

# MotherKind

## Chapter 2

After the birth and the overnight in the hospital, she didn't go downstairs for a week. She'd lost some blood and she felt flattened, nearly dizzy, from the labor and then the general anesthetic. Alexander had been born at dawn on Christmas Day; since then she'd wept frequently, with incredible ease, and entertained the illusion that she now knew more than she'd ever questioned or known before. The illusion pursued her into sleep itself, into jagged pieces of sleep. New Year's came and went; Kate heard bells ring at midnight and revelers' horns blaring plaintively in the cold streets. She slept and woke, naked except for underpants, sanitary napkins, chemical ice packs. The ice packs, shaped to her crotch, were meant to reduce swelling and numb the stitches; the instructions directed her to bend the cotton to activate the solution; inside, the thick pads cracked like sticks. This bathroom looks like a MASH unit, Matt would say. But it's not your unit that's mashed, Kate would think. In fact, her vagina was an open wound. Her vagina was out of the picture. She couldn't believe she'd ever done anything with it, or felt anything through it.

She couldn't use tampons; there were boxes of big napkins, like bandages, piles of blue underliners — plastic on one side, gauze on the other — to protect the sheets, hemorrhoid suppositories, antibiotic salve, mentholated anesthetic gel, tubes of lanolin, plastic cups and plastic pitchers. She drank and drank, water, cider, juices. The baby slept in a bassinette right beside her bed, but her arms ached from picking him up, holding him, putting him down. On the third day her milk came in, and by then her nipples were already cracked and bleeding. The baby was nursing colostrum every hour but he was sucking for comfort, losing a few more ounces every day. His mouth was puckered and a large clear blister had formed on his upper lip; he was thirsty, so thirsty; finally, Kate gave him water, though the nurses had said not to. He needs to nurse, to pull the milk in. That night she woke in the dark, on her back, her engorged breasts sitting on her chest, warm to the touch, gravid, hard and swollen. She woke the baby to feed him. He began to cry but she held him away until she could sit and prop her arms with pillows, pour a glass of water for the thirst that would assail her. In the beginning, she'd moaned as he sucked, then, to move through the initial latching on, she did the same breathing she'd used throughout labor. She breathed evenly, silenced vocalizations cutting in like whispers at the end of each exhalation. The pain cracked through her like a thread of

lightning and gradually eased, rippling like something that might wake up and get her.

She called LaLeche League every couple of days for new suggestions. Kate's favorite counselor was in Medford, a working-class part of Boston Kate didn't remember ever having seen. But the woman had no accent; she was someone else far from home. You'll battle through this, she would say, be stubborn and hang on. Women are made to nurse, she'd declare in each conversation, any woman can nurse; and then she'd say, in a softer tone, that people forgot how hard it was to get established the first time. "Don't let the pain defeat you," were her exact words. "The uterine pain actually helps you heal, and your nipples will toughen."

"What about stress?" Kate asked once. "Will I have enough milk –"

"Stress?" was the response. "Are you kidding? Any woman with a new baby is stressed to the max. She doesn't sleep, she's bleeding, she's sore, she might have other kids or a job she'll go back to. The baby is sucking for life. As long as you eat well and drink, drink constantly, your body responds. You don't need unbroken sleep. You don't need a perfect situation. Refugees nurse their babies, and war victims; theirs are the children more likely to survive, even in the worst of times."

I understand, Kate wanted to say. I understand all about you, and I understand everything.

"Have your husband buy you a Knorr manual breast pump at the hospital infirmary," the counselor had said, "and a roll of disposable plastic bottles. The pump is a clear plastic tube, marked in ounces. Use it each time your breasts aren't completely emptied by the baby. Increase production; you can't have too much milk. Freeze all you express. That's how some women work full-time and still nurse their babies. I'll send you some information in the mail. And if you feel discouraged, call back."

I just want to hear your voice, Kate wanted to say. We're in a tunnel flooded with light.

But she spoke an accepted language, words like "air-dry," "lanolin," "breast rotation," "demand schedule." And there was light all around her, great patches angling through the naked windows, glancing off snow piled and fallen and drifted, hard snow, frozen, crusted with ice, each radiant crystal reflecting light. Kate had brought her son home in the last week of December, and the temperature was sixty degrees, sun like spring. Her neighbor Camille had festooned the fence with blue balloons. Kate and Alexander posed for photographs, then

she took him in the house, shutting the front door behind them. Immediately, the cold came back and the snows began. At night Kate was awake, nursing, burping the baby, changing odorless cloth diapers, changing his gown, nursing, nursing him to sleep; all the while, snow fell in swaths past the windows, certain and constant, drifting windblown through the streetlamp's bell of light. Each day Kate stayed upstairs and her mother padded back and forth along the hallway connecting their rooms. Just before Christmas she'd finished a full round of chemo, and the tumors in her lungs had shrunk. She had a few weeks of respite now before the next group of treatments, and she came to Kate's room to keep her company, to hold the baby while Kate slept, to pour the glasses of juice.

"Are you awake, Katie?" She sat in an upholstered chair that had once graced her own living room; Kate had moved that couch and chair to Boston and slipcovered them in a vibrant 1920s print, navy blue with blowzy, oversized ivory flowers.

"I'm always awake, more or less," Kate said. "How was your night?"

"No complaints," her mother said. "No nausea."

"Good." Kate smiled. "It's nice to see you sitting in that chair. I always see it in photographs, in one of its guises. In the old house."

"Yes," Kate's mother said. "By the time we moved into town, this chair was in the basement."

"Now you might admit I was right to drag it here. The cushions may be shot, but at least you have a comfortable place to sit." Watching her mother, Kate realized the print she'd chosen for the chair, dark blue with white, was nearly the reverse of her mother's choice. "Remember the fabric of your slipcovers, what you used on that chair? What did you always call that print?"

"It was a blue onion print, white with blue vines — "

"Thistlelike flowers," Kate interrupted, "like fans, with viny runners — "

"Yes," her mother continued patiently, "wild onions, hence the name."

"And you had those glass pots with lids, in the same print, on the coffee table. I remember. There they sit, in all the Easter pictures. When we're wearing our good clothes. You always matched things. But before, there was that dark living room."

“Dark?”

“The walls were dark green, and the drapes on the picture windows were dark green, with gold, and the furniture in its original upholstery, dark beige, with a raised texture — ”

“Well, when kids are young you want things that are dark and tough. When you were older, we had the white fiberglass drapes and the lighter slipcovers. That first upholstery was chosen to last through climbing and sliding and whatever. Your brothers gave it a workout.”

“It did last,” Kate said. “It was what I covered up. It seems ageless.”

“Yes,” her mother agreed, “but it darkened. This was your father’s chair, and the fabric darkened just in the shape of him.”

“Really?” Kate asked. “You mean, as though his shadow sank into it?”

Her mother frowned, exasperated. “No, I mean it was worn. Worn from use. Am I speaking English?”

Kate laughed. “Your energy level is better, isn’t it? You’re your old feisty self, and I’m just lying here.”

Her mother peered over at the bassinette. “I thought I might hold Alexander for you, but he’s sleeping so beautifully. I’ve been downstairs already, to let that little girl in, the MotherKind worker. It’s been wonderful to have her for a week. She came this morning with her arms full of groceries. She’s just putting things away, and then she’ll be up to see what you want her to do.”

“It was so nice of you to buy help for me, Mom, such a great present.”

“Well, I’d be doing all the cooking myself if I were able. But I must say, your requirements are pretty daunting.”

Kate smiled. She’d asked for someone versed in preparing natural foods. No additives, no preservatives. No meat with hormones. “Your color is good today, Mom,” she said. “You’re sitting right there in the sun, and you look all lit up.”

“I’m sure I do. It’s so bright in this room. Why do you paint everything white? And not a thing on the windows, not even shades to pull down.”

“The walls are linen white,” Kate said, “and the trim is sail white. And I don’t need shades; I’m not worried about snipers.”

“Snipers?”

“My LaLeche League lady,” Kate said. “She was telling me how war victims can go right on nursing their babies, even in foxholes.”

Her mother frowned. “Some of these people are way out there. What do war victims have to do with you? You’re not in a foxhole.”

“Not yet,” Kate said. “But really, if you want shades on your windows, I’ll get some. You should have told me sooner.”

Her mother waved away the suggestion. “I don’t care. That big tree is in front of one of the windows, and the other faces Camille’s house. I certainly don’t care if she sees me, not that there’s much to see at this point.”

“But there’s always Landon,” Kate said slyly, referring to their neighbor’s live-in boyfriend. “What about him?”

“Landon is occupied with greener pastures — I hope not too occupied. If he lives with Camille, I don’t know why he has to have his own condo in the Back Bay. And his own crystal and china. And his own art collection.”

Kate shrugged. “He’s a big-time investment banker. Maybe he needs a place downtown. Anyway, he’s cute. I remember how they charged over here the first day we moved in, on their way to some swank thing, and there’s Camille, nearly six feet tall, in one of those long satin capes her daughter made her, and all her Navajo jewelry, with a huge tray of assorted handmade cookies and a raspberry pie.”

“Camille is wonderful. Mark my words, though, Lannie” — she emphasized Camille’s pet name for him — “is not in it for the long haul.”

“Not everyone is into hauling,” Kate said. “She’s been divorced twice, he’s been divorced once. Maybe they’re better off just relaxing.”

Katherine shook her head impatiently, signaling her annoyance with a click of the tongue.

“She’s certainly suggested he give up the apartment. Camille loves taking care of people; she’d like to be married. But he is not the right fellow.”

“Gotcha,” Kate said. She realized she often knew in advance her mother’s response to a given topic, but she elicited the responses anyway, sometimes to her annoyance, more often for pleasure. She so valued her mother’s sheer dependability, the slight cynicism of the old wives’ tales she favored, her bedrock common sense, even the rigid provincial innocence with which she approached discussions of what Kate referred to as “modern life.” There were so many topics on which Katherine held strong opinions based on scant experience. Like serial monogamy and live-in arrangements. Interracial relationships. Homosexuality. Literature. Film. When I go to a movie, she liked to say, I want to be entertained, not upset.

Kate leaned back on her pillows. She didn’t want to be entertained; entertainment was far too demanding, and gave so little in return. Kate wanted someone to read stories to her, or speak intensely about a private matter. She wanted to be fed. The MotherKind worker brought her lunch on a tray, numerous plates of soft, warm tastes, samples of the various entrées she’d made to freeze, and sliced vegetables so cold and crisp they wore ice fragments. Her name was Moira, but Kate liked to think of her only as MotherKind; MotherKind put a flower on the tray, the head of a hothouse daisy or rose, never in a bud vase — too likely to topple during the journey upstairs, perhaps — but floating, the first day, in a cup. Then the flower always appeared in an antique shot glass taken from the good crystal. It was so pretty to see a flower, yet Kate felt the daisy and its lissome petals seemed sacrificial. The soft sphere of the scarlet rose sank inward, pulled from its stem. Kate touched the flowers, their surfaces, as though they were already gone. “It may be January in New England,” Moira had said, “but it’s still important to see something blooming. And don’t worry, I work with unprocessed foods. I’m a vegetarian, though I don’t mind cooking meat if that’s what you want. My objections are strictly personal.” Kate heard her now, her tread on the stairs and the subtle shifting of cutlery. The smell of food came closer and set up a dull fear in Kate, like a nervousness or excitement.

“Here we are,” Moira said. “And I brought the mail up too.” She placed the bed tray squarely before Kate and pulled her pillows back. “Might want to sit up a bit more. There’s a tomato arugula salad and French bread, and I made you a really hearty vegetable soup, with barley. I froze five pints.”

“Great,” Kate said. “We’ll be thinking of you into next month, blessing the fact of your existence.”

Moira nodded. She was so efficient, Kate thought, and she had a quiet, nonintrusive presence, but she seemed a bit humorless. Now she smiled her quick, disappearing smile. Perhaps she was only shy.

“This is my last day with you,” she said, “so maybe we should come up with a plan. I know you want to do everything for the baby yourself, but the freezer is almost full of food. There’s just room for a few pans of lasagna, which I’ll make this afternoon. I’ll do all the laundry again, but don’t forget I could also give you a massage, or a manicure.”

“Or you could read to me,” said Kate.

“Don’t waste the time you have left,” her mother said. “I could read to you.”

“How about a massage?” Moira asked.

Kate felt so sore, so weak, the thought of anyone touching her was alarming. But she thought Moira had a dreamy voice, soft, a bit insubstantial; Moira’s voice would carry words and disappear in them. “A massage, maybe,” Kate said, “and then a story.”

“Sure.” She nodded and took the mail from the tray. “There’s a little package for you, and some cards. I left the bills downstairs. Now I’ll go and get another lunch, so the two of you can have lunch together.”

Kate’s mother nodded in her direction. “No, I’ll eat later, I’m coming down soon. You go ahead, Katie, before he wakes up and your arms are full.”

“I’m coming down later too,” Kate announced. “I hope you both realize that I’m dressed today. It’s a nursing gown, but still — ”

“You’re right,” Moira said. “I didn’t even notice. There you sit, clothed to the elbows.”

“Well, I’ve always been clothed below the waist, in my various bandages.”

“Exactly.” Moira busied herself straightening the covers of the bed. “And when you’re nursing every hour and you’re so sore, it hardly seems worth it to take clothes on and off, or lift them up and down.”

“It’s amazing how the two of you think alike,” Kate’s mother said wryly. “Anyway, I wasn’t going to say anything. You’ve been mostly covered with sheets and blankets, and I figured you’d get your clothes on by spring.”

“I have my gown on.” Kate picked up her spoon. “That’s all I’ll commit to.”

“And you do feel warm,” Moira said, “when you’re making milk. But I know you don’t have a temperature, because I’ve taken it every day.”

“You certainly have,” Kate’s mother said. “You’ve taken good care of her.”

“Why don’t we plan on the massage then?” Moira gathered used cups from the bedside table. “You eat all that, then he’ll wake and you’ll nurse, and by the time he goes down again, I’ll be ready. I’ll bring up my oils and a tape to play. All right?”

“You’re in charge,” Kate’s mother said.

When Kate woke, the bed tray was gone. Her mother was gone, and the house was perfectly quiet. She remembered finishing the food and leaning back in bed, and then she’d fallen asleep, dreamlessly, as though she had only to close her eyes to move away, small and weightless, skimming the reflective surface of something deep.

She heard a small sound. Alexander lay in the bassinette, his eyes open, looking at her. His swaddling blankets had come loose. Propped on his side by pillows, he raised one arm and moved his delicate hand. Kate sat up to lean near him and touched her forefinger to his palm; immediately, he grasped her hard and his gaze widened. “They’re your fingers,” she told him. “You don’t know them yet, but I do.” Everyone had told her to leave him be when he was happy, she’d be holding him and caring for him so ceaselessly, but she took him in her arms, propped up the pillows, and put him in her lap. He kicked excitedly and frowned. She bent her knees to bring him closer and regarded him as he lay on her raised thighs; the frown disappeared. “You’re like me,” Kate said softly. “You frown when you think. By the time you’re twenty-five, you’ll have two little lines between your eyes. Such a serious guy.” He raised his downy brows. He had a watchful, observing look and a more excited look — he would open his eyes wider, compress his lips, strain with his limbs as though he was concentrating on moving, on touching or grasping. He could feel his body but he couldn’t command it to move or do; his focus was entirely in his eyes. And he did focus. Kate was sure he saw her. He wasn’t

a newborn any longer; today he was one week old. Perhaps his vision was still blurry, and that was why he peered at her so intently. His eyes were big and dark blue, like those of a baby seal. One eye was always moist and teary; his tear duct was blocked, they'd said at the hospital, it would clear up.

Now Kate wiped his cheek carefully with the edge of a cloth diaper, then drew her finger across his forehead, along his jaw, across his flattened, broad little nose. "Mister man," she whispered, "mighty mouse, here's your face. Here are your nose, your ears, your widow's peak. Old widower, here are your bones . . ." She touched his collarbone and the line along his shoulder, under his gown. His skin was like warm silk and his names were too big for him; she called him Tatie, for his middle name was Tateman, after her family, her divided parents. She cleaned him with warm water, not alcohol wipes, and used a powder that contained no talc. The powder was fine as rice flour and smelled as Kate thought rice fields might smell, in the sun, when the plants bloomed. Like clean food, pure as flowers. Across the world and in the South, those young shoots grew and moved in the breeze like grass. "Rice fields are like grass in water," she said to him. "We haven't seen them yet. Even in India, I didn't see them." Outside the wind moved along the house; Kate heard it circling and testing. Suddenly a gust slammed against the windows and Tatie startled, looked toward the sound. "You can't see the wind," Kate murmured, "just what it moves." The wind would bring snow again, Kate knew; already she heard snow approach like a whining in the air. Absently she traced the baby's lips, and he yawned and began to whimper. You're hungry, Kate thought, and he moved his arms as though to gather her closer. Her milk let down with a flush and surge, and she held a clean diaper to one breast as she put him to the other. Now she breathed, exhaling slowly. The intense pain began to ebb; he drank the cells of her blood, Kate knew, and the crust that formed on her nipples where the cuts were deepest. He was her blood. When she held him he was inside her; always, he was near her, like an atmosphere, in his sleep, in his being. She would not be alone again for many years, even if she wanted to, even if she tried. In her deepest thoughts, she would approach him, move around and through him, make room for him. In nursing there would be a still, spiral peace, an energy in which she felt herself, her needs and wants, slough away like useless debris. It seemed less important to talk or think; like a nesting animal, she took on camouflage, layers of protective awareness that were almost spatial in dimension. The awareness had dark edges, shadows that rose and fell. Kate imagined terrible things. That he might stop breathing. That she dropped him, or someone

had. That someone or something took him from her. That she forgot about him or misplaced him. There were no words; the thoughts occurred to her in starkly precise images, like the unmistakable images of dreams, as though her waking and sleeping lives had met in him. Truly, she was sleeping; the days and nights were fluid, beautiful and discolored; everything in her was available to her, as though she'd become someone else, someone with a similar past history in whom that history was acknowledged rather than felt, someone who didn't need to make amends or understand, someone beyond language. She was shattered. Something new would come of her. Moments in which she crossed from consciousness to sleep, from sleep to awareness, there was a lag of an instant in which she couldn't remember her name, and she didn't care. She remembered him. Now his gaze met hers and his eyelids fluttered; she could see him falling away, back into his infant swoon. His sleep closed around him like an ocean shell and rocked him within it. In this they were alike, Kate thought, though he had no name known to him, no name to forget. He was pure need. She took him from the breast and held him to her shoulder, patting and rubbing him, softly, a caress and a heartbeat.

Moira came into the room so quietly that Kate was unaware of her until she reached the foot of the bed. She carried blankets, a tape recorder, plastic bottles of oils, a small cardboard box. Depositing her burdens on the floor, she mouthed, "Shall I take him?" and Kate gestured, no, not yet. She whispered, "I'll set up," and disappeared from view. Kate smelled the sulfur of lit matches and then citrus and gardenia, Moira's scented votives. Kate put Alexander carefully into the bassinette and looked through the books stacked beside her table. She chose one. Which passage? The beginning would do.

"I'm going to put the tape on very low. As he sleeps more deeply, I'll turn it up just a bit." Moira was beside her. "Is that the book you want?" She smiled and took it, then indicated the rug at the foot of the bed. "I've made a space. It's better to have a firm surface."

"A space," Kate said. She stood and saw that Moira had made an alternate bed, blankets precisely folded, a pallet covered with terry towels. Sheets and more blankets were arranged over it, neatly turned down. Six votives were lit in a row of little flames at the head. "This looks ritualistic," Kate said. "Do I need a chaperone?"

"I don't believe so." Moira turned the tape on. "But I won't lie, it is a ritual. I'm sorry I can't lower the light. Evening is a better time, but I don't work nights."

“It doesn’t need to be dark,” Kate said. “Look how the sun falls across. I love the sun.”

“Yes, you’ll feel it. Can you lie on your front comfortably? I’ll go out while you get ready.”

“No need.”

“No, I will. And take everything off. I’ll bring the warm oils from the kitchen.”

Kate watched her go, and sighed. What a lot of work this was. She walked past the pallet into the bathroom, pulling the door closed. There, the water running, getting warm. She took off her gown and pants, folded the pads and wrapped them in paper, threw them away. Slowly, she began to wash, water cooling on her legs in rivulets. They’d told her not to bathe yet; she stood like this, cloths and soap, carefully. At first, when she stood or walked, she’d felt as though she moved on the deck of a ship, as though some rhythm pulsed in the ground, the floor. Rooms subtly shifted. The effects of the anesthetic, Matt said, but Kate could see the movement even from her bed, from her window. The way the angles of the ceiling met the walls, how the floor slid to its four corners. How the earth turned. This is the way it’s always been, Kate thought; she hadn’t known. Now she did. She rocked the baby in the rocking chair and imagined sailing through the window, rocking, with no interruption, into the cold, the air billowing around them. You okay? Matt would ask. I’m fine, Kate would answer. As a child, an adolescent, an adult, she had almost never cried. Now she could. She didn’t feel depressed, she felt amazed, and moved, and out of sync. Or she was in sync, but she couldn’t explain how. She left her gown where it fell, dried herself and opened the door.

The music was a little more noticeable now, classical music, strings. A shaft of sunlight poured across the rug and motes of dust swam in the light. Moira knelt by the empty fireplace, waiting for her. “Sorry,” Kate said. “I wanted to get clean.” Moira nodded, and pulled back the sheets of the pallet for Kate to slip inside. Slowly, Kate was on her knees, and then prone. “We won’t wake him?” she said, before turning over. “You wouldn’t be comfortable away from him,” Moira answered. “We won’t disturb him.”

Then the sheets and blankets were a silky covering. Moira moved her hands along Kate’s form as though to gain some innate sense of her, pausing, exerting a gentle pressure. It’s not New Age, Kate thought, it’s from the oldest days, when floors were swept earth. Behind the music she heard Moira breathing, exhaling in time to the movement of her hands, as though she were draining Kate of fatigue or discomfort, releasing it through herself. Surely that was the

idea. “So, Moira,” Kate said softly, “what are your personal objections?”

The hands never slowed. “To what?”

“Meat. To meat.”

“Oh. Health, basically, at first, theories about nutrition. But after I stopped eating meat, the smell of my body changed, and the taste in my mouth. I don’t mind handling meat — I cook and do catering, and sometimes it’s part of my job — but I don’t want it inside me. And I didn’t want my daughter growing up on a meat diet.”

“You have a daughter?”

“Yes. She’s three. I’m a single mom.”

So she works days, Kate thought. Nights at home with her daughter. “You seem so content and organized,” she said aloud. “Were you always single?”

“Yes, pretty much. It was a bit difficult at first, but for now, we’re content. We do very well.”

“Little women,” Kate said. “But in those mother-daughter stories, there’s always a virtuous hero offstage, the father off at war, or the rich neighbor.”

“And so there may be,” Moira said. “But I’ll do whatever’s best for my child. I don’t need saved.”

“What a relief,” Kate said.

“Yes.” Moira laughed softly.

“But we do have to save ourselves, don’t we,” Kate murmured. “Such a project.”

“You’re stronger each day,” Moira said. “And you’re doing exactly what you should be doing with this baby. It’s so important to nurse, and to have him constantly with you.”

Now the light of the sun had shifted; it seemed winter light again, flattened and diffuse, and the flames of the votives burned higher. Moira’s hands were at Kate’s hips, lifting her from behind, tilting heat into her abdomen. She moved up along Kate’s spine with her fists, a hard and soft pressure, repetitive, patterned with heat that Kate felt in her forearms, in her thighs. She felt herself knit together, handled like something wounded; she realized how far she was

from herself, and how she might begin to live here again, in her body. Slowly, it would happen. She might call and call now for her own return, but she only floated, inhabiting so many former selves with more conviction. Just now she saw the backs and jostling shoulders of her hometown girlfriends, all bundled in their coats and descending into snow down dormitory stairs; they still looked like high school blondes and brunettes in fur hats and boots, bright twine in their hair, but they were getting off on mescaline, falling into the first tinges of visuals, and someone was crooning, Pleased as punch, pleased as punch. In India, on the vast terrace of the Taj Mahal, boys approached Kate with open arms. Sell blue jeans? Buy hashish? Extreme hashish. You sell blue jeans? The young men, the slim ones, looked like boys, smooth-skinned and lithe. The middle-aged men on the train to Agra were toadish and portly in their tailored clothes; they seldom looked up from their newspapers. Mist rose from the steaming fields as though daybreak would go on for weeks and Kate saw silhouettes of movement, squatting forms, their morning toilette a slow, dark ballet. An old man, skeletal in white, hunkered by the tracks, brushing his teeth with a twig. On the tortuous mountain track to Chitwan, the Nepalese bus had stopped in a town; farmers disembarked with their caged chickens, and the women with their saronged babies; the Gurka soldiers piled out with their guns. The women merely lifted their layered, intricately sewn skirts to relieve themselves, standing to straddle the sewage ditch that ran along one side of the only road. Water rattled in it and the men walked farther up, discreetly, but Kate wandered behind the shacklike kiosks to pick her way down a rocky bank to the river. Ropes of feces blackened among the stones. The riverbank flattened in a broad sweeping curve and the water was low; outcroppings strewn with boulders rose in crescents from glistened sweeps too still and silver to seem fluid. Kate dropped her loose cloth trousers to her knees and crouched, urinating; to her left, two men appeared at the curve of the river, balancing on their shoulders a long pole bent with the weight of a body. The body, bound to the pole at wrists and ankles, swung in delicate motion, the swathed, faceless head flung back.

Kate couldn't look away. Moira's voice came from above her. "It's nearly time for me to go," she said.

"Yes, I know." Kate turned over and lay on her back. Behind her eyes she saw a darkness reddened by light. "Good-bye, Moira."

Moira touched Kate's forehead with her fingertips. Her touch lingered deliberately, a firm

little bruise specific as a kiss. Kate lay still. She felt Moira close to her, just over her, her clove-scented breath, the oil of her dark hair. Perhaps she always ended her massages this way. Perhaps she thought Kate ridiculous, a privileged woman not yet alone with her child. Kate raised her gaze to Moira's. "You look so grave," Kate said. "But then, good-bye is a grave word."

"It's just a wish," Moira said, "like a blessing." She moved away. Her hands pressed in a careful pattern above the tucked blankets, finishing evenly. "He's sleeping," she said softly. "You sleep, too, if you like, but here's your story." Kate heard a ruffling of pages. "Chapter one," came a voice. "I am born . . . To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday at midnight . . ." Kate closed her eyes. The river was a high rattling murmur and the barefoot men moved ceaselessly forward in the islanded riverbed. The men never looked at her. They were there still, Kate thought, making progress down the Narayani to the mouth of the Bagmati, two days' trek. The cremation sites, in view of the blue-eyed stupas and their gold spires, were raised earth bound by stones, and the flaming pyres were set afloat, heaped with burning flowers. Kate smelled that scent, like blackened oranges, sticky and boiled, so close she was enveloped. It was remarked that the clock began to strike . . . and I began to cry, simultaneously. . . . She knew she must stand up now and walk, or the bus would ascend into the mountains without her.