

BANJO

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Everything about the disease was a mystery.

Someone found Kate's mother standing in the shopping center parking lot, frightened and clutching her handbag tightly against her chest. She stood there, trembling, unable to speak. When the police asked her name, she just stared at them. They found her driver's license in her bag, along with an address book. The female officer who called Kate had been kind. "We figured you must be a relative since you had the same last name."

Her mother was sitting in the security office when Kate came in. Someone had placed a styrofoam cup of water next to her, but she ignored it. She sat slumped down, deflated, as though she had been caught shoplifting. Kate had never seen her look so defeated. All her life, she had been a proud woman, her shoulders square, her chin up, her curly red hair bright around her head like a crimson helmet. The red hair had long since turned gray, but her mother never lost her haughtiness, her sense of entitlement. Now she sagged like a bag of dirty laundry thrown on a chair.

"I forgot where I parked my car," she said, looking pathetically at Kate. In her mother's eyes, Kate saw fear so deep, so primal that her own stomach sank, and she inhaled deeply to control the churning. Later, looking back, she realized her mother had glimpsed her end – and it terrified her. Neither of them knew it at the time. That day at the mall, her mother finally remembered her name. Now, eighteen months later, she couldn't recognize herself in the mirror.

Kate stood at the sink in the kitchen washing dishes. She could hear the birds outside in the courtyard, chirping and quarreling around the bird feeders. She and her mother often sat together, watching the birds through the window. What does she see now? Kate wondered. For a while, early in the decline, her mother had struggled to remember things from the past. Kate helped by telling her about memories they shared, good things to stimulate her mother's mind. Kate searched her past: there wasn't a lot to tell. Thirty-five years as a high school science teacher in her hometown, and what did she have to show for it? A teacher's pension, and whatever would be left when her mother died. She decided

not to speak about most of the memories that came to her, memories dredged up like sodden weeds from the bottom of a pond. Keep it cheerful, the neurologist said, so Kate tried to do just that.

Her mother did nothing to take care of herself anymore. When she awoke, she no longer reached for the robe Kate laid on the bed. She sat, slouched on the edge, until Kate put it on her. “She no longer seems to know what to do next, how to do the smallest thing,” Kate told the doctor. A loss of executive function, he called it. Kate liked the term. Somehow it elevated the disease above the mere inability to remember the details of the past, the ordinary events that, together, make a life.

Now her mother rarely spoke. Kate could only guess at what she was thinking. Tell me what you see, what you hear, Kate would sometimes ask. Her mother would look at her blankly, and say nothing. When she did speak, the words came from nowhere, blurted out abruptly, sometimes making sense, often not.

Her mother was talking in the bedroom. Kate strained to hear her.

“Birds. There were birds, big birds. Green, and red. We saw them.”

She’s remembering the parrots at the zoo, Kate thought. Her mother loved those parrots. Sassy things, she laughed. Maybe I’ll get one for the shop. Keep the customers entertained. Her mother talked about it for days. Bernice, her partner in the beauty salon they owned, let it ride for a while before putting her foot down. It would just be a noisy mess, she said. Bernice was the levelheaded one; she held the business together. Sometimes, she held Kate and her mother together.

Kate returned to the dishes in the sink. I’ll leave the rest of them, she decided. A new nurse’s aide was coming, a man this time. All the others had been women, well-meaning, but lacking the mental or physical agility to manage her mother. Her mother turned passivity into resistance, fighting the helpers at every step, until they quit in frustration. The agency suggested a man, diplomatically. They think a man might be able to handle her, Kate thought, not certain whether to be offended. Then she said: “Sure, why not?” Her mother always had men around when she was younger. She seemed to need them, even the ones who beat her, or walked out on her. Maybe a man was needed now.

Kate poured the remaining coffee from the pot into a cup, and sat at the kitchen table where she could look into the yard. Let the new guy do the dishes, she thought. Her mother was quiet now; there was no reason to check on her.

That day in the parking lot wouldn’t leave Kate’s mind as

she sat, fingering the cup on the saucer. Maybe there had been clues before, but Kate hadn't caught them – or had ignored them. Her mother had no soft side, no obvious vulnerability. Together, the two of them blocked out any signal of the catastrophe taking shape in her mother's mind. Later, when the neurologist quizzed Kate about early warning signs, incidents came back to her – her mother forgetting the name of Tillie, the woman who had come in to clean for years; misplacing her handbag and Kate finding it among the garden tools in the garage; then throwing away the mail, along with her social security check, before it was opened.

She and her mother deliberately overlooked these incidents. Her mother could laugh off anything, a survival skill she had learned from a lifetime of disappointments. Minor mistakes, her mother called them. Kate had no will to contest her, so she went along. Now, in Kate's mind, they clanged like fire alarms in the night.

The front doorbell chimed, jolting her.

Kate opened the door. A man stood there, shorter than average, but muscular, reminding her of a tumbler in a circus Kate had once seen. His forearms stood out. Like Popeye, Kate thought. He wore a light blue smock, the uniform of a nurse's aide, and brown trousers, loosely rumped. He's not American, Kate concluded. A foreigner. But what kind?

"I am Pavel Panchelevsky," he said. "Please call me Pancho." He raised a finger, like a teacher calling for attention. "Not Pauncho, as the Mexicans say. But Pancho. Like a frying pan." He laughed lightly. Kate could not place his odd accent. "I am here to care for Mrs. Marva May," he went on, sounding quaintly formal. His odd manner charmed Kate. For a moment, it seemed as though he might reach out and hug her. His eyes never looked away from her face. He's certainly not overly deferential, Kate thought.

Then he smiled, and the smile drew her in. Even before she replied, Kate was persuaded.

"Well, come on in, Mr. Pancho," she said, pulling the door further open. "You've arrived just in time."

Kate walked back toward her mother's room, the man following at a respectful distance. He's probably sizing up the furniture, trying to get a sense of how well-off we are, she thought. How well-off her mother is, she corrected herself. This is her house, not mine. She'd get it when her mother died. She had already decided to sell it when that happened; she had no desire to live in it.

Her mother sat as before, looking out at the bird feeders. "Mother, this is Mr. Pancelevsky," Kate said. "He said we should call him Pancho." After a long moment, her mother turned to

look at the man. Kate could see her incomprehension. Her mother stared at him.

“Banjo?”

The man laughed. “Yes, Mrs. May, Banjo. Banjo will do fine.”

He looked at Kate, and again she felt like he might hug her. She had the sense that he understood everything – that she needn’t worry anymore.

“Oh, Mrs. May, let’s get you dressed,” he said cheerfully. “You’ll feel so much better.”

Kate heard this, and felt guilty. She had gotten into the habit of letting her mother spend the day in her robe – dressing, undressing; it all seemed so useless now.

Pancho asked: May I look through her clothing? Kate nodded. He moved through her closet as though he knew it already, and selected a frock with roses, something her mother hadn’t worn for years. Kate barely recognized it.

“This will make you so pretty,” he said to her mother.

Pancho hummed as he dressed her. When he asked, she stood and raised her arms so the dress could slide over her. Kate was surprised at how easily he did it – and her mother’s lack of resistance. Pancho talked as he worked around the bedroom. “I took care of my mother, too,” he said to Kate. “I helped her when she needed to be taken care of.” He needs no guidance from me, Kate thought as he moved about. He understands her, understands dying old ladies. Kate had a feeling of expectation, the sense of music for a new dance just getting under way.

“Banjo,” she heard her mother say. “Banjo.”

She hadn’t said Kate’s name for months.

Pancho slid smoothly into the household. Soon it seemed as though he had always been there. He called Kate “Miss Kate,” and her mother “Mrs. May.”

“I can’t believe how easily he has connected with her,” Kate told Bernice. “I mean, it’s like they’re related. Like they’ve known each other for their whole lives.”

Bernice agreed. “It’s amazing.” They watched as Pancho guided Kate’s mother around the room on her morning exercise. When Kate did it, she almost had to drag her mother along.

“It’s like they’re dancing,” she whispered to Bernice.

“Yes,” Bernice answered. “A waltz.”

Every day Pancho arrived early, earlier than scheduled, to prepare her mother’s breakfast. He talked to her as he fussed around the bedroom. When she refused to eat, he fed her. He stayed until she was ready for bed in the evening. Quickly he took

over the housekeeping, so efficiently Kate barely noticed it being done. When Kate offered to pay him for the additional hours, he wagged his finger and shushed her.

"Nothing matters but her care," he said. "Do not worry."

He left her mother alone only to do his other work. "Banjo!" her mother would call out. And he would return to her, sometimes putting her in her wheelchair to keep her close by as he worked about the house.

Pancho even planned their weekends when he wasn't there. Food was prepared in advance, her mother's clothing selected, television programs she might like marked in the guide. Just follow the directions on the box, Kate thought whenever she studied the meticulous note he left each week. She sat with her mother as before, looking out at the birds, the television murmuring in the background, sensing the vacuum created by Pancho's absence. She still tried talking to her mother about the past, things they both remembered. Sometimes she even sang to her, old songs, and when she couldn't recall the words, simply hummed the tune. But her mother did not respond. When Kate grew tired of talking, they sat in silence, awaiting his return.

"He's taking care of the whole house now," she told Bernice as they sat under the canopy in the backyard, where they could hear Pancho, busy inside. Bernice nodded: she had noticed the tidiness of the house.

"Your mother was no housekeeper," she said.

"And I learned that from her," Kate added before Bernice could say it.

Kate's bedroom remained an untidy mess, an outlier. She had been neater in her own apartment. But in her mother's house, she often forgot, and was surprised when she entered her own room to find the bed still unmade from the morning. When that happened, it felt like a kitchen spill she had neglected to clean up, something she stumbled across after it dried into a hardened mess.

One day she walked in and found Pancho making her bed.

"I had a few minutes while Mrs. May is resting. So it is no problem." He fluffed the pillows. "I shall change the sheets and pillow cases when I do laundry."

From that day, Kate remembered to make the bed herself.

Pancho's presence swelled inside the house. Kate felt him in every space and corner, and herself being squeezed out. Things had slipped from her control without her knowing it. But she didn't care. As Pancho smoothly filled every niche, it felt like a mild narcotic taking hold, and she was drifting into dependence.

Kate also sensed a new awareness within her mother, an ability to perceive, which had been missing for months. Pancho had restored her mind in a way that nothing else had done. Her mother's movements, her attention span, the way she sat more erect in her chair – it all seemed to indicate a renewed ability to connect. But only for Pancho. With Kate, her mother lapsed into withdrawal, until Pancho brought her back with a laugh.

Bernice felt the change too. "Her mind's in there. And she knows it. But she only comes out for him."

Kate took to spying on them. She would stand outside the open bedroom door, just out of view, straining to hear what was being said. She heard his voice, speaking softly and confidentially. Was her mother responding? Kate couldn't tell, at least not from a distance. What was he saying? she wondered. One day she asked him.

"Oh, I tell her stories," he answered. "Mostly stories about Romania. When I was a boy."

"But does she hear you? Understand, I mean."

"Yes. Oh, yes. She hears. She knows what I say." He paused. "In her own way."

"And she answers you?"

Pancho waited a moment. "She says what she can say. What comes to her. She does not answer so directly. Not always."

He held a dust cloth in his hand, and shifted from one foot to the other, as though impatient to return to his work.

"Well, at least you're reaching her," Kate said. "When I talk to her, I can't tell if she knows what I am saying." And she no longer answers me, she could have added.

Pancho nodded, as though clarifying a distinction between them, a distinction he understood but that she did not yet grasp.

Kate still shopped for the groceries. Pancho swore he could do it easily, but she resisted: she wasn't sure why. So, instead, Pancho prepared a detailed shopping list, and made sure she followed it, checking off each item as he took them from the bags. He would have the groceries put away before she could finish hanging up her coat.

One day he was not waiting for her when she returned from the market. She hefted the groceries onto the counter and listened. Nothing. Maybe they're out for a walk, she told herself. But Pancho would have left a note – he always did. She walked into the bedroom. Her mother's wheelchair was missing, so they must be out. He just forgot to leave a note, she told herself.

Then the thought struck her: They don't need me anymore. They don't even know I'm here.

The feeling chilled her, and she stood for a while looking at her mother's empty bed.

The next day, as she passed the open door, a laugh came from the bedroom – throaty, almost a bark. It startled Kate. Her mother's laugh; she'd know it anywhere. She hadn't heard her mother laugh for months.

She asked Pancho: "Did I hear my mother laugh?"

He nodded. "She is quite merry this morning. Very happy."

"Did you do it? Make her laugh, I mean."

Pancho hesitated. "Oh, I only told her a story. It amused her."

A story – to make her laugh. What could do that? Kate wondered.

"Tell it to me. I want to hear it."

"It is only a simple tale of my boyhood. Not important."

"That's okay. Tell it to me anyway. I want to know what she heard."

He shrugged and told her.

"When I was a boy in Bucharest, my father would take us to the country, to the farm where he grew up and where his mother, my grandmother, and my father's sister still lived. There I would play with my cousin Ionela, who was very pretty, and I was shy to be around her. I was always trying to think up ways to impress her, so she would like me. One day as we played in the yard not far from the pen where the pigs rooted about, I got the idea of walking along the top rail of the pen, from one post to the next. In school I was very good at gymnastic exercises, and I was proud of my athletic expertise – or at least as I saw it."

Pancho stopped talking, and looked quizzically at Kate. She nodded: "Go on."

"' Watch me,' I said to Ionela. 'I will do something very hard – which I will do for you.' As Ionela watched, I climbed up to the top rail of the pen so carefully, and stood, my arms out for balance, and then proceeded to step slowly, one step, another step, across the rail. Oh, I was doing so fine, my chest bursting with love for Ionela. Then, something, a little breeze perhaps, or a pig lifting its head, caused me to stumble. I struggled to keep my balance. And, as my arms waved, I began to wobble like a spinning top winding down. I fought for control, but it was too late. I felt myself falling backward into the pen, and as the pigs scattered out of the way, I plopped with a loud smacking noise into the sloppy muck. As I lay stunned, wondering what had happened, from the yard I could hear Ionela laughing merrily. Even the pigs seem to be laughing at me too."

Pancho had stopped for a long moment before Kate realized he was finished.

“My mother liked that story?” Kate asked.

“Oh yes. Oh yes.”

“She actually laughed at his story,” Kate said to Bernice as they sat on a bench in the park. “She won’t even talk to me. Let alone laugh.”

Bernice patted her hand. “She used to laugh a lot in the shop,” Bernice said. “At jokes especially. Crude. The dirtier the better.”

Bernice was devoted to Kate’s mother. She came every week, and spent an afternoon, talking about their years together, when they were both single mothers, struggling to survive. Their beauty shop was a female-only sanctuary, a place for curling hair, whispered tales of secret abortions, drunken husbands, and beatings at home. Marva and Bernice became famous listeners – Bernice, grandmotherly and accepting; Marva, tough love. Bernice talked endlessly to Kate’s mother about it.

“It helps me remember, too,” she told Kate. “Marva always liked to remember the old days. We would hear awful stories; women put up with so much.” She sighed, and looked at Kate. “Such memories.”

The shop – Kate hated it, even the mention of it. She had never talked about it to her mother; she couldn’t. When she was eight years old, the shop had been a source of searing humiliation. She had rebelled against the long pigtailed her mother made her wear in the summer. She took a scissors and cut one off, close to the scalp. Her mother caught her before she could slice off the second one.

“So you’re doing your own hair now,” her mother said fiercely. “Let’s see how well you did.”

She unraveled the remaining braid, yanking Kate’s head with each twist. Then she stood Kate in front of the mirror. “See how adorable you look.” Kate stared at the figure looking back at her, her eyes puffy from crying, her hair lopsided, long strands stretching to her shoulder on one side; haggled, weedy-looking remnants on the other.

“We’ll see what the girls at the shop think of it,” her mother said. She dragged Kate into the car, Kate sobbing all the way to the shop. She could still hear the sharp jangle of the bell on the shop door as her mother shoved it open.

“Look at my gorgeous daughter,” she said, with that short bark of a laugh. The hairdressers and the customers in their chairs all turned to peer at Kate, standing in the middle of the floor. She tasted the salt from the tears sliding onto her lips as she stood

there, alone and mortified, gulping to hold back the vomit rising sourly in her throat.

For a long moment, no one stirred. Then Bernice knelt and squeezed Kate, and said, "It's okay, honey. I'll fix it."

And she did. Kate's hair was short that summer, a tomboy look she grew attached to. Her mother mocked her: Little Miss Butch, and laughed. By the end of the summer, Kate's hair had grown out a little. But the shame of the salon never left her. The memory of it would flood back when she least expected it. And she would stuff it inside herself, reliving that lonely moment in the middle of the floor. From that summer, she resolved never again to cry in front of her mother.

So there was nothing about the shop to love. Except Bernice's kindness. And that seemed to have no bottom.

"I'd tell her a dirty joke if I thought she could hear me," Kate said.

Bernice chuckled. "I already tried that the last time I saw her." She touched Kate's hand again. "She didn't laugh for me either."

Pancho's presence began to wear on Kate. She could feel the mood in the house shift from when he had been so reassuring. Weeks now seemed to become longer. She found herself eager for the weekend, and some privacy, as it had been with her mother before he came. Kate felt no connection with her mother now, beyond the touching when she dressed and washed her. Her mother lived in another world, a world only Pancho could reach. Kate gave up on the stories from their past. What was the point?

One day, as she entered her mother's room, she saw a sight she could not have imagined – tears running down her mother's cheeks. Her mother never cried, not once that Kate could remember. Pancho was making the bed; he did not look up.

"What's happened – to make my mother cry?" Kate asked. "Did you say something to her?" She wiped the tears from her mother's cheeks with a tissue. And as she did, her mother stared directly at her for the first time in weeks. In her eyes, Kate saw fear, the same fear she had seen that day at the mall so many months ago.

Pancho shrugged, but did not stop fluffing the pillows.

"She's frightened. You scared her," Kate said, her anger rising.

"Only I talk. To make her mind work. To think," Pancho said.

"But she's crying. Why would she cry? What did you say to her?"

Pancho did not answer; he still did not look up at her as he pulled the quilt tightly across the bed.

“Tell me. Tell me what you told her.” Kate was angry now. “I demand that you tell me.”

Pancho stood without moving. The bed separated them. He looked at the bed, then across it to her mother sitting in her chair, gazing out at the birds, oblivious to the conversation around her.

Kate repeated her words. “Tell me what you said to her. This instant.”

Pancho finally looked at Kate. She saw guilt on his face.

He told his story.

“When I was fifteen years old, the revolution came to Romania. My father was a government official, a traffic engineer, and no Communist. But it did not matter. The mobs formed in the street, and in the great square in Bucharest, close to where we lived. All government officials were threatened and attacked. Men came to our apartment, men with guns, clubs, and drove us out, out into the street, where my father and other men from the government were jeered and humiliated.

“There we were dragged to the very front of the crowd, near the great fountain. The crowd was screaming, a mighty roar. I held my sister’s hand tightly; I could feel her shaking. They put a rope around my father’s neck, and the other men, and laughed and yanked them about. Then they made us look up, and there, above the crowd, were the bodies of the dictator Ceausescu and his wife, dead, hanging by ropes around their ankles, upside down, the crowd jeering, laughing, throwing bottles and fruit at them. And things bouncing off their bodies, which were swaying in the air, back and forth, back and forth, pounded by all the things hitting them. It was a horrible sight, so awful that I wet myself. I could not stop it.”

Pancho paused for a while, not moving, and Kate thought: Maybe that’s the end. But after a moment, he continued.

“We were forced onto buses, and a long ride to the Bulgarian frontier. No food, no water, my sister and me clutching each other in fear. Some of the men and my father begged the border guards to let us cross. Finally, they did, but we became prisoners, not refugees, and they showed us little mercy. For months we waited to be allowed to go somewhere – Germany, Britain, even the United States. The dampness and cold were too much for my sister, and she soon died, of flu I was told. My father’s heart was broken, and soon he too was dead. Only my mother and I survived.

“In time, a miracle came and my mother and I were sent to the United States. But the long time we were held in the pen, and the death of my sister and my father, had destroyed my mother’s mind. She had become like a child, clinging to me, whimpering. I

was now just sixteen, but knew it was up to me to make my way in this new world. I worked, and went to school sometimes, as I could, and took care of my mother. But she became a greater and greater burden. So dependent, so needful, so draining on me and my strength.

"As I became older – nineteen, twenty – I began to hate her, despise her even. And to wish her dead. My father, my sister, they had died. Why could my mother not have followed them? Why could she not see how she was dragging me down?

"These thoughts plagued me, and after a while I could not let them go, even in sleep. I dreamed about my mother, and how she was making me a prisoner in my own life. Because she would not die. And I would awake, so full of hate and anger that I could not bear it."

He paused again, his shoulders slumping, still not looking at Kate. But he kept talking.

"And so I began to tell her – to tell her that it was time for her to leave, that I could no longer carry the burden of her, that my life was being ruined by her, and that she was old and useless. Please die, I said. I repeated it. And I could tell that she heard me. And she understood. I could tell, oh, I could tell. I told myself that she wanted to die. That she would die if she could. So I said it again, and again, and again. And soon she was dead."

Pancho stopped. Finally, he looked directly at Kate. "My words killed her."

The story had ended. As Kate listened, the shock of it built inside her.

"My God, did you really say that to my mother, that story?" she asked when her voice came back to her.

Pancho nodded slowly. "She is losing all her thoughts now, and they will not return. It is my only wish to make her happy. But I can no longer make her laugh." Weariness replaced the guilt on his face. "So I must tell her stronger things. Hard things. Things that can reach deeper. To keep her mind going. Where it is still alive." He paused. "Anger, hatred she can still feel. And fear."

He paused again. Kate waited, speechless.

After a while he said: "With my mother, I learned how powerful hate is. And anger. They drive your mind, your soul, like nothing else. Even love."

He sighed, and reached up to rub the back of his neck. "So is it not better for your mother to know these things, these horrible things, than to understand nothing at all?" He looked at her mother, staring out the window. "I know it makes her aware of her own dying. And she is afraid. But isn't fear better than emptiness?"

The question stirred Kate from her silence.

“No. No, I don’t want her to hear such things.” Kate’s anger shook her now. “I don’t care what you think is best. Never say such things to her again.”

She realized a threshold had been crossed. She could no longer wait.

Pancho nodded, and resumed making the bed. As Kate walked from the room, he said to her back: “I loved my mother. So much. So much.”

At least it’s calm, Kate thought when she first entered the nursing home. Bernice drove them. Her mother came quietly, cooperating, as though her will to resist had finally faded. During the day the nurses sat her in a chair in her room, music playing over the intercom. There are no birds here, Kate thought. Only the consoling prattle of the nursing staff. And nothing to terrify her.

Sometimes, as she sat while her mother drifted wherever the remnants of her mind had taken her, Kate thought about Pancho. He had wanted to stay on; he begged her. “I will go to your mother and take care of her at the nursing home. Speak only happy things,” he pleaded. “And keep the house for you. As I do now. I can do it.” Kate thought about how he could pierce through the vacuum and reach into her mother’s dwindling awareness.

But she said no. And Pancho disappeared with Kate’s blessing.

Sometimes, she worried that perhaps she had been wrong to change things. She talked to Bernice and told her about Pancho’s story, and his reason for telling it.

“Maybe he was right,” Kate said. “Maybe any emotion, even fear or anger, is better than nothing but emptiness.”

Bernice looked worried, then sad. “No.” She shook her head. “Nothing troubles her now. Her mind is quiet. She should be allowed to slip away, in peace.”

So doubt would take over once again in Kate’s mind, and she would feel nothing at all.

Her mother stopped eating. The nurses could feed her, but it became harder. The doctors said it would take extreme measures to keep her alive. Kate refused. Her body’s living, but she’s gone, Kate believed. She knows she is dying, Kate told herself; she is only waiting for the right moment. Then she realized she wanted to believe that. She thought of Pancho’s mother. Had she, at the end, wanted to go? Had she heard what her son said to her, and simply given in?

Her mother stayed in the bed now, staring at the ceiling. Kate sat, her hand on her mother’s arm, feeling the bones inside the

dwindling flesh, as if her life was being peeled away layer by layer. And as she sat there, she knew she needed to speak to her mother one last time.

She began a story she had never told – that she had never wanted to tell.

“Do you remember the time we went to the beach in Mobile when I was a girl?” she began. “It was so hot, hot even by what we expected from the Gulf. I had just turned thirteen, and we both had new bathing suits. Let’s show them off, you said, and I remember your laugh. I was awkward, so shy about my body, afraid – ashamed – to look at myself in the mirror naked. I was flattered that you wanted me to come with you to the beach. You were so beautiful, men were sucked in by you. You used to laugh: ‘Not bad for an old broad,’ you’d say. We sat on the beach, you combed your hair, then mine. We giggled about the fat people, and I was embarrassed when you pointed at them. Don’t do that, I said, reaching to cover your hand. You just laughed. Fat people deserve to be laughed at, you said. They shouldn’t let themselves go like that.

“You sat with your chin resting on your knees, looking out across the bay. I remember the sunlight on it, oh god, so hot. We huddled in the shadow under our beach umbrella. You sat that way for a long time, unmoving, so still that I thought you had dozed off. Then you bounced your chin lightly on your knee once or twice, and said: ‘We are nothing alike, you and me. Nothing at all.’” You hugged your knees more tightly – I remember that so distinctly. “I don’t know who you are like. But it isn’t me.’

“That was all, those few words. But they pierced me, slicing into me, deeply. I panicked. If I was not like you, who was I like? I couldn’t imagine anything else. ‘Nothing alike,’ you said. Nothing. Maybe that was it: I was nothing. I would never be anything. And fear came up inside me. A fear that has never gone away.”

Kate stopped; the words no longer came. She had been looking toward the window, absently, as she spoke. It came back to her so clearly, that awful day.

“And at that moment, I hated you.”

She couldn’t look at her mother.

“I’ve never stopped hating you.”

She sat, waiting for the next words.

“And I am glad that you are dying.”

For a long while, she stayed like that, unmoving, not looking down to see if her mother was still breathing. She didn’t need to.