

One True Thing Study Guide

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Contents

One True Thing Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Prologue, Pages 12 - 26.....	5
Pages 27 - 46.....	7
Pages 47 - 66.....	9
Pages 67 - 80.....	11
Pages 81 - 105.....	13
Pages 106 - 124.....	15
Pages 125 - 139.....	17
Pages 140 - 158.....	19
Pages 159 - 173.....	21
Pages 174 - 197.....	23
Pages 198 - 219.....	25
Pages 220 - 261.....	27
Pages 262 - 289, Epilogue.....	30
Characters.....	32
Objects/Places.....	38
Themes.....	40
Style.....	42
Quotes.....	45
Topics for Discussion.....	47



Plot Summary

"One True Thing" is the story of Ellen Gulden and her family in the wake of her mother, Kate Gulden's cancer diagnosis, treatment, and death. At the opening of the story, Kate Gulden is a twenty-four-year-old editor living in New York, who seems to have it all: a great apartment, a great boyfriend, and a great job. She grew up with a very close relationship to her father, George Gulden, a college literature professor who always pushed her to excel in life. George and Ellen have always had an academic bond, speaking about literature in a way that no one else understood, which made Ellen feel superior to the rest of her family, especially her mother. Kate Gulden spent her life as a home maker, dedicating her time to handicrafts and to ensuring that her household was peaceful and nurturing. Ellen always believed that her mother did this willingly, as if she hadn't had any better options. Ellen cannot imagine that Kate would have other aspirations in life than to be considered the perfect wife and mother.

When Kate is diagnosed with cancer, Ellen returns home and is, essentially, blackmailed by her father to leave the magazine she edits to come home and care for Kate full time. Ellen erupts in defiance, but her father will not budge and Ellen knows she cannot refuse him. Ellen packs up her belongings and moves home. Although Kate initially refuses Ellen's help, telling her to get on the next train back to New York, the two women fall into an unexpectedly easy relationship, learning for the first time how to be a bonded mother and daughter. It is clear that neither of the women expected their relationship to grow in this way, as both had resigned themselves many years ago to loving each other from a distance, never quite understanding the other intimately. It had been clear, since Ellen was a little girl, that she had preferred her father, and her mother had always accepted that relationship. Now, however, Ellen's relationship with her father becomes fractured as her resentment for his absence grows. George simply cannot, or will not, cope with his wife's illness and chooses instead to immerse himself in work, refusing to take time off to attend Kate's doctor's appointments or to give her any sort of affection. Ellen begins to realize that she had been wrong about both her parents - her mother, not her father, is the strong parent who had always deserved her idolatry. This, coupled with the pressing evidence of her father's infidelities, devastates Ellen when she realizes that her father is not the man she thought, and she begins a fierce battle to protect her mother from George's remoteness, and from the cancer that is ravaging her body.

Despite her best efforts, Kate begins to deteriorate and there is nothing Ellen can do to save her. Kate becomes dependent on morphine pills to numb her pain, must wear diapers, and in the end, is almost completely bed-ridden. One evening she begs Ellen to help her end her life, saying that Ellen would know what to do. Ellen is horrified by her mother's resignation to death, and horrified to realize that she is too weak to fulfill her mother's dying wish. Shortly after, Kate dies and her death is ruled suspicious - the cause of death: a morphine overdose. Ellen replays the final image of her mother's life over and over and over after she is arrested for her mother's murder. In the final image, George spoons rice pudding into Kate's mouth, bite by bite. Ellen had been unable to look away from the gleam in her mother's eyes, as if her soul had been blazing through



as she stared at George. Ellen knows that it was her father who aided Kate in her morphine overdose and it is now Ellen's responsibility to protect him from the charges that will surely be brought up against him. Although Ellen denies that she was involved in her mother's death, she refuses to admit that her father was responsible. In the end, Ellen is acquitted of the charges brought against her, although no one in town actually believes she is innocent. They simply believe that she was justified in this act of euthanasia. Ellen does not speak to her father for eight years, unable to communicate with him, especially regarding her mother. When she inadvertently bumps into George at a theater performance, Ellen learns that he was not responsible for killing Kate, and that Kate prepared the morphine overdose herself.



Prologue, Pages 12 - 26

Prologue, Pages 12 - 26 Summary

"One True Thing" is the story of Kate Gulden's battle with cancer and the way it affected the lives of her entire family, especially her daughter, Ellen, who left a busy life in New York to come home to care for her. The story is told through Ellen's perspective as she discovers truths about her family that she never expected, and comes to terms with her family history after being charged with her mother's murder.

The novel opens with the narrator, Ellen Gulden, sitting in the local jail. The officer running the local jail, Skip, graduated in the same high school class as Ellen, and is thus able to tell reporters inside information about her. While lying on her cot, Ellen replays the same image over and over in her head: her father feeding her mother with a spoon, her mother's tongue hanging slack from her mouth. This is one of the last images she has of her mother before she died. Ellen replays this image over and over in her head before peacefully falling asleep. Ellen remembers the last "normal" day of her life. She and her brothers drive to the local Tastee Freeze for a soft-serve ice cream cone on a hot summer day. Her brothers, Brian and Jeff, are both tanned from their jobs as summer camp counselors. Ellen has just come home for a four day visit from New York where she works as a journalist. The different relationships the children feel with their mother and father becomes apparent. Their mother is pleased with whatever they do, while their father clearly has high expectations for their successes. Ellen's thoughts shift to how her mother is the perfect homemaker. Because everyone reveres her mother's homemaking skills, Ellen has always felt inadequate: "If you are different from a person everyone agrees is wonderful, it means you are somehow wrong." Ellen's thoughts are interrupted when her father calls the three children together and tells them that their mother has cancer. The children are all momentarily sickened when they hear that their mother initially thought her nausea was on account of being pregnant. They are each embarrassed that this made them more uncomfortable to imagine than their mother having cancer. In the middle of her father's talk, Ellen gets up and leaves the room, claiming that she can no longer listen to this news.

Ellen describes the town of Langhorne, where she grew up in the nicest neighborhood. She remembers the different neighborhoods and college towns her family moved to for her father's professorships, and the fact that her father had been disappointed in her even though she graduated magna cum laude from Harvard University. Back in present time, Ellen's father appears in her doorway and tells her that she must move back home to care for her mother. He uses various manipulative tactics, from reminding her of the times her mother cared for her when she was ill, to stating that she has no heart. When Ellen implies that her father should take a sabbatical from work, he refuses, claiming that his wife will need a woman's companionship during her treatments, and that his work is far too important to put on hold. Ellen clearly resents her father for his implication that her work is not important, but also feels like she cannot say no to him.



Prologue, Pages 12 - 26 Analysis

This section introduces the reader to the main conflict of the story - Ellen's mother's cancer and the way the illness affects her family as a whole. Before the reader knows the crime with which Ellen has been charged, she describes the image that haunts her: the image of her father feeding her mother rice pudding the evening before her death. This will be a reoccurring image in the novel as Ellen reconciles what she thinks she saw that day. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Ellen believes her father, George, fed Kate the overdose of morphine in that final meal of rice pudding, but she refuses to turn against her father. This grapple with the truth becomes integral to Ellen's character development throughout the novel and is, clearly, one of the most important scenes in the story. While Ellen is lying in jail, it is immediately evident that her arrest is one of the biggest stories people in Langhorne have ever experienced. Her relationship with Skip, the jailer, shows how Langhorne is a small town, with everyone's lives intersecting. It is difficult to keep secrets in a town like Langhorne, and even more difficult to escape your past.

This section also introduces Ellen's relationship with both her parents. Throughout her life, Ellen has always sided with her father, even idolized him. She never felt she measured up to the woman her mother wanted her to be. Her statement, "If you are different from a person everyone agrees is wonderful, it means you are somehow wrong" sums up her feelings about her mother: her mother has been deemed the best homemaker in Langhorne, but Ellen has bigger aspirations. Her father had understood these aspirations and supported her. Ellen had always believed her mother didn't understand academia, but she would later learn that Kate, too, had academic aspirations before marrying George. At the end of this section, George refuses to take no for an answer when he requests that Ellen leave her life in New York to help care for Kate. This scene sets about the change in relationship that will occur between George and Ellen, as Ellen begins to realize that her father is not the man she thought he was: he does not value the life she has created in New York, but wants to use her to make his own life easier, the same way he has always used, and not valued, his wife, Kate.



Pages 27 - 46

Pages 27 - 46 Summary

Back in New York, Ellen quits her job at the newspaper. She packs up her belongings and meets with Jules, her best friend in the city, for dinner. Jules comforts Ellen when she begins to cry. Ellen claims that Jules is the only person who has ever known her completely and still loves her. Ellen returns home to Langhorne and is greeted by her very surprised mother. Kate believes Ellen has come home for a visit, and is shocked to hear that she plans to stay. Kate is horrified that Ellen would leave her life in New York and insists that she turn around and get on the next train home.

Ellen and her mother decide to start a book club. They go to the bookstore and buy copies of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, and *Anna Karenina*. Later, Ellen and her mother make a picnic and spend the day down by the river. Ellen remembers coming to this same spot with her boyfriend, Jonathan, and making love. Now, there seems to be nothing erotic about the memory and she suddenly feels very lonely. Her mother interrupts to start talking about *Pride and Prejudice*. The two spend some time discussing feminism in Jane Austin's work - Kate believes that Austin makes housewives out to be fools, while Ellen claims Austin uses prototypes to speak out against societal expectations of women. Kate tells Ellen the story of how she met Ellen's father, George. She had been working at her family's dry cleaning business and would visit the library on her lunch break to read since she wasn't able to attend college. Ellen's father came into the dry cleaning shop with a tomato stain on his jacket. Soon after, he and Kate were married. Kate had been reading *Pride and Prejudice* at the time, but after the wedding, stopped completely. She claims she felt like a little leaguer trying to discuss baseball with the Yankees. Ellen isn't sure how to feel when her mother confesses giving up her passion for reading to keep her father happy.

Pages 27 - 46 Analysis

In this section, Ellen contemplates the different relationships women can have with their mothers, and believes that she "got lucky" in her relationship with her mother. Jules, Ellen's best friend, has a very difficult relationship with her mother, one in which she cannot even speak to her mother. Every grown woman Ellen knows in her life has a difficult, tenuous relationship with their mother. At dinner, Jules reminds Ellen that taking care of her mother won't last forever, a comment that reminds Ellen, and the reader, that a recovery from the cancer is unlikely. While at the diner, Ellen compares her mother to her dinner saying, "I needed her in order to live, but I did not pay much attention to what went in her." In comparison, Ellen compares her father to dessert, and compares his coming home from work to the moment when Dorothy opened the door on OZ for the first time, and the entire screen warmed with color. Again, this shows the reader the close relationship Ellen has with her father and the way she idolizes him above everyone else in her life. This section sets the reader up for the profound shift in



relationships Ellen will have with both her parents, as she realizes that her father is not the demi-god she made him out to be in her memory, and that her mother had always been deserving of much more respect and admiration than Ellen had give her as a child.

In this section, Ellen and her mother start a book club. They choose three books that provide interesting metaphors for the representation of female roles in the novel: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Great Expectations*, and *Anna Karenina*. The first book the women tackle in their book club is *Pride and Prejudice* - a book that polarizes the roles of women through the characters Jane and Elizabeth. Jane, like Kate, is a good housewife. Elizabeth, like Ellen, is a rebel, shirking from the traditional roles of women in society. Kate wants to know why, in the novel, Jane is treated as a nitwit and is not respected simply because she has chosen a traditional life. Kate wants to know what message this polarization of women sends to the readers. It is impossible for the reader to ignore the parallels between the lives of the Gulden women and the lives of Austin's female characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. Although she never states it directly, it is clear that Kate is demanding to know why, since she chose to become a homemaker, she is not respected by her daughter, and perhaps by her academically minded husband.

In this section, Ellen also learns that her mother once read avidly but gave it up after marrying George, believing that she could never keep up with his analysis of literature. Ellen is beginning to learn that her mother is far more complex than she initially gave her credit for being.



Pages 47 - 66

Pages 47 - 66 Summary

After the picnic, Ellen confronts her father, wanting to know why she is caring for her mother alone. Again, her father cites his work, claiming that someone here has to earn a living. Ellen believes her mother is reconciled to the fact that her father is not around. She recalls seeing her parent's feign affection to each other when she was growing up, but not engaging in each other's lives as couples should. As her father storms off, Ellen's eye catches a photograph of her with both her parents. She is overwhelmed with a feeling of guilt for the way her mother worked tirelessly to ensure a happy home for her when she was growing up. Spending this one-on-one time with her mother has led Ellen to realize that the differences she thought were between them, simply don't exist anymore.

Ellen remembers being at the University of Cambridge's library and hearing some of her father's students discussing him without knowing she was there. A group of girls sat together giggling about which of them would sleep with Professor Gulden, and guessing who he was sleeping with now that his teaching assistant had been transferred. Ellen was mortified, but not surprised to hear them speaking so glibly about her father's infidelities. One evening while the family was still living in Cambridge, Ellen's grandfather had a stroke and she was sent to her father's office to tell him the news since all the phone lines in the city were down. When she arrived, she could overhear her father having sex with a woman named Beth in his office. She listened for a long time, fluctuating between feeling sick and apathetic, before writing a note that stated: "Your wife wants you" and sliding it, anonymously, under the door.

Ellen takes her mother for her chemotherapy treatments every three weeks. After the treatments, Kate typically throws up for days. Ellen has questions for the head oncologist, Dr. Cohn, like how long her mother has to live, but doesn't feel comfortable asking these questions in front of her mother. When Ellen attempts to speak with Dr. Cohn privately, the doctor pulls her back into her mother's room and claims that this is Kate's disease and she won't have any private conversations about it. With her mother in the room, Ellen is too embarrassed to ask her questions.

Pages 47 - 66 Analysis

In this section, Ellen recounts her experiences with her father's infidelity. She remembers hearing college students speaking glibly about her father's sexual activity, as if everyone knew he was cheating on his wife, except of course, his wife. Ellen also remembers the mixture of sickness and apathy she felt when she overheard her father having sex with his teaching aide, Beth. On one hand, Ellen understood that her father was human, and that this activity with the aide was completely banal. On the other hand, she thought of her mother darning socks at home, or making dinner for her hard-



working husband, oblivious to his infidelities, and she feels sickened. Ellen never tells her mother about the affairs and assumes that her mother has no idea. Later, she and the reader learn that Kate had known all along that George was unfaithful to her, but that she had afforded him certain graces to keep their family together. Even so, the guilt of keeping this secret from her mother plagues Ellen throughout her life, particularly after moving home and caring for her. Ellen describes how her father is always cordial to men, but overwhelmingly charming to women. In almost any situation, her father can charm a woman - from her school friends to the old woman behind the counter at the bookstore. The charm, of course, had also worked on Ellen when she was growing up, as she had idolized her father and their precious time together. Ellen also assumes that knowing about her father's sexual indiscretions has led to her being sexually devious herself.

In this section, two important secondary characters are introduced - Dr. Cohn, a fiercely loyal doctor who refuses to discuss Kate's illness and treatment without Kate's consent, and Jonathan Beltzer, Ellen's boyfriend. Dr. Cohn provides a lens through which the reader experiences Ellen's insecurities about her mother's illness and also her inability to openly communicate with her mother about the cancer. Through Jonathan's introduction, the reader becomes immediately aware of his apathy and begins to see that the life Ellen has created for herself, with Jonathan, is not as picture-perfect as Ellen believes it is. Since returning home to care for her mother, Jonathan has only called Ellen twice and does not have plans to visit with her. This is not the level of support anyone would expect from the man Ellen has been dating since high school.



Pages 67 - 80

Pages 67 - 80 Summary

Kate invites the Minnies over for lunch. The Minnies are a group of women who get together every Christmas to make decorations for the city. Kate has them over every year, and this year is no exception. Ellen cooks the meal for the party because Kate is too weak. When the Minnie's arrive, they try to convince Kate to act as an overseer for the projects and not take on any physical work, but Kate will hear nothing of it. While cooking the meal - chicken paillard and zucchini soup - Ellen accidentally pours a cup of tea into the soup. She and her mother have a good laugh, calling it Ellen's exotic new recipe. None of the Minnies notice. Later, Kate tells Ellen the story of her brother going off to fight in Vietnam and coming home in a coffin.

One evening, Ellen wakes to hear her mother shrieking from the bedroom. George tries to comfort her, but it is clear that Kate is not ready to give up her role as a parent to Ellen. Ellen phones the doctor, and her father leaves. When Dr. Cohn arrives, she lifts Kate's nightgown to inspect her. Ellen is horrified at the way her mother's body has shrunk. Dr. Cohn administers a shot of morphine which knocks Kate out completely. Downstairs, Dr. Cohn insists that both Kate and Ellen need to meet with therapists to discuss what's going on in their lives. This suggestion makes Ellen very uncomfortable. Dr. Cohn tells her that her mother has many issues she may not want to discuss with her daughter.

Pages 67 - 80 Analysis

Lunch with the Minnies showcases the ways Ellen's character is beginning to change. She embraces cooking for the group using her mother's recipes while a month ago, she would have balked at the thought. This scene also shows the way cancer is beginning to affect Kate's quality of life. She is too weak to perform her regular tasks of cooking and cleaning, and other people outside of her immediate family are beginning to notice. Even the Minnies suggest that Kate act as an overseer rather than a decorator for the Christmas celebrations this year, a suggestion Kate refuses to consider.

In this section, Kate also opens up to Ellen about her brother's death. She cries when she tells the story, and Ellen acknowledges that it is the only time she's seen her mother cry since the diagnosis. After this, both women cry frequently, but only when watching television and something emotional comes on. The two talk about many things - childhood memories, sex, relationships. In the end, Ellen realizes that as she had let her mother go easily from her life, so too had her mother let go of her. It is clear that Kate is attempting to pass on her knowledge of their family history to Ellen before it is too late. Steven, Kate's brother, becomes an important symbol later in the novel as Kate begins speaking to him frequently, signaling to her family, and to the reader, that Steven is her guardian angel and will help her cross over when her time comes.

When Dr. Cohn arrives to make a house call, Ellen sees first hand how the cancer is ravaging her mother's body. She has a profound reaction to seeing her mother's shriveled body, as if this sight confirms that her mother is actually sick. Now that Ellen is beginning to adjust to her role as housewife, she doesn't want help from the outside. She is very jealous of her role in the family and refuses Dr. Cohn's offer to send in a nurse. Ellen naively refuses to believe that there are any topics that she and her mother cannot talk about, and is shocked to hear Dr. Cohn list off her mother's fears including her fear of death, her fear of losing her family, and her fears that her husband may no longer be sexually attracted to her. These issues all showcase the fragility in the relationship between Ellen and Kate, highlighting the ways that years of strain cannot be patched with a few weeks of time spent together.



Pages 81 - 105

Pages 81 - 105 Summary

It is Thanksgiving and Ellen's brothers return home from school. They are shocked when they see their mother's condition. Jonathan surprises Ellen by showing up at her family home. He takes her to his parents' house, which is abandoned, and they make love even though Ellen is not interested. Meanwhile, Kate has been having unexpected rages - raging against the Minnies who wanted to take away her decorating tasks, raging against Mrs. Duane, the bookstore owner, who made the mistake of rubbing Kate's back, treating her like a dog, and raging against Ellen when she brought the wheelchair into the house, screaming that she was "not an invalid!" Ellen tells Jonathan that if she had any guts at all, she would simply hold a pillow over her mother's face and end the pain.

For the meal, Kate tries to make herself look nice, but Ellen thinks she looks horrid. Kate is wearing maternity clothes now, to cover her swollen belly. Kate screams at Ellen to bring her pill, shouting so loudly everyone in the house hears her. Ellen gives her the pill, and she falls asleep. Brian, very emotional, falls asleep holding his mother's hand. Ellen gets very drunk at the bar she visits on Thanksgiving evening with Jeffrey and Jonathan. When they walk in the bar, a woman named Jennifer pushes herself against Jonathan and openly flirts with him. When Ellen begins berating her father for not caring for her mother, Jonathan comes to George's defense, which infuriates her. Ellen gets up to leave and says she doesn't want to go home with Jonathan. She walks home alone. Jonathan doesn't call her and leaves for Cambridge early.

Ellen takes her mother, in the wheelchair, into town. Kate looks around the neighborhood as if she's seeing it for the first time. The pair stops in a shoe store where Kate tries on stacks of shoes. Ellen's high school English teacher, Mrs. Forburg, approaches and asks Ellen if she received the note she sent offering dinner. Mrs. Forburg's mother had died from cancer and she wants to be there for Ellen if they will share the same fate.

Pages 81 - 105 Analysis

When Jonathan finally arrives to visit with Ellen at Thanksgiving, she is not interested in seeing him. Ellen has become so engrossed in her role as homemaker and caretaker that she cannot imagine a life with Jonathan any longer. She is not interested in having sex with Jonathan, but does it to please him, again highlighting the imbalance in their relationship. Afterward, Jonathan tells her the story of how he had been abandoned by his own mother. Jonathan had found her phone number when he was twelve and called her, wanting to know how she could leave her son, and she said, blandly, "I just did". This story again highlights for Ellen how lucky she is with her own mother, and gives her some insight into why Jonathan struggles with intimacy. Later, Jonathan takes Ellen to



the bar, about which she feels very guilty while her mother is at home sick. Ellen hasn't had a drink or thought about sex since she moved back home. It is clear that she feels unworthy of pleasure when her mother is feeling so poorly. This signals a huge shift in Ellen's character. Before her mother became ill, Ellen had been concerned only with herself and her own ambitions. Now, putting her mother first has become so integrated in her life that she cannot contemplate relaxing, or doing anything that gives her pleasure.

During one discussion, Kate tells Ellen the story of when the provost's wife had purchased hundreds of poinsettias to plant around the town flagpole at Christmastime. Kate had known the plants were tropical and would die in the frost, but said nothing. This had become George's favorite story to tell, he was so proud that his wife knew something the provost's wife didn't. It is clear that this story holds an important memory for Kate - a time when her husband was proud of her, not for her homemaking skills, but for her intelligence. Ellen is beginning to realize that Kate has lived her whole life to please George, and it is small moments like this, when George had been visibly proud of her, that had kept Kate going all those years.

This section introduces Mrs. Forburg, Ellen's high school English teacher. Mrs. Forburg will become integral to the story later when she takes over the role of parent after Kate dies and George abandons Ellen. Mrs. Forburg acts as the voice of reason in the story when all the main characters' opinions are muddied by their involvement in Kate's care. As Kate and Ellen spend the day in town, it seems that everyone comes out of the woodwork to wish her well. Everyone who knows her stops to tell her how well she looks, even though they are obviously lying. This scene highlights again the small town mentality of Langhorne. Everyone knows about Kate's illness, but appearances are more important than honesty. No one wants to offend Kate by acknowledging her illness, so they make small talk, which is ridiculous to Kate.



Pages 106 - 124

Pages 106 - 124 Summary

George takes Ellen out for dinner at a steakhouse near his campus. He demands to know why Ellen has been treating him with such hostility. Ellen breaks into a rampage, raising her voice and cursing, which deeply embarrasses George. Ellen tells him that there is no excuse for his ignoring his wife's illness. She refuses to accept any of George's excuses about work, but again, he does not seem moved. Ellen is outraged and leaves the dinner, barely saying goodbye. Ellen finds that her mother's pain medication isn't helping as much as it had. Jonathan calls to say that he got a job. He has planned for Ellen to come and stay with him in the city by June. Ellen is outraged when Jonathan insinuates that her mother will be dead by June, even though it is true.

On Monday, Ellen answers the door and finds a beautiful Ecuadorian woman standing there. Her name is Teresa Guerra and she is the nurse Dr. Cohn has sent. Ellen tells her that she isn't needed, but Kate is pleased to have a nurse there. Kate is able to tell Teresa things she has never told Ellen - like the fact that climbing in and out of the bathtub is increasingly painful. Teresa also brings a folder of papers for Ellen to read, including "The Dying Person's Bill of Rights" which includes clauses such as, "I have the right to be treated as a human being until I die", "I have the right not to die alone", and "I have the right to be cared for by caring, sensitive, knowledgeable people who will attempt to understand my needs and will be able to gain some satisfaction in helping me reach my death." This final statement makes Ellen burst into tears. Later, Teresa tells Ellen that "we cry to give voice to our pain", which Ellen finds poetic and meaningful. Teresa agrees to visit once a week to monitor Kate's medical condition and to help bathe her if the time comes when Kate can no longer bathe herself. When Ellen joins her mother upstairs, she is picking through a box of memorabilia and states that she "remembers it all".

Pages 106 - 124 Analysis

In this section, Ellen finally confronts her father about his apathy regarding Kate's illness and treatment. She describes graphic images of Kate's treatment so he can no longer ignore it, but George remains stoic, refusing to admit that his wife needs him. Ellen admits that no one knows what goes on in a marriage except the two people who are involved, but cannot comprehend her father's inability to care for his wife. In this scene, Ellen finally says what she has been thinking about her father, to his face directly. Even though Ellen's opinion of her father has been changing since she returned home, this is the first time she has truly confronted him about her feelings. Not surprisingly, George is unmoved by her pleas for him to take tenure and help repair their family, but is embarrassed that his daughter is having an emotional breakdown in public, where she could possibly be seen by his coworkers. It is clear that appearance is something that is very important to George, a realization that infuriates Ellen. One is left to wonder what



George's true motivations are in ignoring Kate's illness. Initially, his apathy could be seen as fear, but as time progresses and he continues to barricade himself away from the disease, there are fewer and fewer reasonable excuses for his behavior. Everyone in town has begun to notice his lack of involvement in Kate's care, and some, like Mrs. Best, have even begun to question the family about it.

Teresa Guerra is introduced in this section. Even though she is young, she is very serious about her work. Teresa provides a new outlet for Kate to express her needs without having to burden her daughter and husband. Even though Ellen is initially resistant to having a nurse in the house, it is immediately obvious that it is what Kate needs. Ellen must not hand-off some of the responsibility in caring her for her mother. Even though Ellen is desperate to share the workload with her father, she is resistant to sharing it with a stranger, perhaps fearing that her role as confidant will be overtaken by a more professional caregiver. Ellen also does not want to acknowledge that someone else, such as the new nurse, could provide better care than she could as Kate's daughter. Kate is very jealous of her role as care giver as a way of making up for the years that she ignored her mother and their relationship. Now she does not want to share her. Teresa is not a very complex character, and acts as the voice of reason, almost spouting political messages through her stilted speech and handouts. One of the handouts she brings for Ellen is the Patients' Bill of Rights, which lists the rights of a dying patient. This pamphlet foreshadows Kate's suicide with the morphine overdose and gives a voice to her desires as a patient without having to express them through direct dialogue. Although its text isn't revealed until much later in the novel, the reader is meant to remember the bullet points of the Patients' Bill of Rights, to which Ellen has an emotional aversion, and to note that they directly parallel the thesis arguments of the essay Ellen wrote in high school on euthanasia. Both texts will become increasingly important to understanding Ellen's emotional position when she is charged with the murder of her mother.



Pages 125 - 139

Pages 125 - 139 Summary

Kate threads red ribbon through her mother's wheelchair wheels, but no one in town acknowledges the decoration, as if doing so would acknowledge the cancer, a topic of conversation everyone in town is eager to avoid. All the other Minnies compliment Kate and Ellen on their tree, and Kate claims that in these situations, gaudy is key. The night before, Kate had gone out with George. She had timed her morphine perfectly so there wouldn't be any lapse in pain management as they went out for dinner and to the choral concert afterward. The couple had not stayed out long and when they had returned home, it was clear that Kate had been crying. Her wheelchair hadn't fit through the door frame at the restaurant and she had fallen asleep during the concert. The next morning, however, she had awakened with a peaceful look on her face and had stayed that way all day. Before leaving for work that morning, George tells Ellen that Dr. Cohn has decided to quit Kate's chemotherapy. He says it simply, as if there is nothing to discuss, and leaves for work.

On the night when the Christmas trees are lit, everyone in Langhorne leaves their homes to enjoy the ceremony. Ellen remarks that usually, everyone stays inside their homes after dark, not because there is anything to fear, but because that is where their lives take place. The Christmas tree lighting ceremony is one of the only exceptions to this rule. Again, everyone approaches Kate to say that she looks well. Kate and Ellen make small talk with various people from Langhorne before Ellen is approached by a very pregnant woman named Halley McPhearson. Halley McPhearson had called Kate earlier to receive stenciling instructions for the crib she is decorating for her daughter and wants to invite Kate to come over and see the finished crib herself. Kate and Ellen discuss their final plans for the Christmas meal. Kate states that she wants to teach Ellen how to properly cook a turkey, even though it is not tradition, "just in case". When George suggests that they cook a turkey for Easter, Kate says plaintively, "To hell with Easter."

Pages 125 - 139 Analysis

In this section, George makes his first real attempt to spend time with Kate during her illness. He takes her for a nice meal and to a choral concert, a date night similar to one they would have had before she had fallen ill. The evening, however well planned, does not go well. Kate is deeply embarrassed that the morphine makes her fall asleep during the concert and she wakes with drool sliding down her chin. Although George tries to accommodate for her illness, kicking up a fuss when the wheelchair won't fit through the restaurant doors, it is the wrong kind of accommodation and actually brings more attention to Kate's illness when she wants so desperately to keep it hidden. Later that night, however, Ellen hears her parents whispering to each other and sees the pleasant glow on her mother's face. She is pleased to think that her parents have been intimate,



although this insinuates that they have not been for many months and this is their first sexual contact since Kate's diagnosis.

Decorating the Christmas tree provides a nice parallel for the way Ellen has tried to tie a red bow around her family during her mother's illness. In the decoration scene, Kate sits, invalid, in the wheelchair giving Ellen orders as she painstakingly decorates her mother's tree. Kate dictates exactly where to hang each ornament and exactly how to make the ribbons wave across the branches. The entire process takes three hours. Similarly, ever since Ellen has been home, Kate has been dictating to her how to run the family when she is gone, grooming Ellen to be the perfect housewife as she has been all these years. Both processes are painstaking and painful for Ellen, who describes her aches and pains, and the battle between her desire to flee and her desire to be there for her mother. The Christmas tree lighting ceremony is yet another example of everyone in the town getting together to, essentially, say goodbye to Kate even though no one will acknowledge her illness. Kate rallies up her energy to attend the ceremony and seems to know that this will be her last hoorah before death, and indeed it will. Before returning home, George makes an offhand comment that Easter will come early this year to which Kate replies, "To hell with Easter." Here it is clear that Kate knows she does not have the strength to live another three months and simply wants to enjoy Christmas with her family.



Pages 140 - 158

Pages 140 - 158 Summary

Kate begins having nightmares in which she cries out in the night about her "babies" and the thunderstorms and a tree splitting in the front yard. George wants to take her off the morphine if it makes her hallucinate, but Ellen won't hear of it. She says the hallucinations are much better than the pain Kate goes through off medication, but George wouldn't know that. When Teresa arrives, Jeff attempts to flirt with her, but Teresa isn't interested. Jeff claims that Brian is having a tough time at the University and wants to move home to be closer to Kate, but George won't allow it.

The family sits together later in the evening and watches "A Christmas Carol". When George begins talking through the film, Kate tells him to "put a sock in it", which deeply embarrasses him. Later, when Kate has fallen asleep, George refuses to help carry her upstairs. Jonathan sends Ellen her Christmas present, a date book with all the pages blank.

The hospital bed arrives, which finally makes Ellen see that her mother's life is dismantling. The living room furniture is all pushed aside to make room for the bed and it sits like a wound in the center of their house. Ellen focuses on the book club and eagerly discusses "Anna Karenina" with her mother, until one evening when Kate simply states that she can no longer read the words. Her eyesight is diminishing from the cancer and the book club will have to come to a close. Teresa tells Kate and Jeff that now is the time to enjoy spending time with their mother, and they make the most of this advice.

Pages 140 - 158 Analysis

Ellen discusses these nightmares with Teresa, wanting to know if they are hallucinations from the morphine, actual nightmares, or something else. Teresa believes that Kate's hallucinations are simply Kate "figuring things out" in her head before she dies. According to Teresa, Kate may be creating a hallucinogenic metaphor in which her children are the babies and the cancer is the storm threatening them. George's suggestion to take Kate off the morphine if it is going to make her hallucinate highlights, yet again, how out of touch he is with his wife's needs. He still refuses to believe that she needs the daily medication to numb her pain, and will not listen to Ellen when she tries to tell him. The reader is left to wonder, alongside Kate, whether George is simply frightened of the truth or if he simply doesn't care about his wife's pain. Perhaps George is afraid to acknowledge the pain because then he would also be acknowledging his inability to heal her, to acknowledge the mistakes he has made in their marriage, and to acknowledge his own shortcomings as a man.



Later, George becomes deeply embarrassed by Kate's comment to "put a sock in it" during the family movie. Here, it is apparent that George craves the respect of his family and he usually earns that respect through his intellectualism, as he does around campus. In the Gulden household, however, things are beginning to change, and intellectualism is no longer what is craved. The family simply wants to enjoy their final days together, and George's constant intellectual interruptions distract from that cause. After Kate goes to bed, Ellen wonders if George is angry about Kate's comment during the film, or if carrying her upstairs is simply too intimate a task. Ellen wonders if the act of helping Kate up to bed would create a promise to Kate for something more, an intimacy he is not prepared to give. Ellen wonders if her mother is right to fear that her husband is slipping away from her, and what she would do if she were in the same situation. Again, George is pulling away from his wife in every way so that he does not have to face the truth that she is dying and he cannot save her.

Jonathan calls to find out if Ellen likes his gift. He claims that this datebook was calling her name. Ellen contemplates the woman she was two months ago, when every page of the datebook would have been filled as she tried to push herself ahead at the newspaper. Now, the pages are still empty. Nothing eventful has happened in her life. The gift of the datebook is a symbol for the drastic way Ellen's life has changed since she returned home. Now, even Ellen can plainly see that she has left her old life, including Jonathan behind, and adopted a new one. The blank pages of the datebook symbolize both the emptiness of death, and later will symbolize a fresh start. When Ellen realizes how different her life has become, she is terrified. She claims that without Teresa Guerra visiting three times a week, she might never get out of bed, might never take a shower. Ellen and Teresa have a heart-to-heart discussion about Kate's reconciliation with death. Ellen is outraged by it, thinking her mother should continue to fight, but Teresa believes that it is part of everyone's natural process in life - they must eventually accept death.



Pages 159 - 173

Pages 159 - 173 Summary

Ellen goes into town to run some errands and bumps into Mrs. Duane at the bookstore. When Mrs. Duane starts to say that she's been meaning to stop by for a visit, Ellen's anger boils over. No one has come to visit her mother since before Christmas, as though cancer is contagious, and she has had enough. Kate is lonely and losing her will to live. Ellen shouts all of this at Mrs. Duane and then leaves without paying for her packages. The next day, Mrs. Duane phones and asks if it would be alright if she came over for lunch. Ellen fixes chicken salad sandwiches while Kate and Mrs. Duane gossip. Mrs. Duane never meets Ellen's eye.

Days later, Ellen hears her mother crying from the bathroom. She rushes upstairs and finds that her mother cannot get out of the bathtub alone. She has never seen her mother naked before and is embarrassed at the sight. Kate's body is shrunken and shriveled like a rotten peach. Kate is mortified that Ellen must see her like this and states that she should have waited until George came home so Ellen would never have to see her in this state. Kate is steadily declining into death. She stays up at night, murmuring to people who aren't there, including her brother, Steven, who is dead. One evening there is a snowstorm and George calls to say that he will not be coming home, but will be sleeping on his office couch. Ellen is not surprised, but she is still annoyed. When she tells her mother, Kate demands to know what has happened between Ellen and her father. Kate, in rare lucidity, pleads with Ellen to reconcile things with her father, stating that soon, he will be all Ellen has left. She states that everything Ellen thinks she knows about George, she has always known, implying that she knows about her husband's infidelities. When Ellen tries to shush her, Kate demands to be heard. She pours out her heart - that she is sad she is dying, that she is sad she will miss Ellen's wedding. She gives Ellen the advise to love what she has, not to aspire for anything more. After Kate falls asleep, Ellen lies next to her, weeping. She realizes that she, not her mother, has been the ignorant one in life. Her mother had much to teach her had she been willing to listen. Kate wakes a few hours later, begging for pills. In a very moving scene, she begs Ellen to help her end her life. She claims that she cannot live this way any longer. Ellen cannot meet her mother's eye and knows she is not strong enough to take on this task.

Pages 159 - 173 Analysis

In this section, Ellen finally confronts the fear of the townsfolk around her. Everyone in town wishes Kate well, but have kept their distance, refusing to come to visit and refusing to acknowledge her cancer in conversation, perhaps fearing that doing so will make the creeping death even more real. When Ellen confronts Mrs. Duane about her absence in Kate's life, it is very much as if she is confronting her father. Months of pent-



up frustration and grief come pouring out, and Kate is pleased when Mrs. Duane phones the next day for a visit, even if it is fueled by guilt.

Later, Ellen comes face to face with her mother's cancer when she helps her out of the bathtub. Ellen is mortified when she sees her mother's shrunken body and describes it as a shrunken, rotted peach: "Her skin was slack on her body in places, like soft fruit when its past its prime, on the insides of her thighs, her upper arms. But most of her flesh was stretched tight over her bones, a faint shroud for the skeleton: the two long bones running parallel beneath the skin of her arms and legs, the cage of pelvis and ribs. In her face every bit of skull was visible where the flesh had gone, leaving only the clear outlines of the understructure, the yawning Os of the eye sockets, the sharp peaks of the cheekbones, the hinge of the jaw, from which all the padding had disappeared. Her breasts were flat and sagging, like those of old women I'd seen in pictures of primitive tribes, and her pubic hair was nearly gone" (Page 163). Ellen takes her time giving the reader the full effect of her mother's wasted body as she internalizes it for the first time. Kate no longer has anywhere to hide in her illness, and Ellen must face the fact that death is imminent. Even though Ellen has rallied strength through the duration of the novel, as exemplified in her outburst with Mrs. Duane, her fear of that impending death is exactly the same as everyone in town's. She dries her mother off without really touching her and claims to have spent the rest of her life since that day wondering if she should have wrapped her arms around her mother instead of the towel, but she didn't. She, like her father, was simply too afraid. This is the moment when Kate becomes broken, in a way that could never be repaired in Ellen's eyes.

In perhaps the most emotional scene of the novel, Kate, in rare lucidity, lists off all the advice she would like to give Ellen before she dies. Ellen does not want to listen to this, again running away from the fact that death is at the front door, but Kate will not be silenced. Her monologue is not a resignation to death, as Ellen has accused in earlier sections, but a final opportunity to be heard. Ellen learns that Kate had known all along about George's infidelities and that she had made sacrifices to keep her family together and happy. Ellen is overwhelmed with guilt that her mother has literally given her entire life to creating a harmonious family, and is not left with anything at her death. She is left with nothing, that is, except the admiration and love from a daughter who had previously minimized her mother's efforts. Now, in the final days before her death, Ellen realizes that her mother had much to teach her had she been willing to listen.

At the end of this section, Kate begs Ellen to help her end her life. This is the moment when everything in the novel shifts. It becomes clear that Kate is ready to die and will do so at her own hands if necessary. Kate knows she has no chance of beating her cancer and wants to die with some of her dignity. Ellen is shocked by her mother's request and shamed to admit that she is not strong enough to help her in her final request. This will be Ellen's personal struggle for the rest of the novel and, arguably, for the rest of her life.



Pages 174 - 197

Pages 174 - 197 Summary

Ellen states that February might be the only suitable month to bury a loved one, when the ground is still a bit frozen and the big holidays have passed. Kate has started to have to wear diapers after soiling the bed on a few occasions. Also, Teresa arrives to hook up a morphine drip directly into Kate's catheter. Now, Kate simply needs to press a button and morphine will be injected directly into her blood stream. When Teresa arrives, Ellen asks her if it's possible for her mother to overdose with this machine. Teresa says it is not likely. Halley McPhearson comes to visit and to drop off a photo of her newborn baby. She has an emotional breakdown as she leaves the house, weeping uncontrollably - the first person to cry about Kate's illness who is not a family member. Ellen tells her that it will all be over soon. Later, Ellen tells Kate that she has been a good mother and that she has always loved her. Kate slips in and out of consciousness with the morphine, and Ellen knows the end is very, very near.

When Kate begins calling out for her husband, Ellen sprints out of the house to find her father. She knows that her mother would never want to disturb her father while he is working, so she must be near death to call for him now. At the university, she bolts past the security guards, refusing to sign in, but her father is nowhere to be found. When she cannot locate her father, she sprints back to the car, smashes it into the icy bridge, but manages to keep driving. When she arrives back home, her father is already there. Ellen claims that she has spent the rest of her life replaying the next few hours in her mind: She left her parents alone while she went into the next room to take a nap. She vaguely remembers hearing her mother pleading and her father shouting. When she walked past the room after her nap, she caught the image she would later iconize of her parents - her mother with her mouth hanging open, her father gently spooning rice pudding into her mouth, slowly, bite by bite. Kate's eyes were strangely focused, almost blazing through George. After the feeding, Kate fell asleep and George came into Ellen's room. "No one should have to live like that," he said, and then went to bed. Ellen went to lie next to her mother and listened to her breathing. They breathed together, in and out, until Kate's breathing sputtered and stopped. Even though Ellen knew Kate was dead, she didn't let go of her hand until the next morning, when George came down to check on her. "She's dead," Ellen said simply. "I'll go make the coffee."

Two weeks after Kate's death, Ellen begins packing her bags to return to New York. She hasn't acquired much since moving home, and many of her old clothes no longer fit her. Jules calls Ellen constantly, just to check in on her. Ellen says that she doesn't want Jules to come down for the funeral. She wants to keep her lives separate - the life with her mother in it, and the life without her. Jules coming down from New York would blend these lives too closely together. At the funeral, Ellen and her family all wear navy blue - the black of college towns. She awkwardly tries to make a joke about this, but of course no one laughs. George is not himself at the funeral - his skin has gone grey and Ellen notices his hands shaking. Dr. Cohn unexpectedly arrives to offer her condolences to



the family. After, she asks Ellen to walk her to her car. There, she tells Ellen that the autopsy on Kate found unusually high levels of morphine in her system. Her cause of death is an overdose. Ellen immediately replays the scene of watching her father feed her mother that final meal of rice pudding. She knows that the meal was likely laced with the morphine that killed Kate, but she says nothing. The next day, as Ellen is preparing her final bags, there is a knock at the door. Two officers are there and want to question her about her mother's death. Later, the papers would say that Ellen was arrested as she was preparing to flee the city. Mr. Best, the district attorney, signed the petition to have Ellen arrested for her mother's death. Ellen spends one night in the local jail before being bailed out by Jeff and Mrs. Forburg. She is not surprised that her father doesn't come to rescue her.

Pages 174 - 197 Analysis

In this section, the reader once again sees the iconized image of Ellen's parents: her mother with her mouth hanging open, her father gently spooning rice pudding into her mouth, slowly, bite by bite. This image is integral to understanding Ellen's self-sacrifice in the court system, and she replays the image over and over in her mind for the duration of the novel. Ellen believes that in this moment she has seen her father feeding her mother the morphine overdose in the rice pudding. Ellen knows that her father has finally played his part in Kate's treatment and death. Again, Ellen's esteem of her father rises as she realizes that he is much stronger than she has given him credit for being: he has completed the task she was too weak to complete herself. When Kate actually dies, the reaction on the page is minimal. Perhaps this is because the novel does not surround the question of whether or not Kate dies - from the beginning the reader knows that she would - the novel surrounds the way the family is affected by this death and so it is fitting that the novel breaks here. Ellen's story is divided into two parts - the time before her mother's death, and the time after. Ellen's reaction to her mother's death may seem apathetic, but that is because she, too, has know that it was coming and that death would be a welcomed relief for Kate.

After the funeral, Ellen is quickly arrested for her mother's murder once the autopsy reveals suspiciously high levels of morphine. Because the story is told in first person, from Ellen's point-of-view, there is no question in the reader's mind that Ellen is innocent of these charges, and the reader most likely believes, alongside Ellen, that George is responsible, which is why the image of George feeding Kate holds more literary weight than perhaps any other scene in the novel. This scene is a "critical moment" when Ellen's life changes forever, and there is no turning back. When Ellen hears that she is under arrest for the murder of her mother, she knows, even then, that she will never turn her father in for the crime. She states that in the moments after the arrest she knew she had to choose between saving herself and saving her father. She chooses her father for his heroism in completing the job of caring for Kate.



Pages 198 - 219

Pages 198 - 219 Summary

Ellen remembers the summer when she was eight-years-old and went to stay with her grandparents in the woods. She had been shocked by how scrawny her father appeared in the photographs of his childhood. She recalls this memory when she wakes up in the unfamiliar bed of the jailhouse. She is not surprised that her father has not come to bail her out. Now, she is staying with Mrs. Forburg who had paid \$10,000, 10% of her bail, to have her released. The money will be returned if Ellen is found not guilty and if she doesn't skip town before the trial. Mrs. Forburg is irritated that Ellen didn't contact her when she first heard there might be trouble with the autopsy. Ellen claims she had resigned herself to whatever fate threw her way. Even now, she is not interested in getting a lawyer, not interested defending herself except to say that she "didn't do it".

Ellen remembers the same summer from when she was eight: her father took her for a drive in the truck and was reciting poetry to her. Suddenly, a doe jumped in front of the truck and Ellen locked eyes with the doe before the truck slammed into it. Ellen slammed her head into the dashboard but still managed to get out of the car and see the doe lying on its side, feet scrabbling in the air, unable to move but still very much alive. Her father ordered her not to say a word about the accident, got back into the car, and drove home. When they arrived, George told his parents what had happened and his father, Grandpa Gulden, got his shotgun and demanded to be taken to where the injured animal was. George didn't want to tell him, insisting that "nature will take its course", but in the end, Grandpa Gulden won. They drove back to the site and he shot the deer, which was still alive when they returned. Grandpa Gulden, a stoically silent man, comforted the weeping Ellen while George stared out the window. Jeff arrives to Mrs. Forburg's, coming through the back window to avoid reporters, to visit with Ellen. He claims that George is desperate to see her, but Ellen refuses to see her father. He tells Ellen that Jon is the one who turned her into the district attorney when he heard that the autopsy was suspicious. Some part of Ellen is not surprised to hear this.

Ellen contemplates the way children choose whether they will be their mother's child or their father's. She transformed from being her father's child to her mother's, and now that her mother is dead, instantly back to being her father's - protecting him from the blame for killing his wife. Staying with Mrs. Forburg, Ellen rarely leaves the house, which is swarmed with reporters. They call constantly, stop her in the store, try to reach her through the friends she once had. Ellen is horrified when right-to-death activists champion her case, offer her lawyers, even stop by Mrs. Forburg's house to express their delight in her case. One day, her father calls and leaves a message nearly begging to speak with her, but Ellen cannot. She spends her days helping Mrs. Forburg grade papers, and keeping the house clean. One evening, Ellen brings the trash out to the roadside to find that a raccoon has been digging in it. She breaks down, weeping on the street. She throws her hands to her side, gesturing at the litter and sobs, simply, "Look



at this mess." Later, she has a dream in which she is driving her father's truck and hits the deer. When she returns with her grandfather and the gun, the deer is gone but is now a woman lying in a nightgown, face hidden by her hair. Ellen doesn't recognize her.

Pages 198 - 219 Analysis

The memory Ellen has of the summer she spent at her grandparent's cottage when she was eight holds extremely significant weight in contrast to her emotions regarding her mother's death. The deer could be seen as a symbol for Kate and her illness. While Ellen wants to confront the injury head on, and go back to attend to the injured animal, George closes his eyes to the impending death, simply stating that, "Nature will take its course." This is a striking contrast given that Ellen believes her father assisted her mother in her suicide. Why would George turn a blind eye to the suffering of the deer he hit, when he was so brave facing his wife's death? This conflicting shift in character opens the door for the realization later that George did not help Kate kill herself. Ellen will realize that her father had been a weak man when dealing with the death of the deer and a weak man when dealing with the death of his wife. He has always been the man to turn a blind eye on the injured. The memory of the injured deer also opens the door for the reader to explore euthanasia and, therefore, assisted suicide. With the way the injured deer is presented, most readers would, understandably, believe that shooting the deer would be the right thing to do, putting it out of its misery. This is a gentle transition Quindlen is making to ensure that readers side with Ellen in believing that putting Kate out of her misery was the right thing to do. This is an overt suggestion to the reader that euthanasia, when handled properly, is a heroic, not selfish, act.

In this section, Ellen goes to live with Mrs. Forburg after her father fails to bail her out of jail. The fact that Ellen is alone in jail shows the brokenness in her relationship with her father. Now, she no longer knows how to ask her father for help, and he no longer knows how to save his daughter. The media frenzy outside Mrs. Forburg's home again highlights the small town of Langhorne - this is, clearly, the biggest story of a generation - and perhaps mirrors national media frenzy regarding euthanasia, forcing the reader to remember that this is an issue of national concern, which pushes the reader to evaluate their own stance on its morality.



Pages 220 - 261

Pages 220 - 261 Summary

Jeff hires a lawyer, Robert Greenstein, to help Ellen's case. He raises \$25,000 from neighbors and Langhorne residents, but Ellen knows it isn't nearly enough to cover her court costs. Even so, Ellen likes her lawyer because he doesn't patronize her. He communicates honestly with her, never hiding information, never stretching the truth to serve his own aims, which she appreciates. In his office, Robert Greenstein keeps a copy of the essay that won Ellen the writing contest when she was fifteen. The essay is, ironically, about euthanasia. He reads her quotes from the essay and explains why this might hurt her case. On Good Friday, Ellen drives into town, despite her lawyer's warnings, to have a drink at the bar. The bartender is professional with her, but tells her curtly that the school board is threatening to fire Mrs. Forburg for her involvement in Ellen's case. Rumors are that Ellen and Mrs. Forburg are lovers. Later, Ellen is joined by a man named Chris Mortensen whom she recognizes from high school. He is not very attractive, but continues to buy Ellen shots of Wild Turkey, a bourbon that is the color of her mother's eyes. Chris has a massive red scar on his hand from when he sliced into his hand with a saw while cutting down Christmas trees. While Ellen is drinking with Chris, Jonathan enters the bar. He is home to testify against her. He calls her name but she doesn't respond. Instead, she jumps on Chris' offer to get out of there and get a bite to eat. Back at Chris' double-wide trailer, he and Ellen have sex, although she doesn't remember much about it because she is very drunk. At one point she says to him, "I just want to feel something." When Chris falls asleep, Ellen steals his keys and attempts to drive his car back to the bar, but he comes outside and stops her. He asks if she would like to get dinner sometime. Ellen is sad when she thinks about Chris and how he must hope they are forming a relationship out of their loneliness, but she still turns him down. He stands in the snow and watches as she drives away in his truck.

Ellen testifies in front of the grand jury. She is surprised that there are twenty-three jurors from the area who had not already heard about her case, given the media coverage it received. Ellen stares at each of the jurors intently but does not recognize any of them. She is inexplicably drawn to one woman, an older woman in a blue sweater who seems to lean forward in her seat, searching Ellen's face with her blue eyes. Throughout her testimony, and particularly during the times when the prosecutor is quizzing her about that contest-winning essay about euthanasia, Ellen makes all her statements staring straight at the woman in the blue sweater, as if she is the only one who needs to know the truth. Ellen answers each question straight-forwardly and honestly until the prosecutor asks what Kate's last meal was. Ellen pauses. She thinks of the rice pudding and again replays the image of her father bringing the spoon bite-by-bite to her mother's mouth. She lies and says that she does not remember. After the testimony, the jury takes some time to deliberate and form their own questions if necessary. In the hallway, Ellen sees her father. It is the first time she has seen her father since her mother's funeral. He blows her a kiss down the long hallway, but Ellen does not acknowledge it. At that moment, Robert Greenstein seems to remember that



George, not Ellen, had been the last one alone with Kate. He asks Ellen about it, but she refuses to discuss it with him. Back inside, the prosecutor has one last question for Ellen: "Did you love your mother?" and Ellen knows it is the woman in the blue sweater who wants to ask her. On the stand, Ellen claims that the easy answer to this question is yes, but everything is more complicated than this.

Pages 220 - 261 Analysis

Throughout this section, Ellen tries to deal with life after her mother's death but is constantly reminded of her loss and her father's involvement in it. Jeff takes Ellen to visit her mother's grave. Ellen is shaken when she sees her mother's headstone and imagines the line "Her last meal was rice pudding" below the life and death dates. Earlier, Ellen had gone to the farmers market to purchase seeds to plant at the gravesite. She had seen a woman with red hair wearing a navy peacoat and thought for a moment that it was her mother. Even though her lawyer advises against it, Ellen leaves her house to have a drink because she is clearly lonely cooped up in the house all day. While at the bar, Ellen runs into Jon and, almost immediately after, jumps into bed with Chris Mortenson. While at Chris' trailer, Ellen pleads that she "just wants to feel something." The loss and ache in Ellen's life is unbearably present. Now that her mother is dead and her family is irrevocably fractured, Ellen is living in a constant state of dull pain. She has no interest in defending her case, because she cannot see a life without her mother. In a way, Ellen's life also mirrors the image of the injured deer. She is praying for someone to come and end her misery, but unlike the deer and her mother, Ellen has a chance to recover; she just hasn't seen it yet. During Ellen's interaction with Chris Mortenson, the reader is reminded of her earlier hesitations to indulge in any type of carnal pleasures while her mother was ill. Now that Kate is dead, Ellen goes out, gets very drunk, and has promiscuous sex with a stranger. It is clear that she is trying to dull, or feel anything other than, her constant pain. Even though her interaction with Chris had been meant to be mindless and random, Ellen feels extremely guilty when she leaves him alone, since she recognizes and understands his loneliness. This guilt is heightened when she learns that Chris has lost both parents to alcoholism. While Ellen had been hoping to use someone to whom she felt superior, to make herself "feel better", she realizes that she and Chris are exactly alike. Death, it appears, is the great equalizer in life.

According to Greenstein, almost no one believes Ellen wasn't involved in her mother's death. The jury will probably see the case one of two ways: they will think Ellen helped her mother overdose at Kate's own wishes, or that Ellen helped her mother overdose to lessen the burden of work on herself. According to Ellen, this is the great burden women have in life. She hearkens back to her mother's argument that women are dichotomized into prototypes, the Madonna and the whore, in that prototypes like these, the ones that dichotomize women in literature and the ones that dichotomize Ellen's motives in murder, make life much simpler for people. They don't have to extrapolate and understand the complexities of a character or relationship if they can be easily classified. Good or bad. Innocent or guilty. Selfish or Mad. On the stand, Ellen is finally given the opportunity to explain herself by saying that, "It's the difference between



saying you're for capital punishment and being willing to sit there and pull the switch on the electric chair" (Page 259). It is never as simple as dichotomies suggest. She explains this again when the prosecutor asks if Ellen loved her mother. Although the easy answer in this situation is a simple, "Yes!" the true answer is so much bigger, so much more complex, than that.



Pages 262 - 289, Epilogue

Pages 262 - 289, Epilogue Summary

In the end, Ellen is found to have taken no part in her mother's death although she doesn't find this out until many months later, and actually hears the grand jury's verdict as she is driving around town running errands, not in the sterile courtroom as she would have in the movies. When she returns to Mrs. Forburg's, the house is overrun with reporters. Jeff is waiting for her there. Mrs. Forburg calls and tells Ellen to get "as far away from there as fast as you can for as long as you can". Teresa Guerra calls and tells Ellen that she believes her - believes that she did not kill her mother. Ellen jumps in Jeff's car and they drive first to their old house, which Ellen cannot enter. She still has not spoken to her father, and cannot. She requests a photograph of her between both parents, which Jeff gets for her. Then he drives her to the train station where Jules is waiting for her. The three drive off to New York where Ellen hopes her new life is waiting for her, and hopes she has left her old life behind her.

The epilogue takes place eight years later. Ellen is attending a local theatre play when her beeper goes off in the middle of the performance. Instead of being irritated, her partner, Richard, is understanding. Ellen is a psychologist now and her patient needs her. Ellen had become a psychologist after moving back to the city and had been unable to reignite her fire for writing. To pass the time, she had begun visiting with AIDS patients nearby her apartment. At the hospital where these patients were dying, no one knew who she was, no one had heard the story of her mother, which she saw as a comfort. She recalls only one patient, a girl with an eating disorder, who brought up Kate's story during a session. Ellen handles the conflict professionally and without emotion.

In the epilogue, Ellen sums up all the characters' stories. She has not seen her father in over eight years, since the funeral. This distance had been easy for her since she had stopped celebrating holidays after her mother's death, and her family, Jeff in particular, had not pushed her to return home. George had attempted to contact Ellen only once, through a letter she had inadvertently lost, never opened. Brian contacts Ellen a few years after the trial and tells her over lunch that he is gay. Ellen is overwhelmed with relief: she thought Brian had been avoiding her because he believed she had killed their mother, when in fact he was holding a secret in just as she had, and the silence of secrets had eaten away at their relationship. Jon now works at a big law firm in the city, but was not promoted after Ellen's trial as he had hoped to be.

At the theatre, there is only one public phone and it is in use by a business man, so Ellen must wait. While she is waiting, she runs into her father, smoking a cigarette outside, attending the same production. It is the first time they have seen each other in over eight years, and it is an extremely awkward meeting. He says that he never blamed Ellen for killing her mother, and that he actually admires her for the strength it took to assist Kate in death. Ellen is dumbfounded. She, obviously, did not kill her



mother and had always believed she was sacrificing herself for her father who had actually assisted Kate. In this moment, she realizes that Kate was much stronger than she ever gave her credit for being and that she actually killed herself, without assistance, but Ellen doesn't tell this to her father. Instead, she chooses to let George view her the way he always has, as a strong angel of death. Ellen does not know who she will tell the truth, and believes the only person who deserves to know is the woman in the blue sweater from the jury.

Pages 262 - 289, Epilogue Analysis

The ending of "One True Thing" summarizes the lives of all the characters in the eight years after Ellen had been found not guilty of killing her mother. The family remains somewhat fractured, and Ellen cannot bring herself to communicate with her father until she unexpectedly runs into him at a theatre performance. There, Ellen learns that George had no part in Kate's death, which means that Kate likely finished her fight to death on her own. This is the final shift in character that Ellen undergoes in the novel. As a child, Ellen was clearly aligned with her father. This alignment shifted to her mother during her illness and treatment. The alignment shifted again during the court trial when Ellen sought to protect her father. In the end, the alignment shifts one final time, when Ellen realizes her error. Her mother was much stronger, much braver, than Ellen ever gave her credit for being, even during her treatment when their relationship blossomed. Now, Ellen learns that she has oversimplified her mother for her entire life, saying, "We made her simpler all her life, simpler than her real self. We'd made her what we needed her to be. We'd made her ours, our one true thing" (Page 276). In this moment, Ellen realizes that she, too, like her father, has dichotomized her mother and never truly understood her. The complexity of character, and the inability to understand resilience and love is, essentially, the one true thing Ellen takes away from her mother's death.



Characters

Ellen Gulden

Ellen Gulden is a twenty-four-year-old editor who had been working in New York until her mother fell ill with cancer and her father guilt-tripped her into moving home to care for her. Throughout her whole life, Ellen has had a distant relationship with her mother, thinking she was better than her mother because she went to college while her mother dedicated her life to becoming the perfect housewife. This whole relationship changes when Ellen moves back home and is forced to get to know her mother as a person, not a prototype, learning about her mother's desires, fears, and other complexities. Ellen becomes a home-maker-in-training, learning how to cook, decorate, and sew, and even that she enjoys it. Throughout the months Ellen spends with her mother, she realizes everything her mother gave up to give her a better life and is shamed at the way she treated her mother during her teenage years and into adulthood.

During those years, Ellen had been much closer to her father, a literature professor, and had spent all her time searching for ways to impress him. The pair had even come up with a secret language so academic no one else in the family could understand it. When Ellen is home, however, she begins to realize that her father is not the man she idolized him to be. He is distant with her mother, forcing the bulk of her care onto Ellen. Even when Ellen confronts him about his remoteness, her father refuses to become more involved.

After her mother dies of a morphine overdose, Ellen is arrested for her mother's death. While she is in jail, Ellen replays the final scene of her mother alive over and over in her head: in the scene, George, her father, spoon feeds her mother a bowl of rice pudding. Her mother's eyes are ablaze. Ellen is innocent of the crime and believes her father is responsible, that the morphine was hidden in that final bowl of rice pudding. Even though she has her suspicions, Ellen says nothing, choosing instead to protect her father, believing him to be much braver than she had been regarding her mother's illness and subsequent death. In the end, Ellen is acquitted of all charges and moves back to New York City to become a psychologist. Later, she discovers that her father had not been involved in her mother's death, and that her mother performed the overdose alone, unaided.

Kate Gulden

Kate Gulden is a fifty-something year-old housewife and mother of three children: Kate, Jeff, and Brian. Kate falls ill with cancer and does not want her daughter, Ellen, to return home from the city to care for her. When Ellen comes home anyway, the two struggle to create a mother-daughter relationship as they had never had when Ellen was growing up. Throughout Kate's treatment, the two women bond through cooking classes, a book club, and sewing lessons. Kate passes on many unexpected pieces of advice to Ellen



who learns that she had underestimated Kate's wisdom her entire life. Kate has always felt inadequate when it comes to her husband's academic achievements, and they way he and Ellen bonded over literature. The only time Kate felt as though her husband was proud of her was when she informed him that the poinsettias the decoration guild planted outside for the Christmas season would die. Poinsettias are tropical plants and Kate alone knew that they would freeze in the cold Langhorne weather. When the poinsettias were found keeled over the next morning, George had been very proud of Kate's knowledge and told the story to anyone who would listen. Later in life, Kate told her daughter how she had always wanted to go to college but her family could never afford it. Instead, Kate had begun visiting the local library, reading the book list for a freshman English class, trying to teach herself. She had given all that up, however, when she married George, who had enough academic knowledge for the both of them.

Kate loves arts and crafts and is an active member of the Minnies, a circle of women who decorate Christmas trees in downtown Langhorne every Christmas. Kate believes that gaudy is the key to decorating a good Christmas tree, and wins the prize for best tree almost every year. Members from the community far and wide regularly consult with Kate for their decorative needs, and she is beloved as an artistic member of the community. Once she falls ill, however, Kate becomes a hermit in her home, refusing to go out in her wheelchair, and becoming embarrassed when her illness is obvious. Eventually, Kate dies of a mysterious morphine overdose, and while Ellen is charged with the murder, she and the reader assume it had been George who killed her. It is only in the epilogue that the reader learns that Kate gave herself the fatal overdose in one final act of strength. She believed that her life was becoming an embarrassment; she had lost all her hair, was physically bedridden, forced to wear diapers, and in constant pain. She believed that it was her right to die with dignity, and when she realized no member of her family was going to help her die this way, she took matters into her own hands and did it herself.

George Gulden

George Gulden is a college literature professor. He is somewhat remote from his family, but is adored by his children, especially Ellen. He and Ellen have a special language and are able to talk about literature fluently, which makes the rest of their family somewhat uncomfortable. When his wife falls ill with cancer, George demands that his daughter come home to care for her and refuses to take any time off. He claims that he "works the night shift", but Ellen doesn't think he's doing enough to support his wife. George has a history of being sexually unfaithful to his wife, and once, Ellen overheard him having sex with a woman named Beth. Throughout Kate's treatment and death, George stays away from her. In the end, Ellen believes that George is responsible for killing Kate - feeding her an overdose of morphine in her rice pudding - but takes the fall, trying to protect him. After Kate's death, Ellen and George do not speak for over eight years.



Skip

Skip is a police officer who works in the Montgomery County jail. In high school, he had played on the basketball team but was only called to play for one-quarter of one game. The rest of the time he sat like a bookend on the bench.

Brian Gulden

Brian Gulden is considered the emotional brother in the Gulden family. He is eighteen-years-old with curly black hair, resembling his father. He moves away from Langhorne to attend college, but wants to move closer to home to be near Kate during her treatment, but his father won't allow it. Brian is not as well-read as the rest of his family, which opens him up for ridicule and teasing. He often sneaks smutty romance novels to his mother during her treatment and can be found near her bed, reading to her. After Kate dies, Brian loses most contact with his family. Later, he tells Ellen that he is gay, a secret he had been harboring for many years, which caused his silence within the family.

Jeff Gulden

Jeff Gulden is the middle child in the Gulden family. He is twenty-years-old and has auburn hair, resembling his mother. He has always felt as if he was living in Ellen's shadow, but they still have a close relationship even though he is envious of her. Jeff struggles to speak with his father after his mother's death, but remains the linchpin of communication within the Gulden family after Ellen is arrested. When Ellen is acquitted of murdering their mother, Jeff is the one who picks her up and drives her back to New York. Jeff is also the only one who ever stuck up for Ellen in her terrible relationship with Jonathan.

Steven

Steven is Kate's brother who was sent off to Vietnam during the war and was killed there. When Kate is declining into death, she begins to speak to her brother's spirit regularly as though he is helping to usher her across to the other side.

Mr. Tweedy

Mr. Tweedy is Ellen's boss at the magazine in New York. He offers Ellen a promotion when she takes time off to care for her mother, insinuating that Ellen might have made up her mother's illness to earn a raise.



Brenda Forburg

Brenda Forburg is Ellen's high school English teacher. She had been the favorite teacher of all the Gulden children. When Kate falls ill, Mrs. Forburg sends Ellen a letter inviting her over for dinner. Her own mother had died from cancer and she wanted to be a support system for Ellen if she needed it. Mrs. Forburg also bails Ellen out of jail after she is arrested, and allows Ellen to live with her during the trial period, at great personal cost to herself and her career.

Jules

Jules is Ellen's best friend in New York. Jules has wild black curls, a small pointed face, and a deep voice, three characteristics that exude false confidence. In truth, Jules is fragile - physically and psychologically - but no one really notices. Jules proves to be the only true support system Ellen has while she is caring for her dying mother, and Jules phones often to check up on Ellen, and Kate's, progress during the time they are living in Langhorne.

Jonathan Beltzer

Jonathan Beltzer is Ellen's boyfriend whom she met in an AP English class. He is in law school, and is described as "good looking in an odd way". His eyes are a little too close together and he has full red lips, dirty blonde hair, and a strong jaw. He had been abandoned by his mother as a young boy and found her again when he was twelve. When he relocated his mother, she had no interest in rekindling a relationship with him. For this reason, he is somewhat detached from his relationships with women, including Ellen. Jonathan is the one who turns Ellen into the district attorney, claiming that he knows Ellen wanted to kill her mother. He does this after Ellen breaks up with him, and in the hopes that his involvement in the case will open doors for his law career later in life.

Isabel Duane

Isabel Duane owns the bookstore in Langhorne and is a member of the Minnies. She comes to visit with Kate after Ellen has a very loud outburst in the bookstore about how cancer is not catching, and that Kate is extremely lonely.

Halley McPhearson

Halley McPhearson is the young pregnant woman who moves to town and asks Kate for stenciling advice on the baby crib she is making. She also learns how to embroider headbands with Kate's help. She is Kate's last visitor before death, arriving to drop off a



photo of her newborn baby. She has an emotional breakdown as she says goodbye to Ellen, the first person aside from family to cry about Kate's illness.

Ed Best

Ed Best is the district attorney in Langhorne. He is the lawyer who prosecutes Ellen's murder trial and many, Ellen included, believe that he only pressed charges against Ellen to create a media frenzy during the time of his re-election campaign. Now, with Ellen's story in the papers, he is on the front page nearly every day even though he is often described in the text as a dim-witted attorney.

Dr. Cohn

Dr. Cohn is Kate's Jewish oncologist during her cancer treatment. She refuses to talk about Kate's condition with any of her family member's privately. She makes house-calls when Kate is in extreme pain, and suggests that both Kate and Ellen start speaking to therapists about the death process.

Teresa Guerra

Teresa Guerra is Kate's nurse who visits three times a week to monitor Kate's blood pressure and to help her bathe. She is twenty-three years old, but is very serious about her job. Ellen claims that Teresa is a nurse / shrink, and that she too feels like Teresa's patient. Teresa is Ecuadorian and has had a difficult childhood. Her mother was struck and killed by a cab driver in New York. She is a constant source of friendship and support for Ellen during the final months of her mother's life, and during the court proceedings.

Chris Mortensen

Chris Mortensen is a man whom Ellen remembers from high school. She meets up with him at Smitty's bar on Good Friday and lets him buy her drinks. Later, the two have sex in Chris' double-wide trailer when Ellen "wants to feel something". It is clear that Chris wants more from the encounter than what Ellen is interested in giving. He attends AAAnon meetings for his alcoholism and eventually dies when he is struck by a drunk driver.

Robert Greenstein

Robert Greenstein is the lawyer Jeff hires to take Ellen's case in the murder trial. Robert Greenstein is described as a relatively unattractive man who drives a fancy sports car and had been recently abandoned by his wife. For all his personal shortcomings, Robert is a great lawyer for Ellen and she feels very comfortable around him. Robert is the only



person not to treat Ellen with patronizing sympathy following her mother's death. He asks her direct questions and expects direct answers in return, which Ellen finds profoundly comforting.



Objects/Places

Montgomery County

Montgomery County is the small county where Ellen is held in jail after her mother's death. It is described as an "Andy Griffith jail" more than a Dostoyevsky jail.

Tastee Freeze

The Tastee Freeze is where Ellen remembers going on the last "normal" day of her life. She had gone to the Tastee Freeze with her brothers when they had been home from college, tanned from their summer jobs as lifeguards, on the day they learned their mother had cancer.

Langhorne Proper

Langhorne Proper is the town where the Gulden family lives. It is a small town where everyone knows everyone else's business, and where family histories intersect. In the evenings, no one really leaves their houses to wander around town, not because there is anything to fear, but because home is where everyone's lives take place. When Kate dies mysteriously, the town is divided between people who believe Ellen killed her mother out of mercy and those who believe she killed her mother out of spite. Either way, Kate's murder is the biggest story people in Langhorne Proper have experienced in all their lives.

Harvard University

Harvard University is where Ellen attended college to become an editor and where Jonathan went to attend law school.

Cambridge

Cambridge is a city that Ellen remembers from her childhood, where her father taught English and where he believes his "spiritual colleagues" still live. Cambridge is also where Ellen accidentally overheard her father having sex with his teaching aide in his office.

New York City

New York City is where Ellen moves after graduating from college and where she gets her first job as an editor. She leaves her life in New York behind to care for her mother



when she falls ill with cancer, and returns to the city only when she is acquitted for her mother's murder.

River View Park

River View Park is where Ellen and Kate picnic and talk about the books in their book club. This is also where Ellen and Jon made love once and he accused her of being sexually remote.

Columbia University

Columbia University is where Kate self-taught herself literature when she was a teenager unable to attend college. She found the list of books freshman at Columbia were asked to read for their classes, borrowed the books from the library, and sat at Columbia University reading them. She gave up her academic aspirations, however, after she married George and felt that she couldn't keep up with his literary analysis.

Langhorne College

Langhorne College is where George Gulden teaches literature classes. This is where George keeps his small, untidy office with the leather couch and where he takes to sleeping on occasion when he cannot deal with his wife's illness. Ellen suspects that he entertains a mistress here, or at least has his carnal needs met by teaching aides, secretaries, and students.

Sammy's Bar

Sammy's Bar is the local hangout for college students in Langhorne. It is described as a dark, English-pub imitation with cheap stained glass windows and a big wood bar. This is where Ellen confronts Jonathan about his relationship with Jennifer, and also where she meets Chris Mortenson on the night of their one-night stand.

Themes

The Dichotomization of Women

The dichotomization of women is one of the key themes of the novel "One True Thing". This conflict is first introduced on page 17 when Ellen laments that, "if you are different from a person everyone agrees is wonderful, it means you are somehow wrong." This lamentation gets to the heart of Ellen's relationship with her mother, Kate. As a teenager, Ellen felt superior to her mother because she never went to college and spent her days creating an elegant household. Ellen thought she had to become a woman much different than Kate if she wanted to earn respect and love, especially from her father, so she rebelled against the constraints of the conventional female role and became an outspoken, selfish, sexually remote, journalist who had no interest in learning how to darn socks or bake a pie. In this, Kate and Ellen embody that classic literary dichotomization of women known as the "Madonna - Whore Complex" stating that women in literature are one of two things - an angel or a devil. This theme of dichotomization carries through to the Gulden Girls' Book Club, particularly with the book *Pride and Prejudice*, a book that dichotomizes the roles of women through the characters Jane and Elizabeth. Jane, like Kate, was a good housewife. Elizabeth, like Ellen, was a rebel, shirking from the traditional roles of women in society. Kate wants to know why, in the novel, Jane is treated as a nitwit and is not respected simply because she chose a traditional life. Kate wants to know what message this polarization of women sends to the readers. It is impossible for the reader to ignore the parallels between the lives of the Gulden women and the lives of Austin's female characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. Although she never states it directly, it is clear that Kate is demanding to know why, since she chose to become a homemaker, she is not respected by her daughter, and perhaps by her academically minded husband. As the novel "One True Thing" progresses, the lines between the dichotomization of the Madonna and Whore begin to blur as Ellen, and perhaps the reader, learn that women are much more complex than the prototypes represented in literature. Ellen must decide not how she will classify her mother, and herself, but how to rewrite the categories into which women are commonly pigeonholed, or how to eradicate these classifications altogether.

Family Secrets

Throughout the entire novel, Ellen attempts to come to terms with the secrets she has kept from her mother, particularly regarding her father's infidelities. Oftentimes, the members of the Gulden family seem to keep secrets from one another as a way of protecting them. The key example of this is when Ellen refuses to tell the truth to the prosecutor regarding her father's involvement in her mother's suicide. In this act, Ellen is keeping a secret to protect her father from the repercussions of the law. Other times, the Gulden family keeps secrets from one another as a measure of superiority. An example of this is when Ellen refuses to tell her mother about her father's affairs, on one hand to



protect her father from her mother's wrath, and on the other hand as an exercise of superiority. In Ellen's mind, Kate would never understand the banality of sex. Certainly she would be emotional, perhaps hysterical at the news. Even though it sickens Ellen, she chooses to keep the infidelity to herself as a way of aligning herself with her father - always academic rather than emotional - she even exercises her own sexual deviations in a desperate attempt to emulate the father she admires. In the end, though, it becomes clear that secrets are never worth keeping as they simplify the person from whom one strives to keep the secret. Ellen, for example, learned that the secret she had striven to keep all those years, that her father helped kill her mother, needn't have been kept in the first place. Her father had had no involvement. Ellen would have learned this truth had she not been so desperate to protect her father that she could not bring herself to speak to him. Once she had been forced to interact with her father, however, she learned that he, too, was innocent. Similarly, when Ellen finally told her mother of her father's infidelities, Kate already knew the truth. Ellen had supposed that Kate would be too simple to understand the complexities of sexual desires, even needs, but it was she who was taken for a fool. Kate understood the complexities of sexual desire and the complexities of marriage, far better than Ellen did, nullifying the need to keep these secrets. In the end, although only after their mother's death, Ellen and the rest of the Gulden children learn that there is no need to keep family secrets, as they always fail to protect the ones you love. The real damage is done when one fails to trust that a family member is smart enough, academically or emotionally, to understand the complexities of relationships, and fails to trust in the redemptive power of truth laid bare.

The Morality of Euthanasia

The morality of euthanasia is perhaps the central theme of "One True Thing" although it is handled on emotional, not political terms. It is clear that Quindlen does not want to demonize any member of the Gulden family for their part - real or imagined - in Kate's euthanasia. Quindlen painstakingly depicts the decline of Kate's life due to her illness and treatment, making it very clear that death would be a welcomed relief for Kate and that there is absolutely no hope for her recovery. While it may be a difficult leap for many readers to agree, morally, with euthanasia initially, Quindlen expertly navigates the reader through the pitfalls of this moral argument. This navigation first occurs with Ellen's contest-winning essay about euthanasia. Here, many of the arguments for and against the political issue are presented. In the background, however, Quindlen is carefully constructing her own emotional argument for euthanasia through Kate's decline to death. This argument is made quietly throughout the novel, and comes to a climax with the parallel to the injured deer George strikes with his car. While Ellen wants to confront the injury head on, and go back to attend to the injured animal, George closes his eyes to the impending death, simply stating that, "Nature will take its course." The scene describing the injured deer is horrifying, and most readers would, understandably, argue that shooting the deer is absolutely the right thing to do, putting it out of its misery. This, partnered with Ellen's political paper about euthanasia, overtly suggests to the reader that euthanasia, when handled properly, is a heroic, not selfish, act.



Style

Point of View

This novel is told in first-person, limited omniscience through Ellen's perspective. The point of view is reliable. While it is very clear that the story is filtered through Ellen's perspective, there is never any question that Ellen is telling the truth to the best of her memory. She often poses questions and wonders whether the events she is recalling are the actual truth, or truths she has reconstructed through time and memory. The point of view of this novel is integral to Ellen's character progression. Much of her progression occurs through her filtered memories and her emotional relationship with her parents. This character growth would be lost if the reader was to experience the events of the novel through a third-person narrator. Experiencing the emotions of Ellen's journey through her own perspective provides the intimacy required for readers to tackle the theme of the morality of euthanasia.

The story is told with an even balance of exposition and dialogue. The exposition takes place solely in Ellen's head, and this is where her personal opinion becomes clear. The reader is privy to conflicts within Ellen's character based on the thoughts in her head that directly contrast her dialogue with other characters. Dialogue becomes an important tool for characters to grow within the story, in the reader's perspective, without the constraints of viewing everyone through Ellen's opinion. Every event in the novel is seen through Ellen's eyes alone, and dialogue provides the only opportunity for readers to gauge other characters, reactions to the emotional events of the novel.

Setting

This novel is set in the town of Langhorne, Massachusetts. Langhorne is a picturesque college town where everyone knows everyone else's business, and where family histories intersect. In the evenings, no one really leaves their house to wander around town, not because there is anything to fear, but because home is where everyone's lives take place. The main points of interest of Langhorne are the old bookstore, the pub, and the college. The bookstore is run by the Duanes, and is where Ellen and her mother purchase the books for their book club. Sammy's, the local watering hole, is described as a dark, English-pub imitation with cheap stained glass windows and a big wood bar. This is where Ellen confronts Jonathan about his relationship with Jennifer, and also where she meets Chris Mortenson on the night of their one-night stand. But the main point of interest is Langhorne College, where George Gulden teaches English literature. Everything in town focuses around the college. Most people in Langhorne stay at home at night, with the exception of the Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony, the biggest celebration of the year in Langhorne, where everyone, regardless of age, comes out to take part in the town festivities.



Language and Meaning

The language of this novel can sometimes be overly academic. This is due to the fact that Ellen is an academic woman - a graduate of Harvard - and a journalist. Similarly, George Gulden is extremely academically minded, which occasionally leads to stilted dialogue between these two characters. Their language is described as a "secret language" by Ellen's mother, who often felt like a little leaguer trying to discuss baseball with the Yankees when Ellen and her father began discussing literature. The reader may often feel the same way. This language is useful to understanding the dynamic between Ellen and her father, particularly when understanding the pressure Ellen has felt her entire life to perform academically, never letting her guard down around her father.

Because of Ellen and George's interest in literary analysis, the language of the novel revolves around literary tools such as metaphor, simile, and symbolism. These literary techniques are discussed directly in the analysis of the books in the Gulden Girl's Book Club, and indirectly as Ellen's thoughts and dialogue are peppered with similes and metaphors to larger images throughout the entire novel. The strongest use of embedded metaphor in the novel is with the dichotomization of women, which is addressed directly in Ellen and Kate's discussion of "Pride and Prejudice" and indirectly in the way George views his wife and daughter.

Structure

This novel is broken down into four sections: prologue, part one, part two, and epilogue. All of the sections are separated into smaller sections ranging in length from four to thirteen pages, separated only by white space. The prologue takes place after Kate's death, beginning with Ellen is already arrested and in jail awaiting trial. This structure lets the reader know that Kate will die, but doesn't go into any detail about Ellen's arrest. Part one takes place leading up to Kate's death, and ends with this particular scene, and part two picks up directly after Kate's death, dealing with the funeral, the court trial, and the aftermath of the verdict. The epilogue takes place eight years after the verdict and functions to summarize the lives of the main characters in the years after Kate's death.

The structure functions as a way of minimizing the mysteries of the plot so that the reader can focus on the emotional growth of the characters. By frontloading the information that Kate will die and Ellen will be arrested for her murder, the reader doesn't invest in these conflicts and can immerse themselves in the emotionality of the characters. Character development, not plot, is clearly at the heart of this novel as Quindlen constructs an honest observation of character, desire, motivation, and love, rather than a page-turning, action-heavy tale in which characters function only as mechanisms to further the plot. That said, the pace of the novel is quick, particularly when Kate's health begins to decline and the family fractures further and further apart. While the main text of the story, the two parts, are written linearly, the entire novel is written in past-tense, which allows Ellen to reflect on things she knows now that she

didn't know then. For example, in the years after her mother's death, Ellen became a psychiatrist. During the time Ellen spends nursing her mother, she sometimes reflects on the situation and cites notes from her psychology studies, cuing the reader into her life after Kate's death. These shifts in time don't affect the way the story is told, and heighten the emotional resonance of Ellen's character growth.



Quotes

"If you are different from a person everyone agrees is wonderful, it means you are somehow wrong." Page 17

"'You' - he said, throwing a book atop the pile - 'have' - and then my running shoes - 'a Harvard education' - then my loafers - 'but' - and the glass of orange juice rolled unbroken atop the mess, soaking the shoes - 'you have no heart.'" Page 23

"I remember this book. I was reading it when I met your father. I remember admiring it but being a little put off by it too, because it does that cheap thing that people do, it makes the sister who is sweet and domestic and good a second fiddle to the one who is smart and outspoken. Jane and Elizabeth. I remember them now. It didn't seem fair to me, that Jane was so good and yet Elizabeth is the one who is admired." Page 41.

"For so long I'd thought about myself as a girl who's walked away from my mother's life that it would be a long time before I would start to think about the other part of the bargain, how easily she'd let me go." Page 75

"I sat down on the ottoman and drank tea and ate the toast and it was as though the house was breathing, too, all three of us breathing in tandem, dying in tandem, trying to keep body and soul together as the wind shook the storm windows in their metal frames." Page 116

"That January, when they delivered the hospital bed, leaving the den in disarray and the living room crowded with furniture ... she didn't say anything. She just got in and turned on her side so that she was looking out the window, out the window that looked out our driveway and the side of the house next door. It was as though something was broken, but I think it broke in the bathroom, on that bench." Page 164

"I thought I heard a high cry from below, plaintive, tortured, alive. But it was some bird, knocking against the kitchen window at its own seductive reflection, falling in love with its own image in a case of mistaken identity." Page 194

"'Even second-rate poetry is better than no poetry at all, Ellen,' he said. I remember the sense of relief, almost a physical feeling, that I had waited for him to speak first, to tell me what to feel, that I had not told him immediately how beautiful I thought the poem was." Page 203

"I was sick in my soul for that greater meaning of home that we understand most purely when we are children, when it is a metaphor for all possible feelings of security, of safety, of what is predictable, gentle, and good in life." Page 213

"People were chasing me in those long, attenuated, slow-motion chases that are so common in dreams, and perhaps, more than we even understand, in life. Sometimes



my father would be one of them, sometimes he would be a bystander, sometimes he would try to help me but let go of my hand as I went by, our fingers slipping past one another like fish swimming parallel for a moment, then off in opposite directions." Page 217

"Everyone makes up their little stories and then they wonder why their own lives aren't like that. It makes life so much simpler if they can get rid of all the loose ends." Page 226

"We made her simpler after she was dead. No, that's not true, either. We'd made her simpler all her life, simpler than her real self. We'd made her what we needed her to be. We'd made her our, our one true thing." Page 276

"My father is not a bad man. He is only a weak one. And he only did what so many men do: he divided women into groups ... I had the misfortune to be designated the heartless one, my mother the mindless one. It was a disservice to us both but, on balance, I think she got the better deal." Page 281



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the dichotomization of women in the novel. How does the Madonna-Whore complex affect the women in the Gulden household? How does the struggle to break out of archetypal roles in literature compare / contrast the struggle both Kate and Ellen feel in the novel?

Kate Gulden is presented throughout the novel as a perfect mother and homemaker. Do you agree with this assessment of her character? Why or why not? How does this assessment simplify Kate's character? What have the repercussions of this simplification been on the relationships in Kate's life?

The Gulden parents have spent their whole lives playing favorites with their children, which often leads the children to feel they were living in each other's shadows. Who was George's favorite child and how did he show his favoritism? Who was Kate's favorite child, and how did her acts of favoritism compare / contrast to George's?

Throughout the novel, Ellen struggles to identify the relationship she has with each of her parents, feeling as though she can only align herself with one parent at a time. Who does Ellen align with at the opening of the novel? Who does she align herself with at the end? What causes the shifts in Ellen's alignment, and what does she learn about parental love through this journey?

Teresa Guerra proves to be an important character of support within the Gulden family. What was Ellen's initial reaction to Teresa's arrival at their doorstep? What role did Teresa fill for the Gulden family? How do you think Ellen's story would have progressed had Teresa not been assigned to care for her mother?

Throughout her childhood, Ellen idolized her father, George. Why did Ellen hold her father in such high esteem? Do you think he deserved this reverie? Why or why not? How did Ellen's opinion of her father change as the novel progressed? What events had the biggest impact on Ellen's impression of her father?

Discuss Ellen's relationship with Jonathan. Why do you think she continues with this relationship when it is clear Jonathan is not in love with her? Were you surprised when Jonathan turned on Ellen? Why or why not? How do you think Ellen's relationship with her father has affected her choice in men - Jonathan, Chris, and Richard?

The main issue discussed in the novel is the morality of euthanasia. What is Ellen's stance on this topic? How do Ellen's emotional opinions of euthanasia compare / contrast with her academic opinions of euthanasia? With what guilt has Ellen struggled to come to terms regarding the morality of euthanasia in her personal life?