No place called home| A collection of short stories

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No Place Called Home:
a collection of short stories

by Mia Laurence

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THE EMPTY BED

Perhaps she ought to get a new roommate to help with the rent, she thought as she sat down on Anthony's bed. She could wait one or two rent checks -- if she got a lot of work this month. And the apartment wouldn't seem too lonely. Sammy picked up Cleo and leaned back, stroking the cat's black shining fur.

The phone was ringing but she didn't want to answer. She wanted to make a cup of coffee and sit alone in the small white kitchen. She didn't want to take another job right away. She'd just had a dreadful eight days painting for a man who looked like a gorilla and wouldn't leave the house while she worked. She could feel his impatient breathing through the walls though she kept turning her music louder. Periodically he'd strut into the room where she was working, his belly rolling over his belt, and his ice cubes clinking against the fat round glass he pawed with furry hands all day long. Sometimes she'd get brave and tell him, "Mr. Simmons, I prefer to work alone." His glassy eyes would float around her. He'd smile with thick flat teeth and slowly, ever so slowly, walk into the next room. And getting her money when she'd finished the job. What an ordeal. No, she was not going to answer the phone today.
She put Cleo down and went to the kitchen. It was Thursday. She would answer the phone after the weekend though it was dangerous to wait until Mondays to book a work week. She filled the blue kettle on which Anthony had painted random letters in white. She took the ground coffee from the freezer, filled the filter and automatically pulled two mugs from the cupboard, then paused, realizing she was the only one drinking coffee this morning. She ran from the room. "Cleo," she called. "Cleo." But the cat had fallen asleep, curled up in a little corner of the living room.

It had been a long time since she'd gone out on a weekday. The Museum of Modern Art seemed like a good place to go. She'd seen much better ones on her travels than the one in San Francisco, but there were a few good pieces here. It was refreshing to see the large canvases of squares and rectangles where colors mixed and blended. Sometimes into patterns, sometimes not. It was nice to see the work of creative minds. Her own work was plain and dull. It was work of necessity, not passion (though in his writing, Anthony combined both). She needed a job she could travel with. "A job, Sammy, you can carry in your back pocket," said Peter, the old man who had taught her to paint. No boss, no sitting, no having to settle. Painting houses would, when she had work, pay her rent. Anywhere.

She would go out into the sunny September air. She would have a good day. She put on a clean pair of black Levis and a dark gray T-shirt. She put back her long red hair with a plastic pony tail holder, looked in the mirror, then brushed it out. She took off the Levis. She took off the T-shirt. She put herself in a black cotton
dress and tied a blue and black striped sash around her small waist. She tied her hair back with a black scarf which she wrapped around the top of her forehead several times before securing it in a perfect square knot in the back. She liked the way the black contrasted with the red of her hair; the way the blue in the sash matched her eyes. She put on her black boots and quickly left the house.

Walking toward a cafe, Sammy swung her hips gracefully. Today she wasn't her black Levis. She wasn't a bucket, a brush and a portable tape deck. The construction men from across the street were calling to a finite Sammy Richardson -- a figure she'd paint over tomorrow when she'd step back into jeans.

She stopped for coffee at a small cafe, but quickly added, "To go please," when she thought she saw someone she knew sitting by the wall with a cafe au lait.

"Can you spare a quarter, Miss?" asked a man in green sitting on the street outside the cafe.

"Sorry," she said, switching her coffee to her other hand.

Sammy stood at the bus stop waiting. Sometimes it seemed as if all bus stops in every city were the same. People, cars, buses going the opposite direction from the way you want to go. The thick air of engine exhaust and scant whiffs of cologne. The smell of being alone. Strange, San Francisco didn't always have that smell. Why was she smelling that smell?

Trying to look occupied, Sammy rubbed her calf pretending she had an itch, as a large light-skinned black woman approached. The woman's eyes were round and bulging. Sammy sighed and waited for the sermon.
"There's gonna be a Armageddon," said the woman. But her voice was not repulsive. "You know what I mean?" She moved closer. "Things ain't right in this world," she said, pointing to the dirty gutter. "Look," she said, raising her finger to Sammy's chest. "There's gonna be a Armageddon. Cause people don't live by the way of the Lord."

Sammy watched the large circles of powdery rose blush on the woman's cheeks clash against her dark eyes, which widened as she spoke.

"In the streets and in the projects, in the T.V. sets and the C.I.A." She leaned into Sammy, "You know what I mean?" Sammy nodded. Yes.

"You beware. You," she pointed, "are young. Do you want to die young?" The bus was coming. "There's trouble in the land. There's gonna be a Armageddon and no one's collecting any love to share before it happens." People fumbled for their change. "Things is gonna get worse."

The bus pulled up but Sammy could not follow the bulging eyes and painted cheeks. She watched the woman and the bus go off, adjusted the sash around her waist and noticed that the woman must have dropped something from her purse. It was a small plastic ring, the kind you buy in a gum ball machine for twenty-five cents. But it was strangely pretty -- a platinum colored band with a light pink stone, rosy pink, like the color of the woman's cheeks. Anthony would get a kick out of it. Forget the museum. She would take it home and put it on his bed.
She sat on Anthony's bed, petting Cleo and staring at the things she had collected. The phone was still silent but she'd managed last month's rent and the next wasn't due for a week. Maybe Mr. James would have some work for her. She'd call him tomorrow.

She looked to the window. So gray. And to the bed of objects. The platinum ring with the rose gem was her favorite, but the green pen, the blue feather, the gold dog tag that said, "Froggy," the clay bowl painted with quick black strokes, the two wooden chess pieces -- the black horse and the black castle, the bottle cap she'd inadvertently put in her sweat shirt pocket on a walk one night, the small bouquet of silk flowers, the brightly colored head band -- and the rest -- all were special. She picked up the black chess pieces. Somewhere in an enchanted forest she would ride the horse to a haunted castle, plant wild rose bushes and watch them crawl over the castle walls like ivy, throning into vines of ever growing protection. Ever since she was a little girl, she had loved to go to the woods and gather things. Bring them home to make her own secret collections.

She ran her fingers slowly down Cleo's back. She had to start hustling work again. Rent due next week. It was so gray outside. Gray. She'd worked six days last month. But the rent was a lot for one person to pay. She petted the cat for several minutes. His silky
fur was soft and oily. Small flecks of dust and dandruff came off in her hands. She didn't feel like making phone calls right now.

Sammy walked to the window and stared at the world Anthony had stared at for many years. He'd taken his desk and his favorite chair, his typewriter, of course, and almost everything from his room. Except the bed. She sat back down. She couldn't go look for him. If she found him he would not come back. He didn't follow; he lead.
The day she met him, she was carrying a small piece of agate she had picked up from the ground, tossing it from hand to hand. "That's pretty," said Anthony, stepping beside her from seemingly nowhere. He smiled as she tossed him the stone. He tossed it back, then invited her to his place for coffee. She picked up a feather from the pile, lightly brushed it back and forth across her wrists. She wanted it to tickle but the soft skin was almost numb.

The flat gray street. The dull quiet of his neighborhood.
Where had he gone in such a hurry? Why hadn't he taken his bed? Maybe it was too heavy to carry? Did he go very far? It was hard to get used to the absence of the clicking typewriter keys, her late night reassurance that he was home and somehow with her. A quiet sound someone made alone in another room, like a father lighting a pipe...something she could connect with just by knowing that someone was there. She picked up the ring and the little chess pieces. Anthony'd appreciate these things. He might even write a story about them and praise her for bringing them home. Never before had she shown her collection to anyone. Laying down next to Cleo, she closed her eyes and wondered if Anthony would ever come home.
When she woke, she decided she'd be brave and make a few phone calls for work. She left messages on several answering machines, fighting the urge to hang up after the beeps. Her voice sounded so weak pouring into the tapes, she wondered if it left any impression at all. Perhaps each machine swallowed a piece of her voice until, if she left enough messages, she wouldn't have any voice at all.

Just when she thought she couldn't stand to make another call, Sammy got really brave. She'd call her friend Jeffrey. She hadn't gone out with anyone for a long time. She hadn't seen Jeffrey in over a month. He was the only person she had known when she arrived in San Francisco. It was a strange coincidence because she had met him in her own home town in Pennsylvania. He had been driving with a friend from New York City to San Francisco.

She had driven with her mother that afternoon into town for some medicine for Bonnie, their cow, who had an ear infection. Sammy was standing outside the veterinarian's. After over an hour drive with her mother she needed to stand alone.

"Hey Baby! Want to drive to San Francisco with me and my buddy?" asked one of the boys.

They wore blue jeans and T-shirts. But their hair was long. Her mother would scowl disapproval. Yes. She would like to go.

But she didn't say anything. They were probably joking. The other boy, Jeffrey, spoke a little softer. They needed a place to stay for the night. Sammy knew her mother would never allow it. She gave the boys directions to the farm and made them promise not to
come to the barn before nine. Driving home she prayed they'd be quiet like they said they would. She didn't want to give her mother another excuse to hit her.

In the morning, she brought them corn muffins and a small sack of apples. Jeffrey shook her hand and said thank you. His skin was cool, dry, but not calloused. She felt her cheeks turn red and hot as he held her hand just a little longer than for a normal handshake. When the boys left, she took in their faces and carried them to her chores for the next few months. She could feel Jeffrey's skin in the palm of her hand, urging her to follow. She could see the two boys' long hair trailing in the wind that blew through her own, sparking the inspiration to get herself away from her mother, her mother's sometimes boyfriend, Cliff, and the farm.

Jeffrey answered the phone and after an awkward beat, she asked him if he wanted to go out, hoping he wouldn't want her to spend the night with him. Though their casual sex usually satisfied some physical need they both shared -- his to fuck; hers to be held -- she feared that if he touched her tonight, she would cave in, turn from body to dust. She was calling because she wanted a beer and she knew she couldn't afford it. Jeffrey usually paid.

They sat in a bar in North Beach, listening to jazz and drinking beer. She watched the agile fingers of the pianist press against the keyboard. Fingers long and slim like Anthony's on the typewriter.

"Were you sleeping with him?"

"Jeffrey."

"Were you?"
"He didn't like me that way."
"But were you?"
"Why are you asking me?"
"Because you're in love with him. I wonder if it's fantasy or if he was leading you on."
"I'm not in love with him."
"You are."

The pianist began his solo. Each note penetrated her skin, stirred her blood, made her body move. Tears rose to the bottom of her eyes as she watched the musician's fingers strike the piano keys. She didn't even know where Anthony was. She felt his hand, his long fingers pointed and erect, brush against her face. She tightened her hands in her lap. The music quieted.

"Finish your beer. Let's get out of here."
Sammy reached for her purse.
Jeffrey touched her hand. "I'll get it," he said.

While they were walking to the car, Sammy picked up a plastic red top from the sidewalk, slipped it into her purse.

"What's that?"
"Nothing." A bus passed, spraying them with loud, dirty exhaust.

"Too much beer?" He put his arm around her shoulder.

They reached the white Honda with the gash in the passenger's side so the door couldn't open. She climbed in through his door and rubbed her fingers against the hard cold plastic, trying to warm it
before they reached his apartment. But when he pulled up to the curb, the plastic top was still cold and her finger tips were raw.

His warm body felt alien but nice against hers after so many months sleeping alone, and he had never minded if she wasn't enthusiastic about making love -- just as long as he got into her before the night ended. She usually came anyway, even if her mind wasn't all there. Sometimes it made her angry -- if she came, he assumed he had pleased her. Tonight though, she didn't care. She hardly noticed what passed between them. Several times her body pulsed and shivered; it seemed to move without her. But it did not cave in.

Jeffrey wrapped his arms around her waist, gathering her against him. She liked the smell of his New York City skin even though it had been years since he had lived there. Growing up, it must have soaked into his body. He was the city hustle, while Anthony was more like what she remembered as a child -- a wild cat in the pasture, moving in from behind the woods -- stealthy, quiet, hunting its prey. Jeffrey was a wasp, swarming amidst society with a stinger he could project and retract in danger and delight. Anthony was a black cat. Watching, waiting, prowling; striking only in the silence of the night.

"What time should I set the alarm for?" he asked, relaxing from the heat of their bodies. "Does eight o'clock give you enough time to get to work?"

"Yeah." She couldn't bring herself to tell him that she had no work.
With Cleo in her lap, the objects piled all around her, and a cup of coffee in Anthony's black mug with the random letters in white, she sat all morning long, staring out the window watching the gray darken and lighten, change shades but never brighten. Six days of work in one month. She could move, she could. She'd done it plenty of times before. But she'd collected so many nice things here.

A broken watch chain, a piece of felt, two scratched red dice, a candy necklace Cleo had been chewing for several weeks. Strands of red hair on the blanket. The gray November swirling, pressing against the window. A telephone in the other room, ringing. A pile in Anthony's bed and the ringing in the other room. The grayness of gray. The rent. Anthony's bed. A place she had wanted to lie with him. A place he would not allow her to enter, but would, like a jungle cat, emerge from; pounce her on her own ground.

"Hello," she said, grabbing the phone.

"This is Mr. Secant." She knew his voice. He had a friend whose friend was going to Mexico for two and a half weeks and wanted the inside of his house painted. She would have to meet him today or tomorrow. He was a very nice man. A rich man. Reasonable. The house wasn't too difficult to get to. She would be able to work alone. He had a great stereo. He would pay her very well.
She wrote down the number.

She went back into Anthony's room. Maybe she should get a roommate to help with the rent. At least then she might be able to turn on the heat. The phone number. Work.

She picked up the platinum ring. The rose painted cheeks. "There's gonna be a Armageddon." Her stomach growled. The phone number grew sweaty in her hand. The gray. The thick gray. Sammy gazed across the pile and picked up a pair of lensless broken glasses, small, round wire rims that curved like candy canes to hold on to the ears. She'd have to leave the apartment -- leave Anthony's bed if she didn't make the next rent. The dullness of the street hovered outside. She lay back and put the glasses on her face.

She had picked them up because they reminded her of Peter. Glasses just like the old man had worn, the man who had taught her to scrape, sand, paint. It was a good thing she had met him. She had needed to start making money. She looked at Anthony's room through the wire rim circles.

She took off the glasses. It was so gray outside Anthony's window. Where was Cleo? There was a phone number in her hand. Work. Money. She picked up the platinum ring, examining it against the gray that was seeping in through the window. She examined it framed by the circles of the wire rims. Examined it with the glasses on. So many circles in circles, but no edges connecting. Each circle framed by another, but never interlaced. Ears of corn lying next to each other, each kernel separate. Where was the piece of paper with the phone number for work on it? How could she pay the rent if she didn't call?
Fumbling with the glasses, she remembered when she first met Peter. She had been traveling three weeks, swishing toilet bowls and mopping floors in hostels to earn a night's rent or sometimes a meal. She was trying to save her money for San Francisco, though she knew she was taking the long way to get there. It was her theory that if she could slip along the water's edges, the Great Lakes' fingers could somehow hand her something she knew she needed though she wasn't sure what it was. She was so proud that she had left her home in Pennsylvania. She didn't know what kind of job she could get there. She didn't want to swish toilet bowls forever and you probably had to have an education to get a job in a big city like San Francisco.

Sammy remembered sitting in the common room of the hostel in Madison, overhearing an older man in round, wire-rimmed glasses asking in a thick German accent if the two Swedish girls sitting next to him would like to work for the next couple weeks painting a house. They giggled and quickly decided that they were leaving the next day.

Cleo entered the room, meowed, jumped on the bed and started to chew the candy necklace. Not much left of it. Sammy took it from the cat, bit off a piece, gave it back to Cleo and looked to the floor where she picked up the phone number of Mr. Secant's friend's friend.

She had not wanted to work in Madison, but when the Swedish girls left and the old man leaned over to her with his small gray eyes alive behind his glasses and the strange accent of his voice asking her if she wanted to work with him, painting a house suddenly
sounded alluring. So there would be life outside of a toilet bowl, she told him.

The calm strokes of Peter's brush. His soft voice teaching her to mend a house. To blend with life, he said. She had only planned to stay a couple of days but stayed a month and a half. Working just about everyday. Scrapping, sanding, painting. Listening to Peter as he mixed life into the bucket; stroked wisdom into the walls. He always had a smile for work. Yes, she had to call that number. Peter had usually given her the windows. He said it was symbolic, but when she looked out, she never felt it was a symbol: what was outside the windows was real, and she was part of it. Sometimes he took her out to dinner. And he was so gentle. Most of the time.

"The brush you can carry in your back pocket. Like a turtle with his shell, you can take your home with you always when you have a talent like ours," Peter said, splashing her with a few drops of green paint. It had sounded so good then.

"When one pasture is eaten up," she remembered him saying one night as he buttered and salted his thick brown bread, "you go to the next." They finished their meal and cleaned the brushes, then went outside to look at the stars. But that night he had not been gentle. Sammy suddenly put her fists in her lap, crossed her legs and took off the wire rims. That night in Madison, she had put her paint brush in her back pocket.

But she didn't want to do that now.

She didn't want to carry her home forever. Where was Anthony, anyway? Why hadn't he left a note? She had been almost
comfortable here with him. Three years. It had taken over four to
get here. And never in one place very long.

She picked up a broken chain from the bed. Cleo must miss
Anthony's graceful hands stoking his back. Three years in Anthony's
other room, listening, waiting. Sometimes sharing. Bringing him
words and phrases she heard traveling to and from her jobs. And
occasionally... She covered her breasts with her arms and lay back.
Cleo brushed against her. She picked him up and put him on her
belly, stroking him softly, his gentle purring vibrating against her.

When there hadn't been work for her, Anthony would buy food
and she would cook. Here, the brush didn't slide into her back
pocket if she was out of work a few days or even weeks. She'd go
out in the day and bring home words, an observation, sometimes just
a random letter -- things from her eyes, he said. Cleo was warm and
heavy on her stomach. "Where is Anthony?" she asked aloud. And it
struck her how little he had talked to her. It was often the clicking
of his typewriter, a sound so harmless and reassuring, that she
heard. Not like a screaming mother's tirade. She put her hand on
the pile of objects and picked up the platinum ring, tracing its circle
with her finger. She touched the rose colored gem. She would have
to call that number. But she was so sleepy right now. She closed her
eyes, and rolled over, careful not to crush Cleo or to disturb the
things she had collected for Anthony.
She did call Mr. Secant's friend's friend the next day but he had found someone else to do the job. He was sorry. He had thought she hadn't been interested.

She stood by the phone a long time. She could pack up. She could leave. She could carry her home away. She could try to get some work. And get a roommate to help with the rent. She didn't want to move. She made coffee, sat in Anthony's room until the cup was empty, then called number after number but spoke to no one, and left no voice on any machine.

She made fliers and wrote her phone number on them in pieces that could be torn from the main poster. She put on her dirty black Levis, a large gray hooded sweatshirt; a smile that didn't seem to be her own. She'd love to take Cleo, but he was settled by the pile on Anthony's bed, chewing off the last bit of the candy necklace. Sammy didn't want to disturb him.

The sun had actually come through the weeks of gray. The sky was blue; the crisp air expanded in her empty stomach. She walked a few blocks, put up several posters and tried not to put anything in her shoulder bag but found herself taking two silver jacks and a small red super ball from the sidewalk.

She walked for a long time, feeling the bones in her feet press through her shoes into the ground. People looked so rich and happy. Everyone buying coffee and muffins, croissants, chocolate cake. She passed a crumpet shop. The smell of rich butter baking. Fresh blackberry jam running over the top of a biscuit.

"Spare some change?" Sammy was startled. She hastened her stapling.
Was there anyone she could possibly call for money? A place to go? She thought about the farm. It had been a nightmare of fists and screaming. How had she got herself out of it? The sour smell of milk splashed against the floor. The bloody scraps of meat on the butcher block. The hardened rings of bourbon under cocktail glasses in the mornings. She stapled her posters and tried to remember the will power she had summoned to save herself when she was seventeen.

She remembered watching Jeffrey and his friend drive away the morning after she had secretly let them sleep in the barn. Watching their car shrink into the distance, her hand tingling with the cool touch of Jeffrey's skin, she had known right then that she couldn't stay at home. Her mother had just invited Cliff to live and drink with her and had decided after a fight with Sammy to "clean house," meaning she had thrown out Sammy's collection of the special things picked up on her walks alone in the woods, while Sammy was out doing the chores.

Sammy had packed her bags that night. She had a bit of cash saved up from working at the Jimson's doing odd jobs, picking apples, milking the cow, sifting oats and corn. As she put up her last flier, she remembered the strange flavor of time the night she had left. She had been stepping into a present she had wanted to walk into without her past. The night had air vibrated with crickets' song, the crisp cool breeze blew against her face, whispering into her ear. The evening was singing. She had walked to the roadside and stuck out her thumb, looking only forwards in the direction that she was pointing.
Several hours after she left that morning, Sammy reached Golden Gate Park. She needed to sit and relax for a while. Her fliers were all gone, but her shoulder bag was no lighter. She had found several things today. She sat down. And the gray started rolling in, thick and moving quickly. It was fine though. Fine. Her feet hurt. She was tired. The cold fog was rolling in. Fine. Roll over me, Mr. Fog. Roll me in your thick wet body. Make me cold. Turn me gray. Take away the little bit of sun that shines. It's just fine Mr. Fog. She took out the apple a woman had let her buy for only twenty-five cents when she couldn't find another dime. Some people were very nice. She ate it swiftly and threw the apple core as far as she could towards the beginning of the fog bank. Maybe Jeffrey would take her out to dinner.

Sitting across from him, Sammy watched the candle flicker to the rhythm of Jeffrey's voice.

"So he might lay me off. It wasn't my fault his truck got hit, but he's been so touchy since his wife left him."

Sammy buttered another piece of bread.

"I don't know what I'm going do. I guess Wallace's dad could always use extra hands at the factory, but I like the freedom of driving the truck all around. I love the truck." He poured more wine. "I hate the truck. I'll love it though once it's gone." He looked at her. "Cheers." Their glasses clinked.

She watched him eat to pace herself. The lasagna was warm and red. She was watching another human face. Eating. Drinking.
He looked like a hornet — small dark eyes above a long pointed nose. She hoped he didn’t mind her sloppy dress. Her dirty jeans.

"You're a little quiet," he said.

"Just tired."

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Sure?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you finally called. You never answer your phone."

She finished her wine with a gulp. He emptied the rest of the carafe into their glasses.

"I've found a girlfriend," he smiled. She bit her lip. "You've got to get over that Anthony. He loved his typewriter, not you."

Sammy pressed her eyes into the red checkered table cloth.

*       *       *

In bed at night, petting Cleo, Sammy began to hear the sound of Anthony’s typewriter keys. His words, his phrases, her desire to stay in the room next to his tonight, tomorrow night, the night after that, forever, and long ago after the first night she had slept here. But she had been so used to traveling, putting her brush in her back pocket. Crawling into her green turtle's shell. Why had she suddenly wanted to settle here?
She got up to make coffee, pretending that it was morning, the only time of day he had allowed her to enter his room. Standing by his window looking out, she sipped the hot coffee, slowly. It was a different world. Anthony's window at night. A gray street turned almost black. A single street lamp far to the left pouring yellow light into the dense night air. On a clear night the light must have been beautiful, inspirational. No wonder he'd sat here night after night.

Sammy sat down on the edge of his bed, the center piled high with so many things. She brushed her fingers lightly over the whole mass, and then tried to outline each object one by one, until she felt she could pick up and handle some of the pieces of the collection.

He would like this one. She picked up a small plastic bear with a black nose, puffy cheeks and a very round tummy. Perhaps like Pooh, he had put his paws into the honey jar a little too often. She put the bear down softly and picked up a unicorn she had found. It was silver colored. Very light weight. The horn was shiny and she doubted Anthony would like it but the sparkle had caught her eye. Anthony didn't like symbols of fantasy; he often mocked the Pegasus and Unicorn fad which had taken up racks in stationery and toy stores. Cleo ran into the room and jumped on her lap.

"Look at this Cleo, it's a harp." Too small to play. She put down the little object and petted the cat, staring at the pile on Anthony's bed. She picked up a fluorescent pink earring, long and rectangular with a shiny gold hook. She had found it outside the exploratorium. The night so black and gray. Black and almost blue. She stroked the cat, raking through his tongue-polished coat, put the earring down and fingered a broken piece of green glass she had found on a
sidewalk. Would she have to move? It had been habit for so long; so easy, easier than staying in one place and getting close to people. But now it seemed so hard. The nights alone in her room, connected to Anthony by the sound of a typewriter, the clicking keys...and the occasional connection. Her turtle shell always in her back pocket, but her room always in the same house with Anthony. Three years. Her stomach growled but she wasn't hungry for food. "What shall we do kitty?" she asked out loud, feeling the energy from her voice fading like a dying battery. She scrunched her eyes to blur the outlines of each object as it rested against another. A wonderful collection. Hers. If she sat very still, she could hear the click, click; click, click of the typewriter keys. I am here, she thought. Cleo felt warm and soft in her lap as she touched the piece of glass. She picked it up and dragged its sharp edge against the tip of her finger down past her palm, imagining that if her blood were to spill, it would pour liquid green.
Sometime in the middle of the night, CJ crawled out from under the covers to stand by the window. It was cold, but he pushed the frame up several inches and stared out into the dark.

"What're you doing?" asked Mariana, poking her head out from under the down comforter.

CJ stood silent. He looked towards her, then out to the night.

"Are you all right?" He couldn't tell if she was concerned or not. "It's cold CJ. Please shut the window."

"I can't," he said, as he rubbed his palms against his cold forearms.

"Come here." He turned. "But shut the window first."

Mariana reached out with warm hands, stroked his face, pushed back the hair from his forehead, and softly rubbed his arms until his goose flesh melted away. Gently, she pulled him under the warmth of the comforter, then rolled him onto his side. She curled into him, her knees in the triangle of his bent legs, her warm thighs against the underside of his. She put her arm around to his chest and held on to him.
"You'll be fine CJ," she whispered against the back of his neck, her breath tickling. He lay still as he felt her falling into sleep.

CJ did not sleep. He stared out from under his wife's arm and the goose down blanket that pressed him to this spot. He tried to imagine the warmth of the stars' light falling upon him, but as he watched the night's darkness and knew that the morning sun would not rise, the chill inside him stayed.

In the morning, they showered together. She soaped his body with the thick white soap, then gently scrubbed him with the soft bristled brush. He rinsed, then soaped her, wrapping the wash cloth around her thin legs, moving up past her thighs to her bony hips, up to her small round breasts, down her arms then up to her neck. She was losing weight. Another one of her moves towards the fashionable, but with every pound she lost, he felt that he lost something too. They dressed, then sat quietly over coffee, warm toast, and the Anchorage Daily Times. He looked at the words, while Mariana truly read. She gulped the last of her coffee.

"Someone important from Cress and Waters, the big construction firm downtown, is coming today. They need a budget program designed for them. I've got to convince the partners to pick me," she said, standing up quickly. He watched her walk down the hallway towards the bathroom. She spent at least five minutes in front of the mirror before she left and a little longer when the clients were important. She worked for one of the most prominent accounting firms in the state, so her clients usually were important. First the careful teeth brushing, then the diligent hair brushing, and then the straightening of her immaculate suit. She was beautiful.
Professional looking, assured. Even in this town where men sometimes paid little attention to professional women, they respected her. She was impeccable, well poised, with a body he had once been desperately attracted to. He had wanted to sleep with her the very first time he had seen her in his literature class in college twelve years ago. Her posture was much shier then, she looked down at her feet, her hair hung slightly in her eyes. Now she walked with the self assuredness of success, spine straight, red hair cut short to let her green eyes shine. When she was done getting ready, she swiftly walked towards him and kissed his forehead. She stood for a moment, hesitated.

"You'll do fine," he said.

"Thanks. I think I am a little nervous."

After CJ had finished his second cup of coffee and knotted his tie, he went outside to the bus stop, but couldn't bear to stand in the dark waiting for the bus, so he walked, very slowly, to the public library where he was now head librarian. He kicked at the snow and watched the sky with disgust. The morning light had not penetrated through the thick grey and this morning was even darker than yesterday. CJ felt its heavy weight bear down on him like sticky tar.

He tried to distract himself by imagining the story he would read to the children today at story hour. A group of children play catch in their back yard when suddenly a strange old man from nowhere appears and grabs their ball. Wide-eyed, the children stand, not knowing what to expect but not wanting to jeopardize their playing time by disobedience. The old man puts the ball behind his back, hiding it so that from no angle can any of the
children see it. "Is the ball still here?" he asks with a crooked yellow smile. The children shout "YES! of course it is!" They want it back, there isn't much time left to play before the sun goes down. "But how do you know that the ball is still here?" the old man asks. "You can't see it."

The children beg him to give it back to them. But the old man moves slowly, keeps the ball hidden. He pulls it from behind his back. "If I bounce it very high, will it always land?" The old man bounces the ball, it goes higher than any of the children have ever seen it bounce. Up and up and up, and then it lingers as if caught by the sky. Then slowly, it falls back down to the earth. The grey old man catches it, bends forward, stares into their eyes.

"So it has landed once, but how do you know it will always land again?"

Afraid that he will never give it back to them, the children run frantically after the ball, accidentally pushing him over. There is silence.

A little girl with two red braids hanging down the length of her back picks up the ball and the children anxiously begin their game again.

"It's getting dark children," the old man warns as he gets up from the ground. "And every night at dark, your game must end and you must go back to your little houses. But how do you know that the sun will rise again tomorrow? How do you know that you will ever be able to go back to your game?" His screechy voice rises. He cackles, and walks away laughing coarsely like a scratchy record.
Every time CJ read the story, he imagined that as the old man walked away, he pulled the sun down as if he had it attached to a kite string which he wound up, weighted with a heavy boulder, and buried deep inside a pit.

Where had he first heard this story? he wondered as the snow crunched beneath his boots. He could hear his mother's reedy voice telling it to him, then see her smiling as she patted his head before leaving him alone in the dark Wisconsin afternoon.

"We've got to move," CJ told Mariana when he came home from work that night. She was cooking dinner. "I can't stand it here."

"CJ. It'll be light again soon. We go through this every winter." She sliced onions into the melting butter.

"I don't like the dark. I don't like the cold. I want to get out of here."

She peppered the saute, adding garlic and a little white wine to the onions. "It's not that much longer. You'll be all right." She turned around, wiping her hands on a towel, and reached toward him. "I love you CJ."

He looked at her outstretched hands. Everyone always told him two things: "I love you," and, "You'll be all right." He had heard it a million times. He remembered the report cards he handed to his mother, the column of letters lined with D's and F's. "You're doing fine dear, you know I love you," she would say, handing the stiff card back to him with her swirling signature.

"I want to move Mariana. This is not all right."
She added mushrooms to the mixture, gently floured two fish and placed them in the pan. She poured noodles into boiling water and went to set the table. He knew she wasn't ignoring him -- she didn't know what to say. They had had this conversation for four winters in a row and always a decision was put off until summer.

Mariana had moved up in the accounting firm. She had never expected to be so successful, and in some ways, CJ was proud of her and didn't want to take her away from what she had accomplished here. She designed computer programs for big income companies. The partners were beginning to respect her and even hint of a promotion. It would be difficult to relocate now. And she and CJ both did enjoy the outdoors -- when the sun came back out. But each year the winter seemed to get longer and darker for CJ. The first winter was all right. Something new, something to experience. But the second year was harder. The darkness was accompanied by a cold he had not noticed the first year. The third winter was worse. It was colder, darker, longer. Each day of murky air stuck to his body like petroleum oil. He took long, hot showers alone, turned on all the lights in the apartment (until Mariana complained of the high cost of their bills) -- but none of it did any good.

This fifth winter was dragging with all the weight of the last four. He couldn't escape the darkness even in his dreams. It felt like the time when he broke his leg and every time he fell asleep, in the dreams, his leg was still in a cast. Now, in every dream, there was darkness. Darkness as pervasive and intrusive as every morning when he woke up and saw that truly, the sun had not risen. CJ kept
thinking of the story of the old man who buried the sun. He was convinced that, in fact, come summer, the sun would not rise.

"The sun will never rise!" he said, and realized how silly and desperate he sounded.

"CJ! Every winter you forget how wonderful it is here in the summer. The sun will break through. You know it will." Mariana carried the food into the dining room.

He could tell that she was annoyed, but that was all. She couldn't understand, or wouldn't. It was her idea to move to Alaska; he had merely followed. He had just published his first and only book of poetry -- he was depressed -- in some way he felt that he had removed a piece of himself and his whole being ached. At that time, a move hadn't sounded so bad. Sometimes at night after Mariana was asleep, he'd go into the study and try to write. He found though, that after several lines he would stop, sit paralyzed, his hands and thoughts frozen. He had swallowed the darkness and like a virus it had taken over his body. He tried to read. His eyes washed over the words, but he could never remember what he had seen. As he felt himself lured into sleep, he would go back to the bedroom, afraid to fall asleep in a separate room, afraid to sleep alone.

"Don't you think?" she asked.

"What?"

"CJ, you're not listening to me." She laid the platter on the table.

"We can't leave before the summer. My mother hasn't had her visit."
"She's already visited."

"That was short and we hardly got out of the city."

CJ watched her face and let her talk. He didn't have the energy to argue. By now, she should know how he felt about being here. But he knew she would not leave yet; she was happy. And as much as he hated the dark, he didn't want to let the strange comfort of their relationship slip away. He had grown used to this. To the long nights of their skin under the covers together, and the morning showers wetting each others' bodies. Perhaps she was worth these awful winters. He knew he was afraid to be without her. But he could see her changing. That shy, coy redhead was turning into something new.

"What would you think about getting an exercise bike for the apartment?" she asked.

"Sure."

"The exercise will keep me from getting fat and maybe it will improve your mood." It was funny how that sentence came out. Perhaps that was the problem, that it was her body that kept up his mood, and he was losing even that.

"What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

"CJ, what are you thinking? That I'm fat and ugly and really do need that exercise bike?"

"Not at all. I was just thinking of how to improve my mood. That's all. Honestly. How did your meeting go?"
When they were done eating, he carried the dishes to the kitchen, wishing that they at least had a dog to feed her uneaten portion to. He began to wash, conscious of the warmth running from the faucet.

"Let's go for a walk," she said, taking his hands out of the sudsy water.

She pushed her puffy parka covered arm and mittened hand through his equally insulated arm. They walked quietly, the soft crunch of their feet against the snow sufficed for conversation. Mariana stopped at the top of a small hill. It was dark and the air swirled with heavy particles that layered across themselves and weaved in and out of the overcast sky. Small bits of light bounced through the loosely knit tapestry of clouds, and tiny glints of color -- silver, purple, blue -- glittered briefly like fire flies then sank into blackness.

"Look how beautiful it is," she said. And he felt that she was almost right.

* * * * *

He put his head down on his desk during his lunch hour. The fluorescent light in the library was almost as bad as the darkness outside. He couldn't bear to look at the computer screen into which he was supposed to enter the new acquisitions. He imagined himself
walking home and turning on each light in the apartment, the way he had that third winter, before Mariana scolded him about the electric bill. He saw himself walk down the hallway to the back of the apartment and turn on the main bedroom light; then the reading lamp by his side of the bed and the antique vase lamp by Mariana's side. He saw himself go into the bathroom, turn on the light above the mirror and the heating lamp. Then the two lamps in the den, the dining room's fake chandelier, the kitchen's large overhead flood light, and the small light above the front door. He sighed as he imagined himself looking down the long stretch of apartment now brilliantly aglow.

CJ went home early and lay on the bed, face down, trying to feel his face mold into the softness of the pillow. He heard the front door swing open, her steps sweep into the bedroom.

"Hi Sweetheart! You look comfortable." She sat down next to him, leaned over and kissed the back of his shoulders. "Look at the wine I got for the dinner party tonight." He rolled over, took the bottle.

"Looks good."

"Good? It was the best chardonnay in the store."

He wanted to throw the bottle down and grab her, but he couldn't move. He didn't want to go to the party. He didn't want to talk to all the men and women dressed to impress; subtly or not so subtly pushing their way towards something they called the top. He placed a pillow under his head and watched as Mariana undressed. She took off her suit, carefully placed it on a hangar and stood for a
moment in her underwear. A little black thread hung down over the top of her thigh. Her skin looked soft, the light blond hair on her legs barely visible.

"What should I wear?" she wondered out loud. She wanted him to respond, but he knew she wouldn't listen to his suggestions.

"You're quiet tonight."

"I want to leave, Mariana." She stopped rifling through her clothes.

"So I've heard," she said as if she were swatting a fly from her face. Then she looked at him, walked over and sat at the edge of the bed. "It's really getting to you isn't it?"

He looked at her.

"Maybe we can figure something out when we get home tonight." She squeezed his thigh.

The conversation again. They would decide to move at the end of the next summer, before it got dark again. And he would agree. It always sounded so good that way. To make it through the little bit of winter that was left and then to enjoy the summer that they would by that time so well deserve. The conversation would end on a positive, happy note, and for one night he would feel calm, warm, comforted. But then morning would come and it would be dark. And no matter how long they would stand under the hot, steaming shower, even with Mariana gently soaping his body with her soft sweet hands, the coldness in his bones would not melt. His whole body was becoming frostbitten like his feet had been one day after he had lost his shoes in a snow bank -- they never got warm.
Mariana walked to the closet and picked out a dark blue dress with tiny white polka dots. "What do you think?" She held the dress in front of her. "I think its perfect," she said.

CJ watched her dress. He liked to watch her body move, her graceful bending as she put her head down to catch the neck of the dress. The slight arc of her biceps rose and fell as she combed her hair. In other relationships he had had, his body grew to the woman's slowly -- each time they made love, they would become a little more comfortable. But with Mariana, their bodies seemed to belong together from the very first time. It had been a cold night in Madison in his paltry third floor apartment. An old queen sized mattress on the floor. They rolled between the lumps, moved within the contours of each others' body, slept afterwards, holding on to each other all night long.

As she walked towards her mirror, he watched the bare skin of her neck, the smooth soft tips of her nipples showing through her dress. "Come here," he said. Turning, she walked to him, sat on his lap, brushed back the hair from his forehead. "We've got to get ready CJ." He put his arms through hers, tightening his hands around her belly. He could feel the thinness sucking up her body. He eased his hands under her dress, stroking the skin of her thighs. He nuzzled into her soft red hair trying to smell her real self past the scent of her sophisticated perfume. He moved his hands up to her breasts.

"CJ," she said. But he pulled her down to the bed. She hesitated, then rolled over on to her side, looking into him with sincere green eyes. "It'll be okay. I love you so much." He didn't
want to hear those words. He wanted the warmth only her body could give. He pulled up her dress.

"We've got to get ready," she whispered.

"I am ready," he said, gently climbing over her and entering. She went along with it and for several minutes he felt that they were almost connected as they moved together like a rolling wave, gathering speed, momentum, climbing, cresting, then breaking at the same time.

They lay still for a moment, Mariana's head rested on his shoulder. He tightened his arms around her as the warmth of their perspiration cooled.

"We're going to be late," she said.

"Don't go."

"I have to go. It's an important party."

"Let's move, Mariana. Tonight."

She sat up. The muscles in her face tightened; he could see her eyes glisten.

"Please," she said. "It won't be much longer. I can't leave Alaska right now. You shouldn't be asking like this." She moved to her dresser but would not look at him. He watched as she put on her finishing touches.

"Please come with me tonight." She was looking out the window. "It's important."

He wanted to be able to go with her.

"Are you coming?" She took the wine from the floor, still not looking at him.
After she left, he went into the study. Thoughts, tangled like strands of giant kelp, crowded in his mind. He picked up his favorite pen, one his father had brought him back from one of his long trips north. It was a refillable silver pen, so heavy CJ somehow had managed to keep it for all these years. Sometimes when he couldn't bear the computer, he used his pen to let himself write. He wanted to put down some of the strings of thoughts, try to untie the knot with lines of ink. But hours went by and he hadn't moved. He looked up, light glowed against ceiling. He could almost feel it wrap around his shoulders, slide down his chest. He moved to the couch, lay on his back, pointed the reading lamp over his body; turned it off, then switched it on again. Something inside him stirred. He turned the light off and tried to grasp at those long ago nights laughing with Mariana's shy freckled face. "So that's how you analyze a text," she'd say, as they sat among the books for their literature classes. "That isn't so hard." He liked her practical approach. While he struggled, trying to put abstracts -- "meaning," "freedom," "truth" -- into words, she, when she finally realized it was all right to say what she thought, put it all down as if it were just a simple equation.

He had thought she was what he needed in his life. She thought he was what she wanted. He imagined her flirting at the party tonight -- being socialable and practical. Looking good. Speaking well. Making an impression. She was consumed by her own success; it was literally eating her up. He pictured Mariana hollowing out -- the warmth of her skin evaporating into shadow. He pressed the reading lamp's black switch and let the light wash over him.
He left work at lunch time. The sandwich he had brought was not enough; the fluorescent hum was too much; the gloom outside too painful. He was starved for something he suddenly felt determined to get. Forcing his head through the thick tight-necked wool sweater which he kept in his office closet for especially cold afternoons, he pushed open the heavy doors of the library, walked into the street.

Every light was off when he stepped into the apartment. The long hallway to the back bedroom was nearly black. CJ went down on his hands and knees and crawled through the hallway into the bedroom. When both knees had crossed over the bedroom door threshold, he stood up, opened the closet, moved his hand up the wall and pushed on the switch: a sudden flood of pale yellow light. He stood in the closet for a moment, then stepped out, leaving the door slightly ajar so that the light just barely spilled out in a soft stream onto the floor. He drank in the light, gathering his strength, then moved slowly back down the dark hallway out the front door into the overcast day and back to his office.

"You must have left the closet light on when you went to work this morning," Mariana told him when he got home.

He watched her face as she said the words. He watched her mouth move -- it was tighter than it used to be. She formed her
words precisely, not one extra movement. Even her lips looked thinner, tighter. He took the drink she handed to him, noticed that hers was nearly empty.

"I wish you had come to the party the other night," she told him.

"I'm sorry."

"I've come a long way. You should be proud of me."

"I am proud of you."

"You don't act like you are."

She got up to refill her drink. She poured vodka, then tonic. It spilled over the top of her glass. "It must be more than just the dark." She took a sip from her drink. "Goddamnit, what's going on with you? Where we live is such a superficial point." She took another sip of her drink, then suddenly put it down, moved over to him, grabbed his arms. "Hold me CJ. Hold me. Hold me tight." She sat on his lap and he held her. He held on tightly. Someone was sitting in his lap and he would never let go.

The next day, CJ left for his lunch hour fifteen minutes early. He sludged through the dark streets to his apartment, opened the door slowly and walked inside. The darkness was cool but not cold like outside. Closing his eyes, he walked forward like a blind man down the length of the hallway, feeling with his hands until he found the bedroom. He made his way to the closet door, opened it, and pushed up the switch to bathe in the light which he let glide across
his eyelids for a long, sweet moment before opening his eyes. Then he walked to their bed, turned on his reading lamp.

"CJ," she was slicing onions, her eyes were filled with tears. "Why are you doing this?"
"We can afford the light," he said.
"We cannot afford the waste," she returned. He didn't want to argue though. It didn't make any sense. Their salaries were sufficient and the issue was not about money.
"I know you are upset by the winter but you can't change the weather by leaving on lights in the house. The winter is almost over. Be patient honey. I can't stand to have the lights on when we aren't even here."

In the quiet that followed he watched her eyes drip. The onions sizzled in the olive oil. Bubbling red tomato sauce erupted in small spurting volcanoes out of the sauce pan onto the white stove top.
"Please don't do this," she said. Their eyes locked. They leaned towards each other, and he almost reached out to hold her, but stopped. He started to walk away.
"Don't leave without me," she said suddenly.
He went into the bedroom, pushed his face deep into his pillow.
Right now it seems I can't, he thought.
Each day during the next weeks, he left a little earlier and added one more light to his feast. The bedroom closet light, their reading lamps, the overhead bedroom light, both lights in the bathroom, the two lamps in the small den, the fake chandelier in the dining room, the grand overhead light in the kitchen -- always starting from the bedroom closet and igniting one by one, adding another each day.

At first he had left the lights on for her to find, not consciously, but it hadn't occurred to him to turn them off before he went back to the library. And at first she chastised him for this pleasure he stole each day, trying to make him feel like a criminal who should be punished. But then she started to ignore him, avoiding his eyes, turning off the lights without saying a word.

CJ felt like a young child discovering something forbidden yet essential for survival and grew careful -- careful to extinguish the signs of his afternoon solace before Mariana returned in the evening. He began going home a little later in the evenings to make up for the time he escaped from work during the day. She too, began to work longer hours, but usually left earlier in the morning and was often home before he arrived. When he came home several hours late one night, she was sitting on the couch dressed in a silky black negligee, her red hair, beautifully brushed and shining, fell to just above her pale shoulders. An expensive bottle of cabernet sat on the coffee table and two crystal glasses shimmered in the dancing light of several thin white candles.

"Beautiful," he said to her, taking her hands, pulling her up from the couch. "You are beautiful," he said, and meant it.
"Why were you so late?"

He realized what it must seem like, his coming home later and later each night, his growing aloofness. "You hardly ever make love to me anymore," she said.

"Mariana, I am not having an affair," he said, then thought about the lights. He held her. Her thin body made his stomach hurt. CJ let go and poured the wine.

After they had drunk a glass of the strong oaky cabernet, she led him to the bedroom, undressed him. She warmed her hands with massage oil, kneaded his skin. But she could not rub away his coldness. When they made love that night, he tried to be there with her, imagining the heat of her body gliding across him like warm feathery wisps of sun.

He went home early for his lunch, moving along the deserted street. His bones were brittle icicles -- one unexpected gust of wind would shatter him.

He walked into the apartment, so quiet, so still; and stood for a moment smelling the dark. He opened the bedroom closet door, switched on the light and watched it radiate like a sparkler in all directions. He closed the door until it opened just a little crack to let the rich stream pour across the hallway floor. Like a kitten he wanted to lap up the milky light to nourish his brittle bones.

CJ continued with his ritual, turned on every light, one by one, stopping for a moment after each was ignited. When he got to the one above the front door, he stretched his palms into it, trying to feel the warmth; absorb the emitting light like a plant photosynthesizing.
The sun will never rise again, he thought, and then remembered that there was still another light: in the hallway closet near the front door there was a single bald one hundred watt bulb. He opened the closet, pulled the cord. Listened to the last light click on.

While Mariana was asleep that night, he opened his eyes and lay awake for a long time, feeling the stirring warmth from her skin. He wondered what it would be like to be alone again.

He got up quietly, pulled on the pajamas he had slipped out of before crawling under the covers. He walked to the window, breathed deeply. As he stared out into the sky, he was gathering strength so that when he moved forward out of from the bedroom, he could push the boulder away from the pit where it covered the sun, and pull the hot sphere out by the old fraying kite string.

He opened the front door, his bare toes pointed toward the end of their street where the darkness spooned into the corner.

"Come back to bed," he could hear Mariana saying. But he stepped out and when he reached the snow drift at the end of the street, he looked towards the east. In the distance, he could see a glowing light. It was orange and round and pink at its tip.

He thought he heard Mariana's voice, "Don't go CJ."

He stepped forward, feeling the icy blades tear through the soles of his feet. He reached down, grabbed the snow, rolled it into a tight ball. Stepping back on one leg and forward with the other, CJ took careful aim and hurled it at the sun.
TAKING IN THE GHOST

One day in early spring, it was raining so hard, I had my windshield wipers on full blast on my way home from school, and still could hardly see. I pulled into the driveway, grabbed the empty trash cans which were rapidly filling with water and pulled them around back. My mother, completely soaked in a light blue cotton dress, stood behind the house holding a big burlap sack of something that looked heavy. She was reaching into it like it was a bag of sand and slowly scattering its contents.

"Mom, what are you doing?" I asked through the downpour.

"Trying to scare the ghost away," she said seriously.

Oh no, I thought. Something bad had happened and she had gone into one of her moods.

"It's pouring. Don't you think you should go in the house now?"

"Later Karen, I've really got to spread this salt."

I looked down at the large salt crystals which quickly dissolved in the rain. My mother was in one of her moods, somewhere she let no one into, but someplace I always felt she needed protection from. "Come on, you can come out here later. It's cold and wet." I put my
arm around her shoulder and led her through the back door to the kitchen.

"Why are you putting salt all over the ground? Snails?" I asked, looking at the soggy dress which clung to her small body, hoping for an alternative to the answer she had just given.

"The ghost. It's scaring away your father again."

I hadn't seen my father's car in the driveway that morning when I left for school, but had tried to ignore it.

"Why don't you go upstairs and take a hot shower?" I asked her. "I'll make some tea so we can get warmed up."

She looked at me, her brown eyes wide. Her lips were slightly blue. "Okay. Tea would be nice." She stood there, the salt bag heavy in her arms.

"Here, I'll take the salt," I offered.

"Okay," she said, not moving.

I took the burlap bag from her and urged her again to take a hot shower. Carefully listening to her small footsteps climb the wooden stairs, I hardly breathed until I heard the shower water turn on and then the humming of her deep voice as she stepped under the nozzle. Ever since I could remember, my mother included a non-visible world with the visible. It was a little secret each member of my family kept wrapped in a different box which none of us showed to each other; we each regarded it differently. I was hoping this bout with the ghost wouldn't last too long.

Another family secret was that my father had affairs. Just like my mother's ghost, no one spoke about it, but we all knew. It was part of the family: his missing dinner for business meetings; his
working at the office on weekends. But he usually came home before morning. This was the first time in several years I remembered not seeing his car in the driveway when I had left for school. And this was the first time in many years my mother had seemed so serious about chasing the ghost away.

I had learned to live with mother's strange way of perceiving the world. She argued that humans couldn't hear the notes of a dog whistle but dogs could; therefore, there must be many things humans couldn't see or hear but did, in fact, exist. By the time I got to high school, I no longer questioned the validity of what she perceived. Like God, it was something you couldn't prove, but you couldn't disprove it either. She usually tried to conjure up the spirits, to become friends with the ghosts and the invisible specters. It was only when my father became flagrant about his adultery that she seemed to want to send the spirits away.

Listening to the water of my mother's shower falling in tandem with the rain pouring outside, I imagined it washing over her small, round body and the thick lilac soap she used perfuming the steam in the bathroom. All through my childhood while my father was in and out of our daily lives with his affairs, my mother was in and out of a world completely her own. There were times when after spending all day with her, I'd have the feeling that no time had gone by at all, or that time had simply been swallowed by a huge vacuum cleaner; like dust, it was gone.

My mother read tarot cards and performed psychic healings at her temple -- a place the family was kept separate from. She said the magic was too powerful to expose to the people you were closest
to. My father, the ultimate atheist, scoffed at it all; my younger sister, Angie, just wouldn't acknowledge that part of my mother; but I was always fascinated and curious -- what did she do there? I begged her to let me visit. Once when I was nine, and then again when I was twelve, she allowed me to go.

The temple nestled into an old bookstore called *The Cheshire Cat* which no longer sold books to the public but still held a treasure of old hard covered books stacked throughout the store. It was sandwiched between a record shop that sold second hand jazz albums and hard to find classics, and a bar whose glass windows were so dark I never knew if it was open or not. An old green and white pinstriped canvas awning waved over the bookstore's white stucco walls. A large black and white cardboard cut out of the Cheshire Cat hung on the window and a huge smile was painted on the glass doors that pulled to open. When I visited the temple I pulled the smile at me to go inside. The first time I went there, the smile seemed large and high above my head but the last time I visited, the smile almost swung right into my mouth.

Tall musty rows of shelves weaved in a maze. A flight of wooden steps lead down into a basement with a scarred wooden floor, rose colored walls and absolutely no windows. In the center of the room sat a long oblong table covered with a white cloth surrounded by twelve oak stools. A round mirror with three white candles in silver candle holders placed in its center reflected the weak light of the room. Salt splashed against the mirror's surface. At one end of the room, a tower of cinder blocks rose in a pyramid
shaped platform that held what seemed like hundreds of glowing candles.

The times I was allowed to go there were for healings. Though no sick person was present, we gathered around the table, closed our eyes and held each others' hands. Shaking and sweating, I tried to listen to my mother's hypnotic chanting lead us into a world of the white light she said was so healing. It was warm and I felt it glittering about my body and floating in my stomach like tiny pieces of gold. The light she said, was there for us to spread to the wounded, and if we could concentrate we would make the sick person well.

When the tea kettle whistled, I filled the blue porcelain tea pot with dried chamomile flowers. She never talked about the sick people. I never knew if they got better or not. She refused to talk to me after the ceremonies.

"Better?" I asked her as she came into the kitchen.

"Yes. But I'm worried about your father."

"I'm sure he's all right."

"I know it's that damn ghost," she said.

"Here, have some tea. Peter Rabbit's favorite." I handed her a steaming mug. "Is there any hot water left?" I asked her.

"Well, there should be. I don't think I used it all up. I wasn't in the shower that long, was I?" Her voice sounded child-like, almost defensive, as if I might have been criticizing her.

"Just asking. Tea's okay?"

"Yes."
I felt uneasy about leaving her alone though I knew she didn't like me hanging around her when she was in these moods. I felt chilled so I took my shower, turning the water on hot enough to burn my skin. I watched my flesh turn bright pink, then turned the water to cold until it hurt. I tried to get the hot water to wash over me again, but by then it had been used up; the heat had washed down the drain. I got out of the shower, slightly chilled as I had been when I first got in.

It was almost 4:30, my sister would soon need a ride home from her dance class after school. Thursdays were my day to pick her up. She was only 13; though I remembered four years earlier when I was 13 thinking I was the biggest thing in the world, somehow now, when I looked at her, I felt she was so young and should be protected from something I couldn't quite put into words.

"Mexican food," my mother said, when I went out to the kitchen to tell her I was going to pick up Angie. "I want to go out for Mexican food. I want something hot and something really salty."

"Great. Mexican's my favorite," I said. "But Angie doesn't like it."

"Angie doesn't like any food," said my mother. It was true. Angie was finicky. Skinny like a slivered almond. I often worried about her as I watched her sit through meals, hardly eating anything. I drew so much pleasure from food.

"I'll be back in twenty minutes."

The hostess at Casa Coyote smiled when we entered, and brought us to our favorite table, the big booth near the back of the
restaurant, below the painting of the beautiful Mexican castenada player who twirled in a big, hooped, pink-flowered dress. Colorful flowers lay scattered on the ground all around her; laced through the thick braids in her hair. My mother and sister and I always liked to sit below her -- her good spirit charmed us through dinner.

The tortilla chips were warm and salty, the salsa, hot as always. Angie ate a few chips, but mostly sipped her water as my mother and I chatted about the rain, the president and whether or not daisies grew in Mexico. I tried to draw Angie into the conversation periodically.

"How was dance today?" I asked.
"Fine," she said.
"Are you trying out for any productions soon?"
"They aren't casting any until next month," she answered plainly. She was so energetic and animated on stage when she was dancing, and yet, at home, so quiet and withdrawn.

"Romeo, Romeo, where for art thou? Romeo? Romeo?" said my mother, theatrically sweeping the back of her hand over her brow. Our waiter came over to the table.
"Yes?" he asked.
"Oh. Nothing," said my mother, suddenly shy.

I was happy when the food finally came. I was beginning to fill up on chips and I wanted to enjoy the huge meal of two enchiladas rancheros, rice and beans, and buttered tortillas I had ordered. I also wanted dinner to be over as quickly as possible. I hadn't told my sister about my mother in the rain or that my father hadn't come home the night before, though we had both noticed
without comment that his car hadn't been there. I had wanted to talk about it, but when we were in the car going home from her dance class, I somehow couldn't bring myself to say anything.

"Kids," my mother announced through a mouth full of food. "Kids, we have a serious issue at hand. The ghost has returned and it has scared away your father."

The spicy enchilada burned against my throat. My eyes watered.

"I will take care of it," she said.

I looked at Angie, her plate of food hardly touched. I smiled at her. I wanted to make my mother's world into Angie's and my little joke, but Angie did not smile. Walking to the car after dinner, I tried to hold each of their hands, but neither wanted to be touched. How long would this bout with the ghost last, I wondered. How much could Angie and I pretend that this was normal?

"Why does she always get this way?" Angie asked as I sat at the edge of her bed later that night.

"I don't know."

"I'm sick of it. I hate this!" Angie's soft blue eyes filled with tears. "Can't we have a normal mother? And where did Dad go? What's his problem?"

It worried my sister to think about my father leaving us, a threat always vaguely present. He was big and muscular, his voice deep and scary. He sounded like he was yelling at you even if he wasn't. But he provided balance. A mother, a father, and two
daughters. During the evenings when he wouldn't come home until long after we were supposed to be asleep, I knew Angie felt skewed, off center. The empty place at the dinner table felt large. Despite the threat posed by him, his absence was even more threatening.

"It'll be all right. The rain is probably just bringing 'weird vibes'," I teased. We both smiled.

"Yeah, it must be those 'invisible particles,'" said my sister, imitating my mother's voice.

"You sleep well. Try not to worry," I said, giving her a quick hug and turning away fast. I thought I was going to cry.

The next day, the rain had stopped. My father still hadn't come home. In the morning when I left for school, the space in the driveway looked large and open, small puddles of water spotted the concrete where his car should have been. The sky was grey with patches of sunlight burning through thinning clouds. Angie looked at the empty space and then straight ahead. She asked if I thought he'd come home.

"I'm not sure when he's coming back, but I know he will." My hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Angie, everything's going to be fine."

After I dropped her off at the junior high, I considered not driving the ten blocks to the high school, but rather going to the beach to hide for the day. I drove by my friend Stephen's house, but he had already left for school and I didn't want to go to the beach
alone, so I drove the ten blocks, parked and went in through the whiny metal gates, adjusting my mask into Karen Anders, a plain sort of seventeen year old.

She was outside again when I got home. Her hair was disheveled, her eyes red around the edges of their dark centers.

"Hi Mom. How's it going?"

"You know perfectly well how it's going. There are oil stains in the driveway and the window upstairs won't shut. And you know why." She looked at me as if I might be the cause of whatever it was and then poked me in the chest with the sharp nail of her index finger.

"Oouch. Well, have you tried to call him? He should be in the office today."

"Should be in the office today," she mimicked. "Should be in the office today. Well you know damn well he isn't. There are things driving him away." Her voice was forceful, accusing. But I had learned to deflect her tone. Years ago I had discovered how to let her words wash over me if necessary. It was like putting on my daily mask at school, I could adjust to what was needed at the moment.

"Do you want me to call him, Mom?" I offered.

"Well you could. But I doubt it would do any good. You know the real cause of all this. We have to get to the root of this problem."

She walked over to a patch of small mushrooms that had sprouted up under the old magnolia tree in our front yard. She
plucked one from the earth, pulled off its top and blew at the stem as if it were a sporous dandelion. "We've got to get rid of the ghost once and for all!" she announced and threw down the mushroom. She plucked another out of the wet ground and began to strip its cap.

"Mom?"

"I don't want to hear it Karen." She seized another mushroom, then walked around to the back of the house.

I looked up at the old red tiles of the roof. Birds often nested in the spaces of the arches, dark, cool, protected. Several pigeons would crowd into one space, the cooing of their voices weaving together. The few times I heard my parents fighting they were trying to plan time to spend together. He'd ask her to play tennis or golf, but my mother, unathletic, protested. "I don't like sports." He'd tell her to come watch. "I don't like sports!" If she suggested that he come to one of the lectures or talks she frequented, he'd throw a tantrum about all that psychic bullshit. I looked up at the roof, trying to find some nestled birds, but saw none. The faint humming of my mother's voice threaded the air. She spent so much time alone, why did she think she needed my father?

For several days my mother spent a lot of time at the temple and when she was home, she mostly stayed in her room with her door closed. She said she was working on a series of drawings and didn't want to be disturbed. One Saturday morning, I told her I didn't have anything to do that night and asked if she'd rent some movies with me.

We made lasagna together that night. She showed me her special technique to make the tomato sauce just right, and how to
beat a raw egg into the ricotta cheese so it would spread easier. Angie had slipped away to a friend's house for the weekend, so it was just my mother and me with a huge homemade meal and two rented movies. For most of the night, we talked about common things. She asked if Stephen and I were boyfriend and girlfriend, or just friends, and she told me a little about the drawings she was working on.

"Would you show me your drawings, Mom?"
"They're not ready to be looked at."
"Please?"
She hesitated.
"Come on."
"O.K."

She made me wait downstairs while she got the drawings. I sat in the living room trying to imagine her as a young girl. I knew so little about her childhood. How long had she been imagining ghosts? Had she seen them as a little girl? She would never talk about her childhood. Even my father kept his past life, as well as his present, away from the family. When my parents met, what had brought them together?

When she came downstairs, she lay out four black and white charcoal sketches. The first was an unlit candle in the center of the paper. In the second one, a hand descending from space held a lighted match to the candle. The third drawing focused on the tip of the match flame touching the wick. In the fourth picture, the candle flame flickered against three background walls which had suddenly appeared.
"The next two drawings will show a flame consuming itself, but I haven't got to them yet."

"These are great." I stared at the fine details. "I wish I could draw."

"It just takes patience and practice."

"It takes more than that."

She gathered up the drawings. "Magic."

"Yeah. Magic," I said.

For most of the night she seemed relaxed, though every once in a while for no reason I could see, she'd get up and run upstairs to the bedroom.

"What are you doing Mom?" I'd ask when she'd return to the plush red couch.

"I thought I heard the ghost. I need to tell it that it is no longer welcome."

Why don't you let it stay, I wanted to ask her. It seemed more a part of her than my father. The reflection from the glass coffee table shimmered in her dark brown eyes. Did she really want my father back? Why didn't she feel strong enough to survive without him? What kept her dependent on him? What kept him bound to her -- and to Angie and me? He was so rarely home.

"Why did you and Dad get married?" I asked.

"Let's watch the movie, Karen," she said, clicking the remote control.
When my father finally came home, I was in my room with the door closed, trying to do my homework, but mostly staring at the contours in the plaster ceiling. The purring engine of his Audi pulled into the driveway and I imagined his large body bending out of the car, then heard the car door slam. I pictured him walking to the front door and turning the knob, then heard his heavy footsteps move past my door, climbing up the stairs to my parents' bedroom. Quietly I got up and went to my favorite eavesdropping corner by the bathroom door behind their bedroom, and listened, trying to ignore the loud thumping of my heart. I had already missed the first several beats of their conversation.

"The girls are old enough now," I heard my father say.

"John, I said I'm taking care of it."

"I told you, I am not moving out because of some ghost." His voice was rising. I heard a pause in which I knew my mother stood, her hand on her hip, her head slightly tilted to one side.

"You'll see," she said, steadily, calmly. "Just wait one more day."

"Damnit Edith! I'm not leaving because of some goddamned ghost. This psychic bullshit is tiring."

Was it the "psychic bullshit" or Ellen, one of the women he was seeing that was making him leave. He must have loved my mother in some way -- how else could they have stayed together for 21 years? Clearly, they did not live in the same worlds, but he must have know that when they married.
Perhaps it was his daughters' fault. Maybe he never wanted kids. He just wanted to live like a swinger, playing tennis and golf, going to sports clubs, spas, and recreational retreats.

There was a long pause.

I wanted to keep listening but was afraid I'd hear him packing, so I left. I wished my sister was home. I wanted to hold on to someone. I wanted to feel that there was someone who would always be there.

* * *

She was in the kitchen, watering the plants on the window ledge. I was spreading peanut butter on cheddar cheese flavored crackers.

"Why have you always let him get away with it?" It was a question I had wanted to ask my mother for many years, but in keeping with the code of our family, had never voiced.

"We have an understanding, Karen." She put the watering can in the sink and moved towards the den. I followed.

"How could you understand something like that? I'd never let my husband sleep around." My father had finally packed and left, and as much as I hated him for it, I was glad he was gone.

"Karen," she said, pulling out some green candles from an antique wooden chest, "for many years your father and I have had a
mutual understanding. I need a lot of time for my work and he needs a lot of time for his. We can't always be together."

But her work involved drawing, spirit and healing, I thought. He went to work at the real estate agency, then slept with his clients.

"I'd rather not talk about it," she said. She took out two silver candle holders.

"You better talk about it. Dad is gone." I was afraid I would lose her, and I didn't want her to go yet.

"I don't think you understand." She took out a box of wooden matches.

"Then explain it to me," I dared her. Reaching into the chest, she pulled out a long oblong mirror framed in polished silver.

"I'm sure the candles will bring him back, Mom."

She began to hum. The Brandenburg concerto number four.

"Why do you want him back?"

"There are some things you can't understand."

"He treats you like shit."

"Shut up, Karen." Her face burned red and I thought she would slap me, but she gathered her magical possessions and left. For moments I stood, stunned. The echo of the words I had repeated again and again in my head but had never voiced until now, came flying back at me like a boomerang. I had finally asked her the question. I hadn't got an answer.

I heard her bedroom door slam. The smell of sweet honeycomb wax melted into the air and her soft chanting blended into the walls. I hugged my arms around my body. Maybe it was best not to care, I thought. Maybe caring hurt too much.
"Hi Dad." I had skipped school to go to his office.
"Hello Karen."
"Sorry to bother you at the office, but you haven't been home for two weeks."
"That's okay," he said, though I felt he should be apologizing to me. I didn't know how much I could say. On my way over I had thought of asking him everything from why he and my mother got married to would he please take Angie and me away from her craziness.
"Where are you staying?"
"With a friend."
"Male?"
"Karen." He sounded mad but I didn't think he was.
"Ellen?"
I'm not quite sure how I knew her name. I must have heard him use it. All these years my mother had let him sleep around, silently insisting that they stay together rather than that he give up his other women. Now he was giving up my mother and I suddenly felt defensive.
"Yes," I heard him say.
"You could show Mom a little more respect."
"There are some things you don't understand."
I had heard that before.
"What do you want Karen?"
"Nothing, I don't know why I came." I walked to the door.
"Karen?"
"Yeah?"
"Do you want to sit down?"
"No."
"Turn around please."
"What?" I looked at him.
"It's not so easy." He paused.
"So?"
"We blundered through a few accidents. Your mother and I."

He told me that my mother's first pregnancy hadn't been planned. Somehow I had guessed it, but this was the first time anyone had told me. They got married, had another kid. Then he realized he didn't want to be part of the family. "Thanks for the story," I said.

He picked up a green glass egg-shaped paper weight from his desk -- a golfing trophy he had won from a mixed pairs team; my mother had not been his partner. He tossed it from one hand to the other. "It's not just a story."

"It sounds like one to me." I walked back to the door. I wanted him to say something but he didn't. "Nice paper weight." I let the glass door bang shut.
I picked up my sister from her dance class. On our way home she was even quieter than usual.

"You O.K.?” I asked.

"I don't want to go home."

"What's wrong?"

"Did you hear Mom last night? She was chanting for hours, Karen."

"It woke you up too?"

"How could I sleep through that? And this morning. She looked really scary sitting there naked in the rocking chair. Doesn't she sleep anymore?"

"I guess she has a lot on her mind," I said.

When we pulled into the driveway, the old beat up blue Capri that belonged to my mother's tall, skinny, red-headed friend, was parked in my spot. "Guess who's here?" I said and parked behind Anita's car.

Angie went straight into the house, but curious, I walked quietly around to the back yard expecting to find the two of them -- which I did. They were sitting together, holding hands. They faced west, which I knew for my mother, meant the setting of the sun, the leave-taking of the ghost. In front of them perched three stones, in the center of which was my mother's oblong mirror, candles in the silver candle holders, and the burlap bag of salt, by my mother's side. Anita held out her left hand from which a thick stream of smoke rose. She must have been holding incense in some kind of holder because the smell of a wild blossom I couldn't place, something like sage, filled the air. I was about to go inside, when all
of a sudden Anita got up and started twirling herself through the air, chanting several syllables I could not understand. I watched my mother slowly get up and as Anita spun herself faster and faster, my mother twirled very slowly, so slowly she looked like she was caught on film going at only twelve frames per second.

"Angie," I called as I walked in the house. I knocked on her door. "Angie, what do you think about going out to dinner?"

We decided to go out as soon as Angie had showered and changed, but on the way to get some real food, we both decided that we wanted ice cream instead. The Ice Berg was fairly empty as it was still dinner time so we got one of the big party booths with the plush red upholstery and sank quietly into the enormous seats.

"Want to share a Mammoth with me?" I asked her.

"Can I get my own?"

"Sure, get whatever you want. How about the Siberian Floe?"

"I just want a scoop of chocolate chip."

"I'm getting a hot fudge sundae. Are you sure you don't want to share something with me. I feel like such a pig around you Angie."

"You're not a pig," she said. "Don't worry." We were both silent until the waitress in the penguin outfit took our orders then brought water.

"How are you doing Angie?"

"Fine." She sipped her water then crunched a few cubes of ice.

"I tried to talk to dad a couple days ago." We both crunched our ice. "I think he's going to leave for good." She ripped off small
pieces of her black and white napkin. "I think it'll be better. He's never around anyway."

"Yeah. But he's our father," said Angie looking down at her fraying napkin.

That doesn't mean he's a very good father, I thought. "Doesn't it bother you that he's never around?" I asked.

"A little."

"Just a little?"

"I wouldn't hang around Mom either if I were him!" The ice cream came. Angie's scoop, though large in its fluted dish looked tiny in comparison to my two scoop sundae, steaming with hot fudge, a mountain of whipped cream, and topped with chopped peanuts and two cherries. I spooned up the cherries and placed them on top of Angie's ice cream.

"It's not Mom's fault," I said.

"Yes it is." She ate one of the cherries.

My mother was a little strange, but that didn't give my father the right to sleep around with other women and not come home at night. He'd been doing it ever since I was in third grade. No wonder my mother got so weird. She seemed to believe that we couldn't survive without him, though I didn't know why. "How would you feel if your husband didn't come home at night?"

"How would you feel if your wife ran around with ghosts all the time?" She ate the other cherry. I pulled a spoonful of stringy chocolate to my mouth. "My friends' mothers take them shopping on Sundays. My Mom goes to a temple to perform ceremonies I never even get to see."
"Do you want to see them?" I asked.

"No. Why did you get to go?" She took up a tiny bit of ice cream into her spoon.

"I begged her to let me go. But I didn't really understand what was going on."

"I don't want to go anyway." We both ate our ice cream for awhile. I tried to drink the melted part of my sundae before it turned the hard part of the scoops into soup.

"Angie, remember when we were little and we used to go on camping trips? Remember how we'd sit around the fire late at night, roasting marshmallows and Dad would tell us scary ghost stories that were so scary we wouldn't be able to go to sleep in our tent, so Mom would have to tell us good ghost stories?"

"Then we could go to sleep. But I never believed her stupid stories."

"They weren't stupid. They were sweet. And funny."

"Ha ha. I'd rather have a normal mother." I ate some of my sundae, watched Angie twirl the tip of her spoon into the convex curve of her scoop.

"Angie. If Mom and Dad get divorced, it will be for the better."

"I'm not going to live with Mom."

"Are you going to live with Dad then?"

"No," she said.

"Who'll you live with then?"

"No one."

"We'll live together. How's that?" I took a big spoonful of ice cream accidentally dropping it in my lap. When I reached over to
get my napkin, I knocked over my water glass which spilled right over the edge of the table onto me. We both started laughing. She handed me her severely torn napkin and we laughed even harder. "Yeah. And we can go out every night for ice cream showers instead of dinner." We kept laughing until the waitress came with more napkins. I paid the bill and Angie and I went home.

Anita's car was still there and the two of them were still outside, chanting, burning incense and dancing. Angie and I went straight into my room and shut the door. We did our homework together quietly until it was time to go to bed.

Two weeks later, my mother and I were preparing a Sunday brunch for the family. My father was coming over to spend the morning with us. He had wanted to take my sister and me out to explain things, but both Angie and I had decided late Friday night that if he was going to tell us he was leaving, he better do it in front of my mother too. When we called him at Ellen's, he quickly agreed, which surprised us, but I guess he didn't really care how he told us, he just wanted to get it over with.

I sprinkled the top of the frittata with paprika and my mother slipped it into the oven. We weren't saying much. She had been quiet that week, seemed distant, and had been pretty well consumed by her latest set of drawings and her daily treks to the temple. I took out the bagels and began to slice them open.

"How are the drawings going?" I asked her.
"Fine." She looked out the kitchen window, brushed back a strand from the potted ivy that looked somehow out of line.

"You worried about what Dad will say?"

"I'm not worried about anything." She took a glass from the cupboard, filled it from the tap and watered the plant.

"Ivy looks healthy, Mom."

"Yeah." She left the kitchen, and I finished slicing the bagels and prepared a neatly decorated tray of condiments.

When I heard my father's car roll into the driveway, it felt like a giant stone had dropped into my stomach. The frittata was almost ready, but I wasn't ready for this meeting. I went into my sister's room to solicit her help.

"This is stupid, Karen. I'm not going out."

"Come on Angie, didn't we both think this would be the best thing?"

"Yeah, but that was two days ago. I don't want to see Dad. I don't want to be with Mom. I don't want any parents. I don't give a damn what they do. I just want to be left alone." At that moment I totally agreed. I just wanted to be left alone.

"Come on. Help me with the food."

"I'm not hungry."

"Come on."

"What did you make, Karen?"

"You'll see."

"Spinach frittata? Right?"

"Yeah. Come on."
"I don't feel like eating."
"You don't have to eat anything Angie. But you do have to come to the breakfast table."
"Thanks." She got up slowly. We reached for each other's hand.

"Hi Dad," I said.
"Hi Dad," said Angie, distantly.
"Hi girls." He had on a dark blue short sleeved polo shirt. The cuffs of the sleeves hugged tight around his biceps. His hair looked darker, shorter, more sporty; his eyes sharper. I swear he looked younger than he had just two weeks ago.

"What's for brunch?" he asked. I went to get my mother.

Breakfast was slow. Periodically, we broke our silence with a "pass this" or a "please pass that." My father commented on the weather. Angie wasn't eating much, but had taken a large slice of frittata and had spread cream cheese and jelly over two bagel halves. My mother acted as if nothing was wrong, eating heartily and never once looking my father in the eyes.

"Well. I guess you all have noticed I haven't been around lately." We were silent. "For a while now, your mother and I have been living in slightly different worlds." There was still no sound from any of us, so he went on. "I've decided that the best thing is for me to move out." Still no sound. I think it made him nervous. "I'm not sorry. I think it is the best thing." He looked over at my mother,
who was buttering another bagel half. "Could someone please say something?"

I felt like I was dissolving. I knew our family had always wavered on a precarious edge, but we had stood together and now I saw us falling -- I saw my mother sitting at the table as if somehow her mind had floated out of the room completely; I saw the place my father was sitting in and how it would be permanently empty; I saw the tears forming in the edges of my sister's pretty blue eyes -- and I wanted to hold them all, gather them into a tight circle. Never let go.

"I'm going out." Angie left the table, her plate of food hardly touched. I heard her get her bike out of the shed.

"I have to do my homework." I couldn't think of anything else to say. I went to my room, closed the door and stared at the ceiling until I heard my father's car leave.

"Mom? You okay?" I asked. She was cleaning up the table.
"Of course. I'm fine."
"It's probably better. He hasn't treated you very well."
"Shut up Karen. I don't want to hear it."
She stacked the plates and I gathered the basket of bread, the tray of spreads and the frittata. I wrapped up the food as she carried in the dirty dishes.
"I don't need any help, Karen. You've done enough. I'll take care of this."
"I want to help."
"I'd rather do it alone."
She ran water into the sink, squirted green liquid soap from the big plastic bottle.

"Remember when we used to go camping?" I asked.

"We are not going camping this summer."

"I remember after dinner by the campfire you and Dad and Angie and I would sit around roasting marshmallows. Dad would tell us really scary ghost stories and then Angie and I wouldn't be able to sleep. Finally you would have to come into Angie's and my tent to quiet us down. You'd sit right there in between our two touching sleeping bags and tell us good stories to help us sleep. My favorite was about the Andersons."

"I liked to tell you girls stories." She brushed her hair back from her face with the back of a soapy hand.

"It would have been too scary to lie there all night in the dark if you hadn't put good things into our imaginations." I twisted the wire around the plastic bag of bagels. She had stopped washing; stood still at the sink with her hand in the sudsy water. "Do you remember the stories?"

"They weren't all just stories."

"Why did we stop going on camping trips so suddenly?"

"Your father said he was too busy."

"You could have taken us without him."

"No. I don't think I could."

"Why?"

"I don't know. What if there was an emergency? It always seems like there might be something I'd need him for."
"Like to tell us girls scary stories so that you could come in and tell us good ones?" She turned around. We both smiled. She shook her head.

"No. I guess we don't need him for that." She started to scrub the plates again, then pulled the drain. As the water went down, she took each soapy dish and placed it into the dishwasher.

"Why do you always wash the dishes so thoroughly before you put them in the dishwasher?"

"I didn't grow up with a dishwasher. We had to wash everything by hand."

Habits are hard to break, I thought.

"Karen. Don't you have something to do on this gorgeous Sunday? Why don't you and Stephen go to the park or the beach or something?"

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"I wish you wouldn't ask that. That is supposed to be the mother's question not the daughter's." She rinsed her hands and dried them on the white dish towel. "I'm perfectly fine." I took a step towards her.

"See you later."

"See you later."

I drove to the ocean and walked along the edge of the tide, silently, alone, preparing myself for just about anything when I got home. I began to think about that day when she had been standing out in the rain, her hair dripping wet, the burlap bag of salt heavy in
her arms. What was she really thinking then? Did she really believe that my dad was chased away by some ghost? Why did she let my father get away with hurting her for so many years? If the only way to keep him was to let her own world go, why did she think he was worth it? I tried to imagine them when they first got married but couldn't. I hardly knew my father and couldn't imagine my mother without her ghost.

I took off my shoes and socks, stepped into the cold water. I walked and walked until my feet were numb. A sea gull swooped from the sky. If only I could fly, I thought, I'd soar into the horizon, feeling its edges wrap around my body. Watching myself disappear.

When I got home, just after sunset, the first stars were beginning to sparkle in the northern sky. I pulled up to the house, and my mother, standing outside with the hose on full blast, was washing down the driveway. I parked and slowly got out of the car.

"What are you doing Mom?" I asked. She didn't say anything for a while; just kept the steady stream of water flowing. I looked up at the stars, unsure if I ought to go into the house, or stay outside with her a little longer.

Finally, looking straight ahead, she said, "I'm washing away the salt." I watched her as she vigorously waved the nozzle from side to side. She looked deep in concentration. "I've decided, Karen," she said, suddenly aiming the shooting water towards the sky in a giant arc then back to the ground, "that I want the ghost to stay."

I looked up, saw several stars spring into the night sky. I wasn't sure exactly what she believed about my father's going. I
wasn't even sure why she had changed her mind -- perhaps I would never know. But as I stood there, watching her water the concrete, I was glad to hear that she had finally let him go; was trying to let herself back in.
EULOGY FOR MY FATHER

When my mother finally told me that the man I had grown up thinking of as my grandfather was really my father, I put my jacket on and walked to the front door.

"Why are you telling me this now? I'm 17," I said.

"I'm sorry Dot." She looked down at her feet, the way I remembered her looking at her feet that Christmas when I was 8 years old and my grandfather disappeared.

"Why now?"

She handed me a check. "It's your high school graduation present. He left it for you to use for college."

Four thousand and twenty-five dollars, addressed to me, Dottie Windsfield. I wanted to rip it up right away, but realized that he might have touched this piece of paper. Then I looked at the signature, Helen Windsfield.

"You've kept a bank account all these years for me, but you never told me the truth?" She didn't say anything. Her head hung down, her eyes almost closed. "I can't believe you did this." She looked like Raggedy Ann, her lifeless hair hanging like frayed strands of grey and black yarn. I couldn't stand to look at her. She had lied to me my whole life long. My mother was a liar.
I went out the front door and walked for several minutes before I brought the check out of my pocket. It was dated that morning. The only way for my mother to give me this news was to do it fast, like jumping full force into an icy lake. My skin burned though it was a cold June day. Hail stones had pounded at my window just a few hours before, waking me up that morning the day after my high school graduation.

I walked for hours down the old paths where Pappy used to take me for walks, explaining the various origins of the plants around us. I tried to hear his voice, that raspy voice that somehow sparkled with the wisdom of the stories he was telling -- I never knew what was real and what he was making up. Perhaps like my mother, reality for him was made from inside out, not the way I had thought it was supposed to be. Trying to let go of the anger I felt for my mother right then, I tried hard to think of Pappy as the man I had loved as grandfather. His favorite story was about a place called California. A place he said was better than any place he'd ever lived and somewhere he was sure to get to some day. Sometimes I saw a certain sadness in his eyes when I'd look up. But he'd pull out his bottle, gulp down a few swallows, his pointy adam's apple bobbing up and down, just below the surface of his skin and gaze into the distance. Then he'd look down at me and smile. I loved that smile. It felt like a smile all for me and I'd grab his hand and wish we could walk down the path forever.

But now the path looked dry. It's dusty surface stirred in the breeze. It was brown and barren and sharp little pebbles littered the road. I knew I'd have to go back home and ask questions, but I
didn't want to talk to my mother right then. I almost wanted to forget about the check in my pocket, the words I had heard her say that morning. I couldn't let myself blame him for not telling me the truth. This was my mother's lie. The air stayed cold. I was burning and shivering. I was signed up to start at the local community college for summer session, but now I felt determined to do everything I could to get as far away from my mother as possible -- and the sooner the better.

When I finally got home that evening she was waiting for me. I had never seen my mother drink alcohol, but she was sitting on the orange sofa with a glass of whiskey colored drink. She looked pale, her eyes were red and dull. I walked past her.

"Dottie. Please." Her voice cracked. I turned. She was silent for a while. "Sit down. Please?" I felt caught, lured by the hope that some explanation, though it wouldn't make her lie any more acceptable, would at least give me a reason not to hate her for the rest of my life. I sat down on the far edge of the sofa. It took her a long time. The clock in the living room screamed the minutes. Finally, she told me.

One summer night when she was 19 and getting ready to move away from her parents' house to live with the boy she planned to marry, her uncle whom she had had a crush on since she had been a little girl, came to her, spoke sweetly. They drank together in the shed where her father kept his tools, listening to the branches of the big tree scrape against the tin roof. When the bottle was empty they ran through the fields behind the house. The long grass cut and tickled their bear legs and when she fell into a soft grass-covered
spot beneath an apple tree, he fell down next to her. It was over fast. She said he had been kind and when her belly swelled a couple months later, she didn't say anything. She pretended it was her fiancee, Scott's child, but she was afraid it wasn't. Scott was killed in a car crash six months after they were married. I was born two months later and my mother never remarried.

"It hurts to talk about this, Dot," she said.

"It hurts to hear about this. You should have told me sooner."

We sat that night, mostly in silence. We drank tea and whiskey and listened intensely to the pot each time the water began to stir into a boil. We let the kettle whistle long and shrill before we poured the water into our cups.

Throughout my years at college, I maintained that I had had no father, that I grew up with my mother, and occasional visits from my grandfather. I took the Liberal Arts degree, deferring any decision about what I would do with my life. I didn't see myself as anything in particular. Until my boyfriend, Stephen, asked me to marry him.

Then I saw myself as a liar.

I went back to my apartment the night he asked and lay naked on my back. Looking up at the stars I had painted in fluorescent yellow, I rubbed my bare hand over my belly. On my back, it was flat, but I took a deep breath, pretending there was a balloon inside that I was inflating. The round belly swelled. I knew there was nobody in there but me. I could never let anyone in until I could let myself out. I decided that after graduation, I would go to California to say hello and goodbye to Pappy. I called my mother to tell her I
wanted an airplane ticket to San Francisco for graduation. "Don't you want something more practical?" she asked. I tried to make her understand, but even after my four years away from her, she still couldn't get beyond her shame. I didn't hate her, I felt sorry for her. I also felt I never wanted to see her again -- she had and still was trying to deny me my father; I would to deny my connection to her. I bought the plane ticket with my own money.

When I got to San Francisco, the first place I went was to a greenhouse in Golden Gate Park. The tourist book called it the Lacy Conservatory, but it looked more like a stiff white doll-house, or the English Tea Houses I had seen pictured on little white sugar packets on the tables at Denny's and House of Pancakes restaurants. I stood for a long time looking at it before I went in. I wanted to know exactly what I was entering. I had to see it fully and completely. I was seeing it for Pappy as well as for myself.

Long, white, sectioned into windowed squares and bright with the sunlight that bounced from dripping glass, the building was shaped like a cross, spreading across the lawn in four directions with four neatly erect palm trees shooting up from the top of the steps that lead to the main entrance. Its roof was arced in the middle with short, thick sharp-looking spikes poking defensively up from along the edges -- to protect it from intruders it seemed. Though what intruder would break into a greenhouse, I don't know. The weather perhaps.
That's what Pappy always said. The weather was an intruder. But one day, he was going to California. It was a mythical place he had built up like a plastic model and painted with the brightest colors he could imagine, though I'm certain he truly believed that California was everything he attributed to it. The sun always shined there, he said. Never a grey day, or a frosty morning. You could grow flowers in California. And something even more amazing: they had greenhouses there. Glass buildings created to control the weather. According to Pappy, it was always sunny in California, but even that wasn't enough. There were places where they could get the exact weather they wanted -- make it hotter, wetter, lighter, darker. In there, great jungles could grow and even though the sun would be shining when you left the glass house, if there was ever a day when it didn't, you could just turn on the greenhouse lights!

It seemed a little strange, standing there without him. I hadn't seen him for thirteen years -- since I was eight years old. Growing up, I had never questioned the story that implied he had gone to California the same year he had tried to grow geraniums. I'm not sure if I ever believed my mother when she told me he had left. It seemed odd that he would go without saying goodbye to me, or never write once he got there, but I didn't want to not believe her. When I was fifteen and learning to drive, I had asked her if she remembered his old green truck. She looked at me for a strange moment, hesitated a long time and suddenly admitted that Pappy had not gone to California the year he disappeared, but had died of liver disease just before Christmas. She said she hadn't told me sooner because she didn't want to believe it herself. But she kept
looking away and rubbing the palms of her hands nervously as if she just couldn't tell me the rest of the story. I let it go, didn't protest, didn't even hate her for lying to me. I was numb. I promised myself that one day I would give Pappy the funeral he deserved. And I wouldn't invite my mother.

Standing there in the February sunshine, I kept thinking of the story of this place he told me so often -- although he had never been here. Each time California grew more elaborate. Why he never realized that the things he gave to California might be found in our own home state, I don't know. I think he felt he had more control over his stories than his life. Or maybe he just liked to hear his own voice. The world he saw was never quite good enough, so he'd tell stories, and since I was his special little granddaughter, I got to hear many. Often I didn't understand his words, but I always looked forward to the days we'd spend together: the days my mother would pack me off with a reluctant pat on the back, a somewhat sad smile. I remember her expression very distinctly because it was always the same. First she'd look at me, and then at Pappy, and then back at me. And she'd retreat back into the house without a word. I know now that she must have been embarrassed and totally ashamed. There I was going off with my father and she didn't have the courage to tell me.

I looked up at the greenhouse, the grayish-white paint the color of his skin. His face was gray and bulbous, though his nose was pink "like a rose," (he'd say) and his pale green eyes always bloodshot, lay deep inside their sockets. His white wavy hair
wandered unkempt around his egg-shaped head, and his voice sounded like fine sandpaper rubbing against wood grain.

I paid my dollar and walked inside the Conservatory. I was anxious and excited, and the smell in there was like how I remembered Pappy. The pervasive, moist, earthy odor smelled vaguely familiar, like an old photograph when you pull it out of a musty trunk. I turned around several times, wishing he were standing right behind me.

I had never seen plants so big. The stems were thick as my legs and the branches thicker than my arms. Large drops of moisture tumbled from the ceiling, landed loudly on the huge, rubbery leaves, and slid down. Hot and wet with perspiration, I was scared though I don't know why. A thorny, wrinkled, lettuce-looking plant fanned out from the ground; I don't think it was edible. I doubt they grew any of those plants for food. These were just for show.

If Pappy had come to California would this have been the greenhouse he had first seen? Would he have enjoyed it as much as all his yearning should have earned it? I thought of my mother, lying to me for all those years; my shoulders tensed, I felt blood rush hot to my cheeks. I was here for Pappy -- this pilgrimage to say goodbye to him had simmered quietly on a back burner in my mind since I found out he had died. I wanted to claim a shared moment for the two of us -- a moment wrapped with the knowledge we were never allowed to have together.

Mist filled the greenhouse like his slightly watery eyes --
eyes that twinkled when he talked. He was always ready with an anecdote; always set before his world which seemed just out of reach. He gazed out distantly as he'd sit down in his old mahogany chair with his whittling knife in one hand and a piece of wood in the other. "Dottie," he'd say, "carving is like an act of God. You start with a piece of wood and you make it into anything you damn please." He'd then take a long slow pull off his drink, and tell me a story about California. I remember the vague look on his face after he finished and how I would climb into his lap, wanting to have him hold me. But he'd always put me down too soon. Just as I was getting warm and comfortable, he'd say, "Dottie, you're a dangerous girl." I didn't understand his words, but I knew it was time to crawl down. "You can freshen my glass for me if you like." I'd fill his tall glass with ice and watch the cubes rub against each other, slowly melting in the oily prism of his drink.

To the right of the entrance another room swam with moisture. I don't know much about plants, but I could swear they were sweating. I stepped on a loose vine lying on the ground. The floor began to click and shake, and great steamy sprays of water pulsed out through pipes all along the ceiling -- pipes hidden by the large jungly vines and big yellow flowers that hung down like carefully placed ornaments on a Christmas tree. The hissing steam sprayed several intervals of hard warm mist, then stopped. In the sudden stillness, the room stood quietly dripping. Thick with moisture, the air was like a veil I could hardly see through. I craved to spread open the curtains of mist into Pappy's living room.
Walking along inside, I was surprised at my own fascination for leaves and flowers and strange plant growths. I had never cared much for plants, but felt that in this trip through the greenhouse I was responsible for seeing them for two sets of eyes. As I studied the plants closely, I noticed that many of the leaves were variations of the shape of a heart. The lines and colors were different, but the basic shape was like two ears joined together in a "V". They reminded me of the day Pappy read me from *Letters of Van Gogh*, and afterwards changed the game we had of "I've got your Nose!" where he'd grab my nose and stick his thumb out between his first two fingers, to "I've got your Ear!" and grab my ear, rolling his hand into an ear-shaped fist. When I sometimes slept at his house, he never said, "I love you," when he tucked me in, but one night he told me I was worth both of his ears.

The sun pushed against the glass ceiling, making its way into the humid, cloudy room in filtered waves of soft, thick light. I heard the sound of bubbles and followed. The steamy air opened into a room with a pond where a small fountain bubbled down a lava-rock waterfall. An old man in pale blue shorts with thin white thighs sat watching the lilies in the pond and writing things down in a notebook; I passed quickly so as not to be recorded. I walked around the water, threw a penny in backwards over my left shoulder, and said a prayer for Pappy.

When I came to a glass cage filled with orchids, I stopped. Rarely had I seen orchids, but had always loved the name. I stood
face to face with these creatures whose insect faces supported by
long gaping mouths stared back at me. The orchids bloomed vibrant.
Red, pink, lavender, green, and azure. Their wide jaws and rainbow
colors reminded me of the time Pappy took me trout fishing.

The first time we went fishing, I was so excited, I woke up
before the sun was up and sat up in my bed watching the light fill
the sky with red and orange swirled like a finger painting. Just after
the sun had washed away the streaky light, Mama came into my
room to help me dress. She helped me put on my out-grown yellow
rain pants and my old red suspenders that were getting too small.
She made me dress in three layers of shirts and sweaters and made a
great to-do about the huge lunch she had prepared. I wished she
would come with us, but she never did. She avoided spending time
with Pappy. Besides, this was Pappy and my day to spend together.

He came to get me in his old green truck, laughed when he saw
me, and took the lunch basket with a grunt, ignoring my mother's
plea for him to eat some breakfast before we left. "That mother of
yours," he muttered as we walked outside. "Always wants to fill
everyone up with food. But you try filling her with the real stuff of
life, and she sends you away." I rarely understood the things he said
about my mother, and sometimes I'd ask him, but he would never
explain.

On the way to the lake in the rickety truck, he sang out of key
and drank a lot of the clear liquid he always carried that looked like
water but smelled like gasoline. He never let me taste it. I had my
own bottle — of apple juice. Pappy said that a man could share food,
but a man's bottle was his own and I respected his wisdom. The songs got louder and louder as the road went by and his bottle got emptier. He taught me some of the songs, though the words often confused me. When we were almost to the lake, we sang the fish prayer song, long and loud, and then he pulled to the side, quickly got out and ran behind a tree to pray to the water-fish god.

When we got there, a cool breeze skimmed the lake, so Pappy made me take the extra sweater Mama had sent with me. "Can't trust the weather," said Pappy, looking at the slightly cloudy sky. "If you could only catch fine weather like you can catch these rainbow trout," he said, and took a long, slow swig from his bottle. "In California, they have sunshine every day. And just in case the weather is not exactly the way they want it, they build glass houses where they control it -- make it perfect."

He lay the basket and blanket on the ground, sat down and called me to his side. I sat very close, wondering if he could hear the hurried sound of my heart beat. Opening the little styrofoam coffee cup, he revealed the wriggling worms inside. I watched intently as he rolled one up into a little spiral. He put the hook through its layered body and carefully cast the line. He held his rod between his knees and helped me prepare my own hook.

It was difficult for me to curl the wriggling worm, so he ripped off a small piece of it and handed it to me to fold onto the hook rather than roll. He held my arm as I cast the line. His breath was pungent as it streamed over my shoulder, but I associated the smell with old men since Pappy was the only one I knew, and somehow it seemed okay.
He caught his first fish not long after we had cast the worms. He pulled it out, unhooked its mouth, and threw it in a bucket I had filled with water. The fish splashed against the bucket and slapped its colored body until I thought it would break itself. "Your turn to catch one now, Dottie," he said, smiling.

But my turn seemed to take hours, and I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to catch one. I wanted Pappy to be proud of me, but as I thought about the first fish that had been caught, slapping itself against the sides of the bucket, I wasn't sure I wanted to trap anything.

"Are you trying, Dottie?" he asked, as he cast out his own line again.

"Sure." His line began to tug. He reeled in slowly, savoring his assured victory.

"Got another. Goddamned!" He smiled and took the jaws off the metal hook. "There you go," he said as he slid the fish triumphantly into the bucket. "I got two."

He came close to me. "Are you sure you're trying to catch the fish Dottie dear?"

"Yes."

"Well let me just roll this little worm onto my hook and then we'll see what you're doing wrong." He rolled the worm, cast his line, sank the rod deep into the sand and walked over to me.

"Let me help you," he said, and just as he touched my hand I felt a tug on the line.

"Real slow now, Dottie."
I tried to reel in as slowly as I could, just the way I had watched him do it. My hands were shaking and my palms were beginning to sweat.

"Easy now. Easy now." I wanted to give the rod to Pappy but he wouldn't take it. "You can do it. Easy now. Just hang on to that goddamned fish. You can do it."

I was reeling in as slowly as I could. I could feel my line tightening and getting shorter and shorter. I was shaking a little, trying to stay calm. But when the fish got close, when I saw its snout pierce the surface of the water, I panicked and yanked hard. Its eyes shot through the top of the water and I yanked again, pulling the fish clear out of the lake. Pappy grabbed the rod around my hands so I couldn't let go and pulled that fish right into my lap. The hook was deep inside, tearing at its mouth. Pappy grabbed the fish and looking into its fierce jaws, clicked his tongue.

"Got 'em kid," he said. "Now you have to take out the hook."

But my hands were trembling and the fish was wriggling and slapping its body back and forth and I couldn't hold on to its slippery body. Pappy said, "Grab him!" and I tried to grab the fish, but couldn't. It slapped its body against the ground until Pappy got hold of it, reached into its jaws and yanked the hook so hard the fish's mouth tore right open. Its tail flapped faster and faster and somehow slapped him right across the face. "You wild fish you. Well we got you!" He took hold of that fish and dropped it emphatically into the plastic bucket.

We stopped fishing for a while after that. Pappy said three fish would do us for now. He was thirsty and I was, or had been hungry
for a while, so we set out Mama’s feast from the basket. Neither of
us ate much. Pappy seemed to survive mostly on his bottle, and I
just kept thinking of the fish hurtling through the air into my lap, its
jaws tearing as Pappy removed the hook, and the frantic way it
thrashed inside the bucket we had put it in. Pappy fell asleep soon
after lunch. A cold drizzle began, but I didn’t want to wake him. The
small drops of water on the surface of the lake looked like tiny tears.
If only Mama could have come with us, I thought, we’d have looked
like a real family on an outing together. When he woke up finally, he
took off his jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders. He didn’t
want me to get chilled and though I wasn’t cold, the smell of his
jacket wrapped around me made the day seem like it was just the
way it was supposed to be: a grandfather and his granddaughter and
even the bucket of trout.

A young couple eased up to the orchid cage, their reflection
superimposed over the orchids’ faces, then dissolved as they walked
away. I felt a tug inside my stomach, fishing for something deep
inside. In my blood was a mixture of story, memory and the
presence of the absence in my life I had for so many years not seen.
In the faces of the orchids, I began to read between the lines Mama’s
story mixed with my own had neatly typed out for me. In one
yellow orchid, bent to the side, staring to the left, I saw Mama’s face:
she never did look me straight in the eyes when she told me where
Pappy had gone; nor when she told me, years later, where he had
really gone. And I had never really looked her in the eyes either. I
never asked where Pappy was or why he didn’t write to us. I never
asked her why she complained about my kinky hair though it was just like Pappy's, or why I had green eyes like him while hers were a rich chocolaty brown.

I followed the yellow orchid's pointing gaze and entered the hot desert air where thorny cacti and thick scaly succulents rose from dry, sandy soil. Long, lanky, leafless plants hung from the ceiling like stray strands of a giant spider web. I couldn't breathe in the choking heat of the air. I walked toward a purple flower with a pink stem and noticed the room getting cooler. I followed the cooler air into a room filled with pink blossoms. Pappy, would have melted like a child in the presence of all those flowers. Inside me felt like a rubber band stretched to almost breaking. For so many years I had let Mama's story be my own. I had never questioned her when she told me Pappy had disappeared, though I knew he wouldn't leave without saying good-bye. I let it go, imagining him in California basking in ever-present sunshine, surrounded by sweet smelling blossoms and brightly hued flowers. When I was fifteen and she told me he had really died, I let that go too. Wasn't it better to imagine him in a greenhouse than in a coffin? But when she told me who Pappy really was, my father, I just folded up the secret, locked it in my journal with the little silver key. I liked him as my grandfather.

But now I had to say goodbye to that story of him, and say goodbye to the man who did his best to be good to me, and who remained true to the promise he must have made to my mother. Now I had to strip away the shell I called "Dottie" and build a new one. I looked at all those soft pink flowers, splashed with the drops of sunlight falling through the glass ceiling. I tried to feel like things
were all right: that I was all right, and that he was a good man. I thought deeply about the last time I had seen him.

He had planted pink geraniums, sure that they would grow in the sunny spring predicted for that year. The cold winter frosts were beginning to melt, and one day, he took me to his place for the weekend.

We got in the rickety green truck and as soon as we were out past the long driveway, he took out his bottle of pungent clear liquid and began telling me about geraniums. I was afraid of trying to say the word. I wasn't sure I could pronounce it. But Pappy made up a song and the refrain -- "When there's no more snow and rain, we'll have pink geraniums!" -- he insisted I sing along with him. When we got to his house, the familiar smell, a combination of must and kerosene, was strong, and like his breath, comforting. I put my overnight bag in the room I always stayed in when I slept there and went directly to the back porch where I saw rows of pots and little packets of seeds with pictures of flowers on the front.

We carefully put three seeds in each pot and Pappy told me stories of San Francisco, a place where the sun always shined and where in the parks, they had greenhouses inside of which they could control the weather.

When all the pots were filled, we placed them against the window. It was gray outside, but Pappy said the sun was sure to shine soon. He sat in his old mahogany arm chair with the fading red seat cushion and worn out red arm rests, drinking from a tall glass, and quietly hummed to the radio. I colored in my special coloring
book and played with the wooden blocks he had made for me one Christmas.

At night, I made us peanut butter and honey sandwiches. I was surprised when he ate a whole one. He laughed. "If I eat the honey, maybe the bees will come to pollinate our flowers." Then he explained pollination to me and told me about bees and flowers. And about greenhouses. And California.

When I woke in the morning, it was raining. It rained the next day and the next day and the next. It was one of the coldest and wettest springs I ever remember. It was always dark. The geraniums never came up.

I didn't see him much that spring, summer or even the next fall. Mama said he was really sick. I wanted to visit, but she said it wasn't a sickness that you could visit.

At Christmas time, the house was quiet. When I asked where Pappy was, Mama said he was still sick. On Christmas morning, she told me had gone to California. Gone to San Francisco to look for sunshine. And greenhouses, I suggested.

Dizzy in the strong scent of geraniums, my stomach swirled queasy. I had to leave the greenhouse. But first, I leaned over and carefully picked a flower: the most beautifully shaped, brightest colored geranium I could find. I walked back through the green jungle of vines, back to the little lava fountain that bubbled peacefully by itself. I touched the water, looked into it and saw in my reflection, his face. I imagined him lying on his death bed. Tears hung right below the folds of my eyes. "Here Dad. Here is
California." I tossed the flower into the water and watched it float through the reflection of our faces smiling into the pond.