



VINTAGE

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# MotherKind

Jayne Anne Phillips

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## About the Book

Kate - whose care for her terminally ill mother coincides with the birth of her first child in the early months of a young marriage - must, in a single year, come to terms with radiant beginnings and profound loss.

Kate's everyday world is enveloped by the gradual vanishing of her mother. And as the woman who has been her best friend and mentor disappears, we see Kate deal with timeless, perhaps unanswerable, questions of love and death.

## About the Author

Jayne Anne Phillips is the author of four books of fiction: two novels - *Machine Dreams* and *Shelter* - and two collections of stories - *Black Tickets* and *Fast Lanes*. She has won numerous awards, including a Guggenheim fellowship and a 1997 Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She lives with her husband and two sons in Massachusetts.

ALSO BY JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS

*Black Tickets*  
*Machine Dreams*  
*Fast Lanes*  
*Shelter*

Jayne Anne Phillips

MOTHERKIND





*There is no charming stewardess. The prop plane rumbles like an airborne lawn mower, transporting twenty to the airport of a larger, neighboring town near Kate's own, which has no airport at all. She'd offered to rent a car in Pittsburgh and drive the two hours home, but her mother insisted on meeting her, and Kate insisted on flying closer. Katherine has struggled so with being sick; Kate wants to support her attempts to "live normally, do things." She took early retirement from her job as a reading specialist soon after being diagnosed; Kate declined a teaching job in Boston to help her recover after the initial operation. They'd held on to the phrase "50/50 chance," but Katherine's cancer returned in less than a year. She lives with her aging dog, encouraged and assisted by a circle of friends, by Kate's daily calls. Recently she's concluded a hospital stay for radiation therapy. "They say I've plateaued," she told Kate. "Fine with me. I'm trying to sit tight." Kate envisions her mother on a high, empty mesa, watching the sky for incoming weather while her tiny, failing poodle stands rigidly at attention.*

*The sky just now is azure. Kate touches her forehead to the window of the plane. The vibration is a tiny, felt hum, like a musical note, separate from the lumbering noise of the engines. Even the clumsy plane, with its nose propeller and hooded motors, seems invincible in such blue air, a day so clear and sharp that Kate sees the shadow of their passage move across fields below, over the dense summer canopies of the trees. Far down, the green foliage stirs as*

*though in response. They're circling; Kate sees the airport and its block-size parking lot, the little city in the distance, the ribbon of highway leading home. Soon, then.*

*Her mother will be smaller, and very upright; no doubt she is looking up now at the plane, shielding her eyes. Kate sits still and feels, again, a tremor in the deep, wet dark of her body, so small, yet not imagined: the quickening of which women speak, barely discernible, distinctly other. Like a minnow in water, Kate thinks, the flutter of a soul. She will give birth before the turn of another summer; she's nearly four months along, though almost no one knows. She's come home to tell Katherine, because the decision is made, because her mother is ill, because her mother might not live to see the baby. Katherine and Kate; mother and daughter; mother and trial-by-fire, Katherine joked; mother and slightly successful expatriate, Kate responded. Ironically, she'd warned her mother years ago that she might well have children without benefit of marriage. She's thirty-one, certainly old enough to carry it off. But she'll raise this baby with Matthew, though she won't carry her mother far into that transformed life; Katherine's illness is terminal. The plane turns, banking sharply. Tilting in her seat, Kate feels her way into the word. Terminal. Terminus. Like a spiritual roundhouse, a circular station where all tracks meet, a center of travel, transfers, routes and sojourns. Words are so often maligned by their meanings; Kate conceives of words as implements of pure energy, washed, infused, shadowed or illumined by all they carry in endless combination with one another. She writes words and works with them, for pay and for succor; she believes words open in the intangible spheres of their construction, yet stay apart from the world of use, innocent of motive, of healing or harm.*

*Two years ago, before Matthew, before her mother began to die, she sat with Sumi at a rooftop cafe in Kathmandu. Sumi: thin, nearly wraith-like, nimble, ageless sidekick to*



*Ram and Amrit. It wasn't clear what Sumi did, something in Ram's hotel, evidently; there was no family compound for him, no matriarch or shielded wife; probably he had come from the mountains. He described spheres with his hands as he tried to explain the word "namaste." He drew images on a scrap of paper: "namaste" was greeting and benediction, exclusion and inclusion, wholly Buddhist; "namaste" was thousands of years folded into syllables. Sumi sketched mandalas with a waiter's pencil: "namaste" was a sound. A pulse in the mouth, acceptance and surrender. Not an American specialty, Kate murmured. Americans did not accept anything, she explained; they were immigrants, travelers, eaters, users, owners; a country descended from Puritans who did not accept darkness and called it evil, set it apart, cut it from them. They could be floppy, armed children, Americans. Sumi listened; he said he was a simple man, he liked Americans, all of Kathmandu liked Americans, even those who still camped on Freak Street, but Americans could not understand namaste until they had lived as Nepalis for fifty years, and few of them would survive so long. How many Nepalis do, Kate asked. What was the infant death rate in Kathmandu, and farther up, into the Himalayas? Sumi smiled shyly. This did not matter. The Nepali people were born in namaste, and there was no death.*

*Ah, death. Words in English were not life or death. They were only messengers, impulses traveling on a nerve, bearers of tidings. "Here," children said when the roll was called, as it was every morning, a ritual in the grade school Kate attended, the school her mother had attended before her, a two-story brick monolith with high ceilings and wide-board wooden floors, broad wooden staircases, each wide step worn in the middle. Generations of roll calls, as though the teachers couldn't make out who was absent without the recitation of names, the voices answering, "Here." Here, the doctor had said, indicating with his pointer the spots of*

*shadow on the X-rays of her mother's lungs. And here, and here. Here. Katherine had sat wordless in her chair, in her hospital gown, as Kate stood behind her, gripping her shoulders. Then Kate moved to sit beside her and took her hand. Without chemotherapy, six months to a year. With chemotherapy, a few months more. No chemo, Katherine said quietly. Radiation will halt the spread in the spine, they were told, and it was true; within days, she was pain free. The disease encroaches, then sleeps, alive in its sleep like the sleeper in a coma whose hair and nails grow long. Kate closes her eyes and the plane's wheels bump reliably on tarmac. A smattering of polite applause runs through the cabin. And yes, here it is. Kate's landscape: no plateaus. Appalachian scrub hills wild with flower, the dense foothills and humped mountains, valleys, small skies, hay smell, cicada and locust, generations of farms and mining towns, the winding dirt roads and fields in dense shade or brilliant sun, silos and barn board, choke of sumac and bramble: all she sees in her mind's eye when she remembers what she fled.*

# 1

Kate was expecting. Imminently. It was the last, frantic week in December, a Saturday, and they had Matt's sons to entertain. Christmas was in two days and frigid weather kept the boys inside. They ricocheted around the house, fighting and sparring. Kate's mother, too ill to live alone any longer, had arrived in October. For better or worse, she'd grown accustomed to boisterous Saturdays. Now Kate pushed open the door to her mother's room, then stepped in and shut it firmly behind her.

"Oh, no, you don't," her mother said. "Get out there and help him."

"What can I do?" Kate said. "Anyway, I'm sorry it's so loud. How are you feeling?"

"Every day, a little better. Tomorrow, no more meals on trays." She was sitting up in her chair. She always moved to the chair the minute she heard the boys arrive, as though to participate, even if she couldn't bring herself to leave her room. She smiled wanly. "Kids are all loud. Don't you remember how you used to fight with your brothers? Like cats in a sack some days."

Kate moved to her mother's bedside table to clear the lunch dishes. "I think it's because they're here, with us. Not in their own house. They get so fixated on each other."

"Well, of course, but I'd wager they do the same at home." She raised her brows in an expression that only emphasized her weariness. "You're only a small part of it, Kate."

Kate smiled ruefully. "I'm so gargantuan, I don't know how I could be a small part of anything."

"Oh, what do you care how big you are," her mother said, "as long as that baby is healthy." She struggled to sit more upright in her chair just as the boys crashed by in the hallway, lurching against the closed door. Kate saw her wince as something hard—perhaps the plastic Nerf gun they'd brought with them—cracked sharply against the wall.

Kate realized she would have to empty the house, at least for a few hours. She herself was as much a problem as the kids. If she weren't here, so aware of her mother's "recovery," Katherine would get into bed and rest. She'd agreed to chemo so that she could "live to see this baby." No one had promised a cure, but they hoped for what the doctors called a dramatic, temporary response. Kate grew larger as her mother grew smaller, buying time. Katherine had recently finished her second treatment. The X-rays already showed improvement, but the season had seemed endless. Through dank November and early snow, Katherine's chemotherapy had raged in the house like a banked fire, gobbling the air here, lighting up this or that corner. By its glow Kate opened boxes her mother's friends had packed—the christening dress Kate and her brothers had worn home from the hospital, the tiny hand-knit sweater with angora cuffs, still buttery and perfect in its tissue paper. "Newborns wore yellow then," her mother said. "There were no amnios, just that moment of truth. And so exhilarating!"

Now Kate stacked the plates and cups and turned with the tray. This room was far from where they'd started. Katherine had passed on her own name to her daughter, as though to stake a claim or hope. Meant to be her mother's daughter, Katherine's diminutive, Kate was now the taller, stronger one, the caretaker. She'd always been Kate, never Kathy or Katherine, in a version of her father's face, his

light hair and eyes, straight nose and Scots chin, but it was her mother's voice she heard in her head like a counterpart, pervasive as atmosphere. "I think we're going out," she told Katherine. There were frantic cries from downstairs, a sign someone had suffered a major insult. Kate knew all their cries, though it wasn't usually she who rushed to aid or intervene. They wanted their father; of course they did. "Get some rest while it's quiet," she told her mother. "Promise me."

But her mother only smiled and waved her away.

In the hall, Kate balanced the tray on her round abdomen and pulled the door to. Somehow this deepest, darkest phase of New England winter brought out the beast in Sam and Jonah. The big Christmas tree had been up for weeks—too many—and stood twinkling like an outpost, vibrating as the boys veered to and fro. They ate breakfast, played board games, dominoes, badminton, I Spy and hide-and-seek, all of which degenerated until Matt and Kate bundled them into Matt's Volkswagen van in self-defense and looked for somewhere, anywhere, to take them.

They all needed to get out. Kate was so pregnant that walking over the ice seemed hazardous, and she'd stayed in the house for days. She'd brought home mounds of work from the publishing house where she edited nonfiction. Since Katherine's arrival, Kate had worked from home, an arrangement that would segue into maternity leave and, Kate hoped, ensuing freelance employment. As for her own writing, lines she'd nurtured floated in her head, but their means of connection seemed to elude her. She knew better than to stack the words, like bricks. Words could be walls enclosing her if she wrote too fast or too soon, yet the two slim volumes of poems she'd published seemed to her increasingly minimal and past tense—gestures made in another life. She'd finished only three poems in the months of her pregnancy, and all of them concerned her mother, as

though, despite the resistance of her conscious mind, nothing else inhabited her heart.

Today she'd paced, rather laboriously, after the kids tired of Battleship and Operation, and done housework. Standing at the kitchen table, she wrapped a few last presents in flocked red foil. The baby's head had been engaged for almost a week, and Kate was too uncomfortable to sit in a chair. She had to stand, or tilt herself in a very particular fashion, and that worked better on beds or in cars. Riding around in the van was a relief, and Kate was a little nervous about staying at home without Matt for what would become an interminable wait. Matt was an internist and Kate could always reach him by phone at the HMO, but he tended to be gone for hours when he took off on weekends with the kids, as though he fell into them and got lost. Kate supposed the kids felt similarly about Matt's time with her—that he disappeared into a nameless maw on Mondays and Tuesdays and Thursdays, the days he didn't see them. Nameless because they weren't allowed to say Kate's name in front of their mother. "I know what her name is," she'd told the kids, "but I don't have to hear it in my own house." Kate thought her uncharitable, given that Matt had never acted that way about *her* boyfriend, in the months after she told him she had one, back when their marriage was breaking up. She'd moved into a friend's house in order to continue to explore her options, and at some point during that period Matt had met Kate. By the time Matt's wife realized he'd met someone, it was nearly Christmas (last Christmas), and the pull of hearth and home grew suddenly intense. She moved back in, and Matt moved out, into his own apartment. In a few weeks, he was living at Kate's. Matt and his wife, a legal aid lawyer, began something called divorce mediation; it seemed as though they might go on mediating for several years. Then Kate realized she was pregnant.

And now here they all were. It was December 23. Wreaths tied to the grilles of trucks shuddered, their plastic bows flapping. Snow blew across the highway in little swirls. Like puffs of spirit, Kate thought, wandering souls. Sam and Jonah were bouncing up and down in the big backseat, trying to see if they could touch the ceiling with their heads. "Guys," Kate said, "what about your seat belts? We've already blasted off, and you're not strapped in."

"Right," Matt added, "and here comes a shower of asteroids."

"What's asteroids?" Jonah asked.

"Space rocks, dummy," Sam answered. "They land and they make a big hole."

"Something sure made holes in this road. Where are we, anyway?" Matt glanced at Kate apologetically. "Sorry. I guess I should have headed downtown, toward civilization and smoother terrain."

"Well," Kate said, "it's pretty here. Look, there's the harbor. Downtown is across the water. Oh, I know where we are. That's the Kennedy Library. Let's go there."

"You've never been?" Matt slowed for the rotary, but didn't put his blinker on for a turn. "Here you've tramped all over India and Nepal, and you haven't taken in the hot tourist spots of your own adopted city."

"Hot tourist spot? Really? Should I bring Mom here when she's better?" Kate peered through the broad curved windshield of the van.

"Is she going to get better?" Jonah asked.

Kate turned and smiled at him. At least he'd asked. Maybe they did wonder. "She's actually better already. It's just that the medicine still makes her a little sick." But he was staring out the window as the hulking edifice by the water came into view. It glared white, lit in the winter sun, massive and lonely, and the surface of the water beside it rippled. One long wall formed a wavy curve between the building and the sea. "There's no one around," Kate said.

“There is so,” Jonah protested. “I see cars parked in front.”

“Dad,” Sam said, “what is this place?”

“It’s a kind of museum about President Kennedy. Do you know who he was?” Matt continued to circle the rotary.

“You missed the entrance,” Kate said. “See the sign? You have to take that access road over to the—”

“I think I know,” Sam said.

“You always think you know everything, Sam,” Jonah said, “but you don’t.”

“I know a lot more than you,” Sam said. “You’re only in first grade. I’m two years ahead of you.”

“So?”

“You both know a lot,” Kate said. “Kids these days know so much, so much earlier than they used to. Jonah, you know a lot more than I did when I was six.”

He looked at her pensively. Big brown eyes and blond curls. So much smaller than Sam, so much more comfortable. “Did you know about divorces?” he asked.

“I did know about them,” Kate said. She willed herself not to break Jonah’s gaze, not to look at Matt. “I didn’t know very much, because my parents weren’t divorced until I was a teenager. But you know about other things too, like the space program. When I was six, no American rocket ship had ever landed on the moon.”

“Mom gave me a puzzle of the solar system,” Sam said. “It has every planet. I know all about space.”

“You do,” Kate said, “and this museum tries to tell people all about the life of a man, John Kennedy. He was a president of the United States who was assassinated.”

“What’s that, Dad?” Jonah asked.

“Killed,” Sam said.

“How, Dad?”

“He was shot,” Matt said, “by a man with a gun who was far away.”

“He was riding in a convertible,” Kate said, “in a parade.”



“Oh, yeah,” Sam said, “I think I heard about it.”

“Dad, Dad,” Jonah shouted, “turn up the radio. That’s my best song!”

They circled, blasted by phrases, until Matt drove onto the access road and into the parking lot. The museum rose into the air on its spit of land. One white rounded wall three stories high followed the contours of the cliff to a rocky bar of beach. The flat water of Boston Harbor existed there, unmoving; across its gulf lay the towers of the city, a few abstract shapes quite separate from each other, like a grouping of blocks. The far-flung runways of Logan Airport were discernible off to the right. Toy-size airplanes streaked toward home in straight lines, trying hard to stop, all silent as a game on a screen.

Where are we? Kate thought. We could be anywhere. But we’re here.

“Everyone out,” said Matt, and the boys bolted from the car.

Kate followed them with her eyes. Just as her mother had lived nowhere but home, Matt and his sons had lived nowhere but here—Matt in the nearby seaside town where he’d grown up before going to college near Boston, the children in their suburb. Sam and Jonah disappeared behind Matt before Kate could even hoist herself from her seat. They ran, these boys, as though their lives depended on triumph—one would get to the doors of the museum first, the other would know defeat. Exhausting, Kate thought, so many contests an hour, a day, a week. No wonder they seemed to turn to blows at the slightest provocation. They fought with an immediate violence that amazed her. On such occasions they had to be saved from themselves, but in general they felt entitled to any space they inhabited, and this amazed Kate as well. Her own mother had taught children to notice spaces held sacrosanct by others. Was she right or wrong?

Matt stood holding open the passenger door of the van, waiting for Kate. "Honey, ready to go?"

Kate smiled. "I guess I'd better be." She climbed out of the bus, cumbersome in boots and mittens, her big stomach hidden in the bulky coat. It occurred to her that Matt seldom called her by name. She wasn't herself anymore; she'd become a term of endearment. She was dear to him. What was dear to him, therefore, must grow dear to her.

"They'll wait for us," Matt said.

Matt and Kate walked the length of the parking lot. The air was pale blue, leaden with cold. The winter water spread along one side of the horizon like smooth slate. "Funny how we never thought of stopping by here before," Matt said softly, resigned. "I suppose it's educational. 1963. Let me think about it before I get inside."

Kate nodded. "I was in grade school. I had a male teacher for the first time, the only one in the school. Mr. Norris."

She'd looked up to him. His approval meant more to Kate than the approval of women, which was more readily obtained, more easily expressed. Mr. Norris was a big man with a quiet, definite presence and a slow drawl to his voice. He would be principal as soon as the older, balding Mr. Hanover, who was a diabetic, retired. Mr. Norris would sit on the bookshelf, leaning against the wall by the big schoolroom windows, while they read off the answers to their arithmetic homework. Arithmetic had been the curse of Kate's existence. That day, the trees beyond the old pocked glass of the windows were naked. The leaves had fallen and were nearly colorless now, dry, layered. The afternoon sky was blue. Mr. Hanover walked into the room unannounced and said loudly, over their heads, as though they were invisible, "The president's been shot." "What?" Mr. Norris stood suddenly, forcefully, and moved forward as though to perform some urgent action. But there was nothing to be done.

“I remember that arithmetic stopped,” Kate said aloud. “I felt guilty because I was relieved—I hadn’t finished my homework. They turned on the intercom throughout the school so the older kids could hear the radio. Listening, I was scared.”

“I was so much older than you, then,” Matt said. “A senior in high school.”

“Practically a man,” Kate joked. Then, worriedly, she looked for the kids. They were gone. “Where are the boys?”

Matt and Kate crossed the lot and were walking up the sidewalk to the doors of the building. “They couldn’t have gone anywhere,” Matt said. “There’s nowhere to go.”

There was only down, around the ocean curve of the building, and the boys were there, clambering up and down the rocky bank on the big-windowed sea side of the edifice. They looked so isolated, moving ceaselessly across the plaza, sharply angling between the sheer wall of granite and the edge of the gray, half-frozen water; they seemed to have been blown to this place by some errant wind.

Matt stood watching them. “I wonder who they’ll see assassinated.”

“Probably everyone,” Kate answered.

Matt sighed and put his arm around her. “Gee, does pregnancy always make you so cheerful?”

Kate smiled and shrugged. “You’re Jewish. I’m a Primitive Superstitionist. If I say it, maybe it won’t happen. You know, appease the gods.”

He nodded. “I hear you.” He put his fingers to his lips and whistled, and the shrill music of his demand rent the air like a scream. The kids made a last foragers circle and drifted toward them.

“The museum is really still expanding,” the attendant said. “Two dollars for children, six for adults. There’s a photo and memento display and a film running continuously; we start every half hour.”

One curved, chest-high wall of the lobby afforded a view into the deep, round room below. Jonah hung his arms over, peering down. "Dad, look," he said, pointing. "Can we climb that?" Architectural iron scaffolding rose the entire height of a massive, three-story glass panel on the far side of the building. Winter sunlight fell through flat and sharp as the edge of a knife; at the foot of the black scaffold, the vast stone floor nearly gleamed. "Dad," Jonah said, "we could climb those black pipes."

"Yikes," Kate said, "I think you'd have to be at least twelve before they'd let you." She moved closer to the wall. "Actually, that's quite a drop. Why isn't there a railing?"

No one answered. Matt shoved his money at the attendant and followed the boys along the curve of the lobby. The open space below was a continuation of the plaza outside, and the sweep of the harbor filled the vista of the towering glass window. Gray stripes of ice hunched in the still water. The theater must be beneath them, Kate realized, and they would exit up those broad stairs that curved seamlessly along the bowl of the wall. The empty space was a kind of church, meditative, full of sky, a place to emerge into out of the dark. The black scaffolding was skeletal and imposing, yet easy to ignore in all that light. Kate supposed people did climb it: those who cleaned that wall of glass, who'd hung the enormous American flag that fell in a straight drop from the ceiling.

"Excuse me." Kate lowered her voice and leaned toward the attendant. "I suppose everyone with young kids asks you this. What does the film show, exactly?"

The attendant looked up and their eyes met. "You'd be surprised how few ask. But there's no footage of the assassination. It ends as his plane is taking off for Dallas."

Kate nodded. "Right." Into the dazzling skies of Marilyn Monroe and Judith Exner and Castro and Jimmy Hoffa, and all the other mysteries.

"Some people complain," the attendant said.

“Pardon?” Kate looked past him at the boys, who were peering down over the wall at the empty plaza far below.

“They complain because that part is left out. The motorcade, and all of it.”

“Oh,” Kate said, pulling off her heavy coat. “Well. It tore everything apart so, didn’t it, for people of a certain age. Maybe they can’t help wanting to see it again.”

“Then they should go to another museum,” he said curtly.

Kate focused on his face. He was young and balding, and wore tortoiseshell glasses. She saw him notice her advanced pregnancy, which was what everyone noticed now, the minute her form came into view. Last week a stranger at the grocery store had queried, incredulous, “Shouldn’t you have already *had* that baby?” The attendant’s expression softened, as though he were privately amused that a person he’d taken for normal a moment ago could be so rotund, yet stand and offer opinions about the motivations of a generation. Kate continued to meet his eyes, and he glanced toward Sam and Jonah, who had dropped to their knees, wrestling near the wall as Matt approached them. “Guess you’ve got your hands full,” he said. “Show begins in three minutes.”

Kate moved toward the theater entrance and found herself in a square white room whose walls were hung with enlarged photographs. When she was out with Matt’s boys, particularly as her pregnancy became obvious, people assumed she was their mother, rather than the villain of the piece. Did she qualify as the Other Woman, when Matt’s wife had been somebody else’s Other Woman first? Sometimes it did seem they were all involved in a graphic melodrama whose banal details were nearly as heartrending as pillbox hats and blood-smeared pink mohair, a melodrama Kate’s mother had arrived just in time to witness personally. Real life had such enveloping dimension, Kate thought. Photographs, like the ones of the stained suit, were flat statements. That suit stayed its

torturous color, even in black and white. Those photographs, Kate thought, all the ones not displayed here, were another reason American girls should never wear pink. "No pink" was one of many maxims Kate would have passed on to her daughter, were she carrying one. But she wasn't. Her baby was a boy. Her baby was Alexander, conqueror of the world, the world as it was.

Kate walked on, perusing photographs of the world as it was not: the Newport bride in white, surrounded by men in black. The ushers: black morning coats and cravats. Weddings were such pagan rituals, Kate reflected; everything about them was wishful superstition and bargaining. Long ago it was customary for bridesmaids to dress exactly like the bride, so that evil spirits couldn't tell which one hoped to be happy. Groomsmen stood in a line to flank their prince, confusing death, distracting the dark fates. As ever, the better safety was in numbers, money and power: the bigger the wedding, the more distraction. Her own wedding would be fifty or so people, but no bridesmaids. Kate felt she was already so firmly in the grip of fortune that it was pointless to try to bargain. Matt's divorce was final in a few weeks, but Kate refused to marry in the winter. Alexander would be sitting up by early summer, fat and happy: Kate wished him so. He could come to the wedding. What better reason to marry?

"Is this all there is?" Jonah stood looking up at her, his coat dragging behind him like a winding sheet, his fleeced-lined cap on his shoe. His curls were tousled.

Kate leaned down and retrieved the cap. She smoothed his hair, only to touch him, really. His skin was soft and his hands so sturdy and small. She trailed her fingers gently through his hair, hair as cold and tangled as the coarse mane of a pony come in from a winter beach. "No," she told him, "this is a waiting room. There's a movie."

"A movie? A movie?" He turned and dashed through the gathering crowd, jostling everyone. "Sam! Sam! A movie!

What movie is it?" Kate heard him shout.

But she didn't answer. She supposed he would find out. His father would tell him. Or Kate would, if she could ever catch up with any of them. Should she phone her mother, make sure she was all right? No. Better not to interrupt. Surely she was resting or sleeping, adrift in the interlude of their absence.

They all walked down into the amphitheater, a land of vast, domed bunker. The long, descending aisles were carpeted; the screen was large and seemed to conform to the circular shape of the room. Plushly cushioned seats with padded armrests were arranged in semicircular rows to face the screen. Sam and Jonah walked in, stood looking for an instant, and began to run. They ran, hopped, skipped a careening descent to the bottom and started back up the long aisle on the other side. Twenty or thirty people scattered around the auditorium watched as the boys ascended, gaining the upper slopes at what seemed lightning speed. Kate sighed. It was impossible to rein them in without shouting. She gave Matt a frustrated look and took a seat. Matt stood waiting as the lights went down, signaling the boys as they aimed themselves in his general direction.

Later Kate and Matt would have a talk. Kate might list the offenses of the week. She would suggest that Sam and Jonah reconsider running like maniacs through enclosed spaces, including the living room of the house Kate had helped to purchase; that they be advised not to change places in movie theaters two or three times, crawling under the seats to pop up a row ahead or behind. She might mention the way they'd eaten pizza at a restaurant recently, clasping their hands behind their backs to prove they could eat like puppies. And she would admit she hated the way Jonah asked for more food at meals and then threw it all in the garbage. Food she'd cooked! And she hated

herself for going on about their continuous infractions, which were infractions only to her. She felt like a dinky wren fluttering pathetically around an endangered nest, when the real dangers oppressing them all were too big to glimpse or imagine. This much was certain—the time drew near. Her mother would see the baby; she would hold Kate's baby.

As though on cue, music began; the blessing of darkness descended. Images of autumn, ducks flying above the funeral cortege moving up Pennsylvania Avenue. Rain. The bleak air. Close-ups of faces in the crowd. A woman weeping. Catastrophe from afar: now everything would change, and what would happen? With a flicker, a flourish of color, the documentary focused on his past, Kennedy a boy in a suit.

Sam and Jonah didn't own suits. Kate's coming discussion with Matt would follow a prescribed pattern: Kate knew the scenario so well that she could make up dialogue for both of them. She heard it now against her will.

Matt might say, "They're kids," or "They're boys," or "Museums are places *you* like. They'd rather run in a field."

It was true. They were like ponies testing the dimensions of a paddock.

"Will they spend their whole lives in a field?" Kate would ask. "Do they need to learn behavior appropriate only to fields?" She imagined them running, running, running, the wind and the air, glorious.

"By the time they decide to go to a museum," Matt would reason, "they'll know not to run."

"How? How will they know?" Silence. "Aren't you counting on some vague peer pressure to teach them things you should teach them?"

"I'll decide what I want to teach them," Matt would say, in a tone of firm disengagement.

"Fine. But what am I supposed to do? Strike myself deaf, dumb and blind until such time as they embarrass



*themselves* by running in public?"

"What *is* it?" Matt would demand at this point. "Why is this such a crusade with you?"

If Kate were honest, which she hadn't been in the past, because the truth was just now occurring to her, she would answer, in a crescendo of anger, "Because they get away with murder!"

The wild boys. No stalwart commandments engraved on the conscience. No unchanging boundaries, no sacred cows. It did make her angry, because they ignored her and everything she thought or felt, and because she was jealous. They moved happily this way and that, for miles of verdant plains and hills. They made it seem she and her brothers had grown up in a series of careful boxes. But had they? Her conception of metaphysical wild-boy fields was based on her own memories, on the acres of fields behind her childhood home, on the stream that flooded in spring, the wooded hills where dogwood bloomed early and stood out like bursts of popcorn. Kate and her brothers had played there through long afternoons in spring, summer, autumn, hiking and hiding and fishing in the creek. But they'd gone to church as small children too, sitting still for an interminable hour. Their mother always claimed she could take them anywhere and they'd behave, and it was true. Kate remembered now; she'd actually pretended to be a pony, swinging her dangling feet, watching the reflection of her black-patent shoes and white socks across the polished surface of the pew in front of them. Hard black hooves. Her brothers, dressed in sport coats, long pants, shined shoes, fidgeted but stayed in their seats, silent, miniature men. The sermons. Her mother reached out and held their hands if they poked or prodded each other. Long moments. Kate passed the time by pulling her mother's glove on and off, freeing each tightly fitted finger, covering it again. Under the glove, black kid in winter, white cotton

in summer, her mother's diamond ring was a hard little rock.

Kate didn't like diamonds. She didn't like the way wives were expected to have one, the way women supposedly wanted them and showed them off. It was painful to see the things women did. Actually Kate didn't know anyone anymore who would display an engagement ring with pride, or even bother with an engagement. She thought of the girls in her small-town high school. Those unfortunate enough to marry at eighteen had stood by the battered green lockers, holding out their hands for everyone's approval. Most of them were pregnant and relieved. Kate didn't feel relieved. Pregnant, she felt magical and fierce, as though these were the qualities her son would require of her. Enormous, she was girded for battle. Now, in the documentary, Jack and Jackie weren't married yet; they moved toward each other on the porch of a summer house. The footage seemed a home movie clip, unrehearsed and jerky. It was the only footage Kate had ever seen in which Jacqueline Kennedy didn't seem an impossibly poised icon. Kennedy was bronzed, angular and thin; he squinted into the sun and Jackie stood behind his chair, looking directly into the camera. Quizzical, dreamy or nervous, she raised her hand to her mouth and sucked and bit at her fingernail. The gesture was so unexpected, so naked and vulnerable and adolescently sexual, that Kate felt something in her chest contract. She wanted to turn away, and tears came to her eyes. *My God, that's how we all start out, in thrall, slouching against someone's chair.* She heard a commotion in the shadows and felt a sharp kick to her shin. Jonah was crawling over the back of the seat in front of them, trying to get into Matt's lap. Kate exhaled slowly, always her response to pain. "I needed that," she murmured, but no one heard her.

Later, in the gift shop, she looked for something to buy Sam and Jonah. There were little presidential rocking chairs, coloring books, calendars.

Matt stood beside her, turning the postcard rack for Jonah. "Not a bad film," he said.

"I could have done without the pink suit," Kate said.

"They had to show them getting on the plane," Matt said.

"They could have just shown the plane. We would have assumed they were on it." She looked down at Sam, who'd picked out a plastic PT boat. "Right, Sam?"

"Dad," he said, "I got a boat."

"What did you think of the movie?" Matt asked.

"I liked the part where he was making the commercial, and he kept getting it wrong and then he said a curse word."

"He sort of said it," Jonah remarked. "You couldn't really hear."

"But you could tell," Sam said.

"Could not. They would have taken that out."

"That was actually an advertisement," Kate said, "to ask people to vote for him. And maybe the filmmakers left it in to show he made mistakes and got frustrated and had to do things over again, that he was an ordinary person."

"Oh, yeah. Ordinary," Matt said. "Dexter, Groton, Harvard, the Court of St. James's."

Kate smiled. "Not my point, Dad. Anyway, *you* went to Harvard."

"Yes, I did. And I got in even though my father was a businessman, not an ambassador."

"That's my point. Three generations ago the Kennedys were just immigrants, double-crossing their way to the top. And now we're standing here in the Kennedy Library."

"Are you guys fighting?" Jonah asked.

"We're not fighting, we're discussing." Kate touched her forefinger softly to the bridge of his nose and looked back

at Matt. "I mean, land of opportunity. He did some good things."

"He wrote on the coconut," Sam said.

"Absolutely," Kate agreed. "And he might have done more. Everything might have been different."

"Isn't that a bit of a myth," Matt said gently, "about the war never happening if he'd lived?"

"What war?" Jonah said.

"He would have gotten into it," Kate said, "but he would have gotten out. He wouldn't even go through with the Bay of Pigs to fight Communists. Remember how he left those guys to get rounded up on the beach? No, he wasn't such a cowboy. He knew when to back down."

"Maybe," Matt said. "I notice there were no Cuban beach scenes included in the film."

"No," Kate said, "but still. They're all gone now, all the heroes. Thank God for Ted, no matter how much he drinks."

"Ted will stop drinking any day now." Matt looked over at Kate and arched his brows in mock flirtation. "He'll find a good woman."

"Dad, *I* want a drink," Jonah said, "and a boat like Sam's."

"You can't have one," Sam said. "I got the last one."

"Sam—" Matt began.

"Jonah, look at this." Kate picked up a blue plastic spyglass and looked toward Jonah through it. "There are pictures of PT boats inside, like the ones they used to look for Japanese boats in the Solomon Islands."

"Yeah, that's good." Jonah accepted the spyglass with a satisfied nod.

"Okay, okay," Matt said, "time to get going."

"I'm thirsty," Sam said. "I'm thirsty."

"We'll stop on the way home," Matt said. "Can we move toward the cash register, please? Kate, this way."

"I'm looking for the bathroom. I'll be fast—"

"Why do you always go to the bathroom?" Jonah asked.

Kate rested her hands on her drumlike abdomen. "Because I'm going to have a baby, and the baby has grown nice and round, and the baby presses on my bladder." She looked at Matt and shrugged. "I'd take them with me while you pay, but—"

"No way," Sam said, then he brightened. "Take Jonah."

Jonah tried to kick him and Sam grinned. "All right, all right," Matt said. "We'll see you in front."

Kate walked away. "I know about the baby," she heard Jonah say. "Of course you do," Matt was answering. "Then why do you ask dumb questions?" someone hissed. That would be Sam, peering at Jonah through wire-rim glasses. He broke Kate's heart. He would lie at home on the top bunk, trying to read without the glasses. "Dad," he would say, "my eyes are crossing." His hair was long and stringy and he had a space between his front teeth, an indication, in folk wisdom, of a lustful nature. "It means you'll travel far," Kate had told him, "and your heart is big." She didn't think she was lying; both travel and a capacity for strong feeling were ways of representing lust. And he did have such strong feelings, and so much difficulty expressing them. He seemed to deny himself until he exploded. Sports, Matt said, sports. Sports were invented for boys like Sam, boys who didn't talk.

Kate pushed through the heavy door to the rest room and closed herself into a stall. The tremendous effort of pulling layers up and down was worth the relief of sitting, her belly supported by her thighs. The baby moved. She flattened her hand against her lower left side and felt the heel of his foot or his elbow, something knobby and firm, roll against her palm. He was too crowded to turn now, he could only move his limbs. She was due on New Year's Day, but first babies were often late. She heard the clatter of her own urine falling into the bowl with a faraway sensation; her urine had no smell now, as though she'd turned pure and sweet, and she couldn't feel her muscles anymore. "Believe

me, you'll feel them in labor," the obstetric nurse had said. Kate trained her gaze on the back of the stall door. The white metal looked new and untouched, but someone had scrawled, near the bottom in red ink, "Born to Die." Farther down, another scribe had written in script, "Bonnie loves." Lines begun and not completed were everywhere, Kate thought wryly. Loves what, she wondered, loves who?

She thought of her mother, floating in her sleep as they floated, all of them and the world itself, through various postures and traveling states, the boys tossed in the van against a soft drone of adult comment, this arching, inhabited monument on its spit of land, the coastline beyond, irregular and rocky, running on for hundreds, thousands of miles, into other weathers and zones of time. The turning of events might register across such distance as a ripple of liquid movement, a settling of limbs. Her father, during the years of her parents' marriage, would drive into town on Sundays to buy the newspapers. He'd called from the store. "Turn on the television," he'd said gravely. "Why?" Kate had asked, adolescent by then, eleven, twelve. "They shot Bobby Kennedy," he'd said, resigned.

The phrase floated still. Kate saw the words bobbing on water like a cast-off paper label, remnant of some drifting flotsam. She heard it in her father's voice as the baby moved, hard. Kate stood to give him room.

They'd all left the building by the time Kate got to the lobby, but she saw Matt standing just outside. He turned to hold the heavy door open for her. "I'm going to go get the van," Matt said, "so we won't have to slide you across the parking lot again."

"Great. Every little bit helps." Kate pulled the collar of her down coat up higher. "Everything's darker now," she said. "Is it so late?"