,” he would say. And sometimes terrifying. “Stay away!” he shouted one night. “Away! Away!” When she woke him, he looked at her, and she saw the terror pass from his face as soon as he recognized her. “Love,” he said sleepily, and then held on to her for a desperate and needy moment before he fell back asleep.

Toward the end of October, Kate arrived home from work one afternoon to find her daughter in tears at the kitchen table. Sitting across from her, Mark looked pale and unwell, and Kate assumed that he had finally broken her daughter’s heart. Kate had had a good day and was hardly prepared to deal with this sadness. She’d felt strong, invigorated right through this sunny, slightly chilly afternoon. At lunch she had seen a

group of schoolchildren dressed as witches and vampires grasping a rope as their teachers herded them safely across Huron Street. Walking home, she took note of the fat pumpkins, gapped-toothed and grinning on porch steps, and thought of this holiday that contemplated darkness and fear and death. She'd felt both aware of and pleasantly removed from what was about to happen to her. And now, facing her weeping daughter, she was about to rush upstairs and leave the kids to themselves when Melissa lifted an open letter from the table. "You didn't tell me. You didn't say anything."

"Is that my mail?" Kate asked, setting her briefcase down. From the torn envelope on the table, Kate knew it must be a letter from the hospice where she had decided she would die, in part to give Melissa her own safe space at home.

"You lied."

"I think Mark should go home," Kate said calmly. "I think you and I need to talk."

"He's not going." Kate's daughter reached over and grasped Mark's hand.

Mark looked shaken, uncertain. He wore a Mountain Dew T-shirt, a new pair of bright-blue Nike running shoes, and the same sort of blue sweatpants that Melissa was wearing. They had just returned from swim-team practice and had that sallow, washed-out look of kids who've been in water for hours. A box of Raisin Bran was out on the table, and they'd no doubt eaten two or three bowls each before Melissa had opened the letter. This time of the afternoon, with the kids gorging on toast and cereal, then sitting in front of the TV or working on homework, could be Kate's favorite part of the day. She enjoyed the house most when they were there, when she felt their presence, which was

another reason she never should have put her foot down weeks before. “Should I go, Mrs. Harrison?” Mark asked.

“He’s staying,” Melissa said again.

“He might want to go,” Kate said.

Mark looked timidly over at Melissa. “Maybe I should go.” Melissa shook her head and pulled him so forcefully toward her that Mark had to scoot his chair over. “I think I should go.”

“Please just . . .,” Melissa growled, unable to finish her sentence.

Kate sat down at the table. “I didn’t tell you because I needed some privacy for a while. I needed to get used to it again.”

“How long?” Melissa asked.

“Maybe three months. Maybe six. The doctors can’t be certain.”

“You don’t look sick,” Melissa said suspiciously.

“I don’t feel very sick. Yet.”

“Maybe it won’t happen. It didn’t happen last time.”

“Maybe.”

Sitting beside Melissa, Mark seemed to squirm in his chair. He had no freedom to move with Melissa clinging to him, and Kate saw how intensely he wanted to escape. She sensed that this second occasion of her dying might be too much for him. She hardly knew if it was a selfish and calculating impulse or true desperation, the better motive by far, that made her say, “You can spend as much time with Mark as you like, Melissa. He can even sleep over now and then. I just ask that you not disappear this time.”

Melissa’s gaze was cruel. “You lied to me.”

And because Kate couldn't fight, especially over this, she got up and left the room.

Kate was not surprised when her daughter disappeared after that. She came home from school late and left first thing in the morning, hopping into Mark's car. She stopped talking to Kate, or only talked to her to say the most prosaic things. "Got to go. Be home later." Kate could do nothing but watch as her daughter grew distant, watch and hope that Melissa's fury would subside.

It was around this time that Kate began testing Charles, though she was only vaguely aware of doing so. One morning when they woke up together, Kate kissed him and then asked him to shave his mustache. "I'd like to see you without it. It tickles a little."

He touched it contemplatively before retreating to her bathroom. After a moment, she heard his electric razor, which he'd brought over hesitantly the week before and only after asking her permission. "It's an extra," he had said. "I have another at home." As if that somehow made a difference. Kate had smiled and said teasingly, "As long as you don't think it's too dangerous." When he came back out of the bathroom now, his face was leaner than she'd expected, though she knew she'd get used to it. What surprised her even more was how willingly, how quickly he'd done as she asked.

She made other requests, too. She asked him to part his hair on the left side rather than in the middle, and he did it. She asked him to wear red, the color that suited him best, and discouraged him from ever wearing gray, which washed him out. She woke him at two, three, four in the morning and made him leave without explaining herself.

She called him at the same hours and pressured him to come over and get into bed with her. He came and he left when she asked. And though she wasn't always sure why she made her requests, she was sure that Ryan had been right about her. She was taking advantage. She was pushing him around.

The first weekend in November, Charles took Kate hunting. He'd proposed that she hike with him through the woods while he hunted, and had been surprised when she insisted on participating. She left a note for Melissa, to whom she hadn't talked in days. "Gone hunting. Will return on Sunday." Kate felt startled by the note even as she wrote it: how odd, how unlike herself it sounded. Would Melissa laugh when she read it? Would she worry?

Charles picked her up at five on Saturday morning in what he called his "rig": a huge pickup with a camper on the back. It was dark out, freezing, and Kate felt frail and groggy as she locked the front door and pushed herself through the cold air. The truck was warm and smelled of boot leather, wet wool, and another odor that Kate could identify now as guns—oil and cordite. A mist clung to the roads and made the dark houses on Washington Street appear caught in spools of web. Kate struggled to stay awake and talk to Charles, but she felt unwell, and the pull of sleep and the pleasure of succumbing to it were too much.

She woke in a little town called Mio, where Charles bought her a hunting license from a large man who wore an orange hat with earflaps and smiled at Kate. "Wish I could get my wife to hunt. But she won't have it."

“I thought I’d try it this once,” Kate said. She felt a little strange and improper, going out into the woods to kill things.

Outside Mio, they entered a tract of forest that Charles knew well enough to navigate without a map. By ten that morning, Kate had donned a hunting vest, its pockets weighted down by twenty-gauge shells, and was cradling a shotgun and trampling over a forest floor carpeted with bark and dead leaves. Charles was twenty yards to her right. Their quarry was grouse, and Kate was tense, conscious of wanting to shoot something, though she didn’t necessarily want to kill it. The day was sunless and cold enough that Kate could see her breath. When the first bird rose in front of her, the muscular beating of its wings startled her. She shot and missed, after which Charles took the bird down in a cloud of feathers. The grouse, dark gray and nearly the size of a chicken, was still alive, driving itself into the ground as it flapped one wing. Charles ran to it, took its head in hand, and snapped its neck with a flick of his wrist, then stuffed it in his game pouch. “You want to do that right away,” he said. “There’s no reason to let it suffer.” How simple, how quick it was. It sickened Kate even as it excited her, even as it made her want to shoot more surely the next time.

The second bird that got up, she missed, as did Charles, who shot after her, and she was relieved to see the bird soar above the tree line and escape. But early that afternoon a grouse burst out of a tree no more than five feet in front of her. She was quick to train the barrel on it. The bird went down and immediately began its broken dance, hopping on a leg, leaping into the air and falling again. She ran to it, then stood back when she saw the ripped-open wing, the bleeding flesh to which bits of feather stuck. Charles reached her and offered to finish the panicky creature off. “I can do it,”

Kate said. She grabbed it by the neck, struck by its weight, its absolute terror as its one good wing insisted on struggle. She tried to flick her wrist, as she had seen Charles do, but the bird was stubbornly heavy, one grayish, unreadable eye trained on her as she flopped its too-solid body about. Feathers fell to her feet. Blood flecked her forearm and left dark spots on her jeans. The bird's stupid determination enraged her, and she tightened her grasp around its neck and flung it down like a heavy bag of laundry. She felt its neck snap, as distinct as a pencil breaking. Finally, it was dead, and Kate felt guilty for the sense of accomplishment killing it had given her. She had overcome the bird. She was the stronger. And this feeling was overshadowed only by her desire to clean herself up, to get rid of the mess, the blood and feathers, of her stupid bird.

That night, Charles opened a nice bottle of Cabernet and prepared a modest feast of wild rice, zucchini squash, and grouse breasts, which were thankfully small. Kate's appetite was poor. Though the bright interior of the camper was warm and cozy, she battled a nearly irresistible fatigue that seemed to arrive earlier every evening now. Charles offered a toast to her hunting skills. "To your successful first day out," he said. "We'll do this again."

He was glowing, overjoyed by the success of the day, by the belief that there would be other such days, and Kate felt the urgent need to dim his happiness. But it was too late to tell him with any justice what he should have already known. "I'm not sure," she said. "Hunting is a little dirty for me."

It stormed that night, the wind and the rain pounding the thin camper walls. In bed, the darkness was all-encompassing, pitch-black as it could only be away from city lights. Kate could see nothing in it. No sign of Charles beside her. No sign of her own

hand in front of her. And as the wind continued to rage, Kate thought of the grouse out there clenched like fists in the shelter of trees and covered over in the same darkness that seemed to be smothering her. She felt his touch then, his soft fingers settling over the place where her breast was gone. It was not a sexual touch. It was tender. It wanted only closeness. And when Kate tried to remove his hand, he held her more firmly, and soon she let her hand rest over his, let herself be held in a darkness that felt safer now.

In November, Kate found it almost impossible to work through a full day at the bank. She was having pressure headaches that made even light physical activity unthinkable. Her double vision and dizziness worsened. At times, her left hand stopped functioning. She couldn't make the fingers close, and so for hours at a time she would keep this hand in her lap and hope no one noticed. To a degree, these signs of her illness relieved Kate. Certainty was good. It precluded hope. It precluded delusion and disappointment. And then, for a day, even two or three, the pain and fatigue would lift and she'd feel remarkably well again. She'd eat large dinners with Charles and make love to him. She'd take long walks with him and stay up late watching rented movies. She'd laugh loudly at his jokes, which were admittedly not so funny. But the pain would always come back, and she had to prepare herself for its return. She had to remind herself that she would die, which she did by handling numerous practicalities with the same dispatch and efficiency she brought to everything else in her life. She prepared her taxes in advance, contacted a lawyer, revised her will, set up a checking account for Melissa, who would turn seventeen in six months and would live alone in the year before college. Kate arranged a very brief and affordable funeral, at which, she had decided, no physical

remains of her—in a jar or coffin—would be present. Kate found comfort in these tasks. They made death accomplishable, something she could do rather than something that would be done to her.

One morning, after four days of what felt like perfect health, Kate got up from bed and collapsed before she'd gotten halfway to the bathroom. Charles was helping her up when she realized what had happened. She was unhurt, and as soon as she could stand on her own, she pushed Charles away. "Please don't cling to me," she said.

"You just fell."

"I stumbled. I'm fine now." She went into the bathroom, and when she came back out, Charles was sitting on the edge of the bed looking up at her with too much concern in his eyes.

"Is something wrong?" He paused, seeming to realize the danger in his question. "Are you unwell?"

She slammed her underwear drawer, panties and a bra clenched in her fist, and began rifling through dresses in her closet with a physical vigor that was meant to be definite proof of her wellness. Charles flinched when she threw a dress down on the bed. "I am not unwell."

"You just collapsed."

"I tripped."

"Your knees gave out from under you. I saw it. You've been tired lately. I've seen that, too."

She turned her back to him and kicked a stray house-slipper into the wall. “I’m dying.” She was furious at him for making her say it. But in the long silence after her admission, her anger faded. “I lied to you earlier. I’m not recovered. I’m sick.”

“Dying,” he said flatly. “Dying when?”

“I’m dying now.”

“When?” he asked again. “How long?”

“Not long.” She turned around. Charles was naked save for his boxer shorts. His pale shoulders were drooped in a sad way that made her want to go to him, and through the slightly open slit of his shorts, she glimpsed a small part of his limp penis, the sight of which left her feeling tender and proprietary toward him. He was hers—her lover, her friend, her companion.

“From what?” he asked.

“Cancer.”

He nodded.

“It’s gone to the brain,” she said. “That’s why I get dizzy.”

“Jesus,” he said.

“It’ll get worse,” she continued, unable to stop herself. “Before it’s over, I might not be able to make facial expressions. I might not be able to pronounce words correctly.” She stopped. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“You didn’t tell me any of this.”

“We were having a fling,” she said. “That was our agreement.”

She sat down next to him, but he moved away and then stood up and began hurriedly dressing. “No,” she said. She hadn’t meant to say that.

He struggled to tie his necktie, finally just letting its ends fall. “I’ve got to go for a while,” he said. He picked his shoes up from the floor, walked into the hallway in his socks, and closed the door behind him.

She hadn’t expected the heartbreak, the thoughts of him, the simple, unrelenting desire for an absent person. She called twice and left messages. In the first, she asked him to please call. In the second, she was blunt. “Call me, Charles. Call me today.” She was shocked by her aggression, her outright command. But she was even more surprised by the fact that he didn’t call, not on that day and not on the next. The third time she called, Ryan answered with a flat, face-slapping, “Yeah, who is it?”

“Kate,” she said softly. “I’d like to speak to your father.”

“What did you do to him?” She’d expected the rudeness, but not the defensiveness, the obvious anger in his voice.

“I’d like to speak to him.”

“He’s not here.” He paused. “What did you do to him?”

“I don’t think that’s really your concern.”

“He was crying the other day. He was just sitting at the table crying. I guess you found out just how much you could push him around. I’d say you’re an expert at that.”

The rage in Ryan’s voice left her both overwhelmed by guilt and glad that there was love for Charles mixed in with his son’s bitterness. “Please tell him I called.”

“Maybe I will,” he said, and then hung up.

By mid-November, the beautiful portion of fall had ended. The winds came and blasted the leaves from the trees, and the rains turned them to brown gutter slush. The

dark fell early, and more often than not Kate woke to gray mornings and the wet sounds of cars driving through water-drenched streets. Melissa continued to stay away, arriving home late in the evenings and slipping out of the house with her book bag early in the mornings. Kate worked half days now at the bank. She'd told her bad news to her district manager, who was happy to let her work until she no longer could. She spent her solitary afternoons at home rereading old mysteries and watching stacks of rented movies. She slept. She hoped that Charles would call. And she prepared herself for what would be a quieter, lonelier death than she'd expected.

Just when it seemed things would go on in this way, Kate came home from work one afternoon to find Melissa on the couch hugging her knees. She was in her favorite pajamas—thin yellow cotton with blue polka dots—and her eyes were raw from crying. In the crook of one arm, she held her worn-out teddy bear. Kate sat down on the opposite end of the couch. “Where’s Mark?” she asked.

“He’s gone.”

“Home?” Kate asked.

“Gone,” Melissa said. “He dropped me.”

Kate felt a rush of guilt. She wanted to go to her daughter, but Melissa made no gesture or sign of wanting her. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“I scared him off,” Melissa said. “I was too intense for him, or something.”

“I don’t think it was you,” Kate said. “I think it was the circumstances. Sixteen-year-old boys don’t particularly want to be around a house where the mother keeps taking to her sickbed.”

Melissa shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“OK,” Kate said. “There are other boys.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Melissa said, beginning to cry again. “I was just using him. That’s what he said, and maybe he was right. He was my protector.” She looked up at Kate. “From you.” She stopped crying then and sat up straight and made an effort, Kate could tell, to be brave. “I’m going to try to be around more.”

This news caught Kate off guard. She didn’t know what to say, and was just as surprised when she felt the tears come. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“I can’t be here all the time,” Melissa said cautiously. “But I’ll be here after school, and I’ll be here for dinners.”

“I know what to expect this time,” Kate said. “I’m going to be better. I’m not going to—”

“You went hunting the other weekend,” Melissa interrupted.

Kate nodded. “I actually shot a bird.”

Melissa laughed. “I can’t picture it.”

“I did. I shot it and Charles roasted it and I ate it.” Kate and Melissa both laughed at the thought of it.

It took Charles three weeks to call. He left a message on the machine asking Kate to coffee at the café where they’d first met. That afternoon, the temperature fell below freezing, though the sun was out, and people hurried over the sidewalks, bundled in heavy coats. Wanting to look her best, Kate went without a hat and suffered for it, her ears numb by the time she entered the warm, mostly empty café. She found him seated in the same sunny corner where they had met, though he looked different now. After three

weeks of not seeing him, he looked paler, thinner, slighter than she'd remembered him. He sat clinging to his coffee cup as if for warmth. His mustache was back, for which she was glad. In truth, she preferred him with his mustache. "Thank you for coming," he said after she'd sat down.

She could hear the fear in his voice and was at first reassured by it. "I've missed you," Kate said. It was a great relief to have said this, to have let it out.

He smiled, but his smile didn't last. "I'm not good at this."

"Good at what?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know what I want to say."

Kate already knew from his tone what he wanted to say. "Sure you do. I don't know why you had to make me come out in the cold to hear it."

He shook his head as if he were trying to rid himself of a thought. "I'm very sorry about your . . . about being sick. I wanted you to know that."

"Thank you," Kate said. "I'm sorry, too. About not telling you." But she couldn't make herself sound sorry. And once again, she was surprised by her anger. She wanted to strike out at him now. Instead, she sat back in her chair and waited for him to speak.

"It's nice to see you. I've missed you. That's true for me, too. But I don't think I know you well enough to . . ."

He was going to make her finish his thought. He didn't know her well enough to watch her die. "I suppose not," she said. And then she added, with more anger in her voice than she'd wanted, "Your electric razor is still in my bathroom."

"Oh," he said.

For a moment, she remained silent and fought off an urge to weep. It stung to see this man who had giggled and tumbled in her bed now hold himself at a distance. And when she was sure she would not cry, she laughed. “It was just a fling, right?” Her voice sounded fake, and though she knew this pretense made her ridiculous, she couldn’t help herself.

“Sure,” Charles said. “I just wanted to see you again.” He put his head down, and for a moment Kate thought he might cry. But when he looked up again, he managed to smile briefly. “It was nice,” he said.

He wanted her to agree. He wanted her to say something equally fake and cheerful, but she didn’t.

Melissa came back to her, as she’d said she would. In the late afternoons, she opened her books on the kitchen table and worked while Kate prepared dinner. One afternoon, Melissa brought dozens of college brochures home from school, and Kate and Melissa paged through them, talking about whether a large or a small college experience would suit Melissa best. Did she want a school with a Greek system? “That’s not for me,” Melissa said. And Kate, who didn’t want to be too influential, was inwardly glad that her daughter would not be a sorority girl. It was far too early to be so absorbed by these questions, but Kate was grateful for any opportunity to talk about her daughter’s future, and Melissa seemed to know this and indulged her.

In December, Kate’s double vision worsened and she finally left the bank for good. Her doctor recommended that she tape her left eye shut and wear a patch. And so this small part of Kate was already dead. Once or twice a week, she would suffer

headaches that were bad enough for morphine. But for the most part, dying was surprisingly painless. More than anything else, it was exhausting, so exhausting that merely standing up was a struggle. At times, death seemed more mundane than frightening. The drawn-out brightness of the mornings, the length of midday and of the late afternoons when she lay on the couch alone waiting for Melissa to come home from school left her fatigued and drowsy.

Kate still had her bursts of energy, though they'd last now for hours rather than days. When a blizzard descended on Ann Arbor, Kate and Melissa put on their fattest winter coats, gloves, and hats, and walked for more than an hour in the new snow.

Melissa and Kate almost never spoke of what was happening—and what would soon happen—until one afternoon when Kate was especially sick. She lay over the couch, groggy from painkillers and covered in blankets. Kate had been discussing as lucidly as she could the virtues of Carleton College, while trying to hide the fact that this was the school she would choose for her daughter, when Melissa stopped her with a blunt question. “Does it hurt?”

Kate looked at Melissa for a moment. “You’re sure you want to know?”

Melissa nodded.

“Sometimes,” she said. “But not as much as I thought it would.”

“But it hurts.”

“Yes.”

“Will it hurt when it happens?” Melissa wasn’t looking at her. She was paging through a glossy college brochure.

“No,” Kate said. “I won’t be awake.”

Melissa shook her head. “I don’t think I want to be there then. If that’s OK.”

For an instant, Kate wanted to beg her daughter to be there, to stay with her, above all, at that moment. Instead, she nodded. “I’ll be asleep. I won’t know who’s there.”

“Is it OK?” Melissa asked.

“It’s OK,” Kate said.

It was raining out when someone knocked. The day nurse had just gone home, and Kate had to summon all her energy to rise from the couch and answer the door. A cold in-suck of air filled the entryway, and despite the grayness outside, the light had a raw brightness that Kate had to turn away from. Charles was wet, and the stringy flatness of his hair made him appear desperate. He held a small bunch of drenched tulips out to her, and she managed to carry them back to the couch. Looking at the flowers—their dramatic mess of color—exhausted her. “I got caught in this,” he said. Water dripped off his coat and onto her wood floor. “I’m sorry,” he said. Then he explained himself: “I just wanted to visit. As a friend.”

“I’m tired, Charles,” she said. “I won’t be able to say much.” As usual he was nervous, and for the first time Kate was irritated by his fear rather than touched by it. She knew that he was merely afraid to be in the presence of a dying person. He seemed so reduced: every inch the furniture salesman. She should have offered him tea or coffee, but she could not imagine how she would get up from the couch again. She was in her robe, for God’s sake. “Your eye,” he said. “Is it OK?” She’d forgotten about her patch

until then, and now felt humiliated. She didn't want him there. She didn't want him to see her dying. He had been right: They didn't know each other well enough.

“No,” she said. “It's not OK.”

“You look good.”

She almost laughed, but stopped herself when she realized how horrific laughter would sound coming from her. For a time they were silent until Kate finally said, “I'm tired.”

He nodded. “I hope . . . I hope I wasn't unkind. I hope I didn't mistreat you. I hope . . .”

Kate understood now why he had come. She shook her head, and because he looked so achingly vulnerable, so convinced of his guilt, and because he was so extremely kind that he believed he was in the wrong when he wasn't, she said, “Of course not.” And though she was too exhausted to summon the requisite tone of penitence and regret, though she wasn't sure it was entirely true, she remembered her daughter's recent courage and summoned her own. “I suppose I used you . . . a little. I didn't want to end up alone. I didn't want to end up”—she paused and let her head sink into her pillow—“like this.” She smiled. “It's not as bad as it looks. It's not as bad as I thought it would be. I have my daughter.” And now that she had said it, she thought it was true.

His shoulders lifted as if a chain had just come off him. How easily people might push him around. How easily she might have delivered a blow to him right now, had she wanted to. “It was just using me?” he asked.

“Not just. It was more than that, too.” The truth of these words was in the sudden enthusiasm and fullness of her voice, and his smile and the lift in his face told her that he

had heard it. For a moment, she wondered if he deserved to be this happy given what would soon happen to her. But the moment passed.

“I’d rather you not come back,” she said. “I’m going to get worse, and I’d rather you remember me as the woman you took to bed and not the woman with an eye patch and half a paralyzed face.”

“Sure,” he said. She wished he’d struggled more before saying that.

“I’m tired,” she said again. But she wasn’t prepared for how quickly he kissed her forehead and then turned around and left.

Her heartbreak continued. When she was especially lonely, in the long hours of daylight, she thought again of his lanky nakedness, his surprising competence at killing, his melancholic voice on her answering machine asking to speak to her. How odd to be heartbroken at this time in her life. How odd to be left with desire. It was a relief and a luxury to know that she did not want the actual man. Not now. She liked him best in her thoughts. He was more vivid, more alive that way. She could spend hours thinking of the soft, contemplative way he’d touched his mustache from time to time, and the way he’d told her, “Always stand behind the shooter,” making it clear with his paternal tone of voice that her safety was his foremost concern. She would see them making love and be surprised again by his athleticism, his volume, his surprising confidence in bed. She would see years into an imaginary future with him; how annoying his passivity and meekness would become, annoying and also endearing. She would exhaust herself protecting him from those who’d take advantage of him: his son, his business partners, even herself. She would think of him as a hunter, too, a gentle hunter with great respect

for his prey. How quickly he got to his wounded bird and snapped its neck. She would think of how he had lifted his wine above their small feast of grouse and toasted to her success, to their many hunts to come; and how he had lain beside her that night, his hand—the same one he had killed with—touching her scar in a darkness that was, for the time, easier to bear.