



THE DAYLIGHT MARRIAGE



A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion



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It was July 16, 1999. Some friends and I were hefting huge backpacks into the trunks of our cars after a backwoods camping trip in northern New Hampshire. Someone turned on a car radio and we all heard the news: John F. Kennedy Jr. and Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy, as well as her sister, had disappeared in a small plane just off Martha's Vineyard. I hardly knew anything about these three people. As my friends and I drove back toward civilization, more was said over the radio—gravely, and with alarm—although at that point, not much more was known. Something triggered within me. How did I know so little about these people? I had heard John-John's upper-crusty nickname muttered with a derisive lockjaw. I knew a bit about his dabblings in politics and publishing. Everyone knew about the Kennedy curse. But I knew hardly anything

about Carolyn or her sister. Every DJ on every radio station was soon talking about the missing Piper Saratoga. What had happened to them? What was their connection with Martha's Vineyard, where I had spent several summers in college working in restaurants? Wasn't Hyannis Port their domain? As the story unfolded—and with it, rumors of marital discontent, John's failing magazine, Carolyn's possible depression—I found myself oddly riveted. Carolyn soon drifted closer to the center of the story, this lovely, apparently shy woman who rocketed to global fame only after she had died.

At the end of 2002, a beautiful, very pregnant married woman named Laci Peterson disappeared. The media lit up.

Poe wrote, "The death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover." I set out to write this novel with an interest in this country's—and my own—obsession with the disappearances of beautiful women.

A few months after I started it, a young mother, Rachel Entwistle, and her baby were shot and killed by her British husband in the very small Massachusetts town where my new husband and I had recently moved. I watched the international media swarm in and the town morph into a temporary city of reporters and cameramen and producers and curious onlookers. The Entwistles had lived about two miles from our house, and I began to go for drives past theirs. I took note of the throngs of people and police tape. I tried to catch a glimpse of

a family member or neighbor—a hum in my chest, horrified but intrigued. And utterly ashamed of myself. Wasn't I, literary fiction editor and writer, educated woman and news snob, above this desperate gawking?

I began to think that the media, as well as we, its willing viewers and readers, were reveling in a dark fairy tale: Beautiful woman marries charming, handsome man. Something about the man is not as it seems—perhaps his competence, his loyalty, his morality. His hidden flaw causes her downfall, which inevitably leads to his. Is our enthusiasm for this story the ultimate *schadenfreude*? The perfect are not in fact perfect. Thank God.

The gap between a person's external and internal lives has always intrigued me. When I began this book, I wanted to tunnel my way inside the archetypes of the beautiful victim and the secretive suspect and unearth some possible complexities. I was curious about how interchangeable the roles of aggressor and victim might be within the bounds of a strained marriage. I hoped to imagine the impact of so much external attention and, with it, so many assumptions for both the beautiful woman during her life and the secretive man after her disappearance. I wanted to travel to the extreme of what might happen when a couple's desires go ignored for years in the face of their daily realities. When their blackest thoughts about each other finally burst forth, when they must face their own dark impulses and wishes in the light of day, what then?

Light plays a significant role in this book—the clear light of

one pivotal day in the life of a husband and wife; the blinding flash of cameras; the ever-changing view through a skylight above the couple's bed. *The Daylight Marriage* is a study of exposure—an x-ray of two lives, a marriage, and a culture that professes to love one kind of tale but so often embraces a much darker story.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Lovell and Hannah chose the jobs that they did? How do their jobs contribute to their fates?
2. The author chose to tell this story from two points of view. What did this narrative choice add to the story?
3. Why do you think Lovell and Hannah ended up getting married and staying together, even after their incompatibilities became clear to them?
4. How does Lovell's work serve as a metaphor for what happens elsewhere in his life?

5. Do you think Hannah's fate was wholly accidental, or did she have some small say in it? Do you think she was entirely unaware of the danger she faced on the beach?
6. What role do the neighbors, Stephen and Jeff, play in this book? Without them, what would be lost?
7. What does the title mean to you?
8. Is Lovell a reliable character? Why or why not?
9. How does the author build suspense in this novel?
10. What does danger mean to Hannah? Why was it necessary to her?
11. Why wasn't Lovell more receptive to the therapist, Dr. Valmer? Why weren't the kids?
12. The members of the Hall family often chide each other for their language. What roles do language and swearing have in this book?
13. What does Janine think has happened to her mother? How does this change throughout the book? Why?

14. Do you think the author wrote this book more as a character study and a literary novel or as a cautionary tale? Why?

15. Hannah once asked Lovell, “Do you ever get sick of trying to predict the precise movement of every molecule in the atmosphere? When you look so close at something, doesn’t it start to disappear? Doesn’t it lose its fundamental it-ness?” (page 184). What does this mean to you? What do you think Hannah was talking about, beyond Lovell’s work?

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Heidi Pitlor is the author of *The Birthdays*, of which Fred Leebron wrote, “Undeniably gratifying . . . Subtly riveting . . . This isn’t just a terrific family novel; it’s a terrific novel through and through.” Formerly a senior editor at Houghton Mifflin, Pitlor is the annual series editor for *The Best American Short Stories*. She lives with her husband and their twins outside Boston.