THIRTEEN

Melanie and Rick laughed throughout my story, at times holding one another to keep from toppling over. I suspected they'd had enough wine, maybe too much, but I let them finish the little bit left.

"I'd forgotten all about that horrible casserole you made," Melanie said, bursting into a new fit of giggling.

"What did *you* find so funny?" I asked Rick.

"The whole thing," he said. "A bachelor uncle taking charge of his niece. And your family, your parents; they sound like a real scream."

"From fright or hysterics?"

"Both, I guess. Please, don't take it personally."

"How else can you take your family? They do such personal things to you. Their fucking you up is so personalized, so customized, all it's missing is the little brass plaque: 'Prepared especially for…'"

"I meant I wasn't laughing *at* you," Rick explained. "I see so many shades of my own parents in them, you'd think the same artist drew them."

"He did. The artist is our culture. We're just little stick figures, Saturday morning cartoons and prime time sitcoms. It's hard to break out of the outline they've sketched for you. It's scary, too. You're suddenly living on a blank page and have to draw yourself. Everything becomes possible."

"Yeah," Melanie said. "There are so many ways things *could* have turned out. What if I had gone to live with Grandma and Grandpa instead?"

"I know *I* wouldn't have made it," I said. "You turned my life around. I had to stop trying to fix the past and get on with my life. You taught me to be responsible for myself, Melanie."

"You helped me, too, Unc. And Rick should be grateful you did. I don't think he'd want to know me if Grandma and Grandpa had raised me — or, worse yet, my Dad. We helped each other, Unc."

"OK, I'll go along with that," I said. "But I still think about how things might have been, especially if your mother had lived, Melanie."

"Stop it, Unc. It's not your fault. And who knows? Maybe it would have been worse. At least living with my Dad taught her to be strong."

"Not strong enough," I said. "She still relied on him for her happiness. But you're right, Melanie. Even if your mother and I had never met Charles Swan, we would've met someone else, someone even worse. We still had so much to overcome."

"Like what?" Rick asked. "It sounds like Melanie's father was the worst single influence on all your lives."

"Not by a long shot," I said. "I admit he didn't help the situation, but everything was already in place for unhappiness, all our weaknesses and vulnerabilities still intact. A worse fate than encountering Charles Swan, worse even than Connie's dying, might have been our…"

. . .Coming Home

My sister and I watched as our parents' caskets descended into their grave. The lowering of the ornamented bronze boxes marked the simultaneous lifting of a great weight from our shoulders. I was sorry I hadn't taken Connie's suggestion to wrap a slice of onion in my handkerchief. She gushed great geysers of grief and honked her nose like a swan, while I stood dry-eyed, swaying slightly in the breeze, as unmoved as the nearby trees. Everybody was watching me.

We prepared ourselves for the funeral by recounting sad events from our lives—like when the family beast, Sam, had died—to put us in the proper funereal mood, but it wasn't working for me. I was far too elated to get even moist-eyed. This was the last we'd see of them, thank God, though I doubted we'd ever be truly rid of them.

Connie and I saw it as a stroke of luck that Mom and Dad had packed their bags for Beulah Land at the same time, thereby sparing us the hassle of nursing the surviving partner through an inconsolable grief.

The coroner was still not certain exactly what'd happened to them, other than that they'd taken the wrong medication. My sister and I understood perfectly how it happened. Mom and Dad had a habit of taking up the pair of eyeglasses closest at hand rather than pull themselves up out of their chairs during a commercial to go look for their own. We'd frequently find Dad watching the football game through Mom's rhinestone cat-eye glasses; Mom knitting a misshapen afghan with

Dad's heavy horn-rimmed glasses sliding down her nose as she leaned forward to untangle the skein. They often spoke to one another during commercials, asking, "Did you remember to take your pill, dear?"

Neither eyeglass prescription was right for their own eyes, much less for their spouse's. Connie and I suspected they reached for their pill bottles while wearing the borrowed spectacles, each getting the other's medication. As a result, Mom got Dad's heart attack and he got her stroke. Their neighbor found them two days later sitting in front of the TV, milky eyes frozen wide, staring at "One Life To Live."

Now they'd been lowered into their single grave, a steep-sided hole about the same dimensions as their marriage bed. The minister Uncle Ernie hired said a few perfunctory prayers and remarked how each time an old person died it was like a little library burning down, all the rich experiences of a lifetime destroyed with their passing. He clearly hadn't known our parents. With them, it was more like some *Cliff Notes* getting singed.

The undertaker handed my sister and me the ceremonial shovel so we could toss in the first spadefuls of clumpy dirt. He tapped my shoulder a few minutes later, saying, "You can leave something for the cemetery crew to do. Their time's already figured into the bill." I set the spade back against the mound of red dirt. I'd filled in more than half the grave.

Connie and I walked back to our car, slowly enough to be considered solemn. They'd fixed the flat on the hearse. The rest of the small gathering stood around the graveside like they might be waiting for the Second Coming.

"Why aren't they going home?" I asked my sister.

"They're probably waiting for us to announce where we'll be having the funeral luncheon."

"Yeah, you're right. I forgot about that," I said, pulling out my wallet. "How much you got?"

"About twenty bucks," Connie said. "Didn't you get the cost of a second grave taken off the funeral bill?"

"No," I said. "Believe me, I tried. But the director said they didn't give two-for-one discounts. The crew that digs the graves gets paid by the hour."

"What're we going to do? Nobody's going back to their cars."

I thumbed through my wallet. "Wait here," I said, taking Connie's twenty dollars and stuffing it between the other bills. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Just get them all rounded up over there by that nice shade tree. I'll be back in a flash."

I ran down the grassy incline to the cemetery drive where I'd parked my car. I'd left the keys in the ignition, not expecting anyone around there to steal it. The engine cranked without catching a few times. I sped down the tree-lined drive and out through the wrought-iron gates.

My upbeat mood had begun to fizzle out. Our parents were dead and they were still causing us problems. First it was the flat tire on the hearse just as it pulled into the cemetery, requiring the pallbearers, of which I was one, to lug the friggin' caskets a quarter of a mile to the grave site. Now it was all our stupid relatives standing around like orphans, waiting to be fed. Mom and Dad were gone, but we still weren't rid of them.

When I got back to the cemetery, nearly taking a corner off a mausoleum at one of the sharp turns in Valhalla Drive, Connie had the relatives gathered beneath the linden tree. I grabbed the

blanket I used to hide the worn upholstery and protruding springs on the back seat of my car, rolling it up and tucking it under my arm.

Connie shot me a dirty look. I knew she thought I'd taken too long, leaving her stranded with Uncle Ernie and Aunt Edna for a stretch of time that must've felt like eternity to her. She took the blanket from me and spread it on the plush, springy lawn.

"Who wants the extra crispy?" I asked, setting the boxes of fried chicken and plastic containers of potato salad and cole slaw on the picnic blanket. "I'll be right back with the six-packs. Make yourselves right at home."

When I returned, half the assembly had left and gone back to their cars. The rest, in high-heels and long black skirts or suitcoats and dress slacks a size or two too small, refused to risk sitting down to the funeral luncheon.

Aunt Edna's lips trembled and she burst into tears. She tottered away on Uncle Ernie's arm, the points of her high-heels kicking up little divots of the manicured lawn. Only Connie and I remained.

"Looks like we'll be having leftovers for a week," I said, offering her the box of original recipe. She took a wing and a leg and popped open her can of beer. We smiled. Connie's eyes were as sparkling and blue as the cloudless sky. It was a beautiful day.

We clanked our cans together in a toast. Nearly full, they made a dull, metallic sound like a shovel hitting a rock. We watched as the backhoe operator drove up and finished what my sister and I had begun.

After the Flood / Coming Home

Connie and I were halfway home when we realized we hadn't checked to see whether Mom's and Dad's house'd been locked up after the sheriff and the coroner left. The keys handed to us at the hospital morgue were still on the floor of my car. Connie suggested we stop at the house on my way to dropping her back at her apartment.

Our parents' place was camouflaged among the other unimpressive gray stucco houses on the block, all built from similar templates: what we called two-storey bungalows. We hesitated at the curb. The house's slanting upper windows and protruding side dormers gave it the appearance of a crouching cat. The sun-porch of windows across the front of the house lent the further impression that the cat was baring its teeth, and the sag in the middle of the porch gave the cat an unsettling Cheshire grin.

The sheriff *had* locked the house, but we decided to go in and have a look around. Several years had passed since we were last inside. We intended to sell the place and thought it might be a good idea to see whether it was in marketable shape.

The fourth key I tried fit the lock on the front door. I pushed it aside and my sister and I entered cautiously. We felt like intruders and always had, even when we lived there. We'd never been comfortable at home, feeling at times like squatters or, when we were on better terms with Mom and Dad, like a couple of tenants with a tenuous sub-lease. Mom had always kept our rooms on the second floor as tediously tidy as spare bedrooms, making us feel like visitors admitted only with reluctance. Our beds had seemed as much our permanent property as those in an overnight motel room. Even our pajamas had hung on us like rental attire for which there'd been no time for

alterations. Not for a minute did we pretend we were entering the secure abode where the sweet memories of childhood dwelled.

Connie and I stood in the small foyer between the living and dining rooms. Connie shut the door, careful not to let the wind slam it shut, a serious infraction. In the little alcove on the back wall was a photograph of Mom and Dad. Beside it on the ledge of the niche sat the old black rotary telephone.

I turned the photo face down on the linen doily. At that precise instant the phone rang. Connie jumped back and let out a scream. My arm tingled and my hair bristled, as though the phone had sent a charge of current through me. I stood in shock until, on the fourth or fifth ring, Connie picked up the oversized receiver, as dark and heavy as a paleolithic femur.

"Yes, they did. Yes, I am. Yeah. Yeah. I think so. No. No. Constance Swan. Fine. Of course. Thank you. See you then," she said, and hung up.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"A real estate agent. Mrs. Springer. She wanted to know if we planned on selling the house. I told her we did. She's coming by Friday evening."

"Fine with me," I told Connie. "I wish we didn't have to deal with this at all. I wish Mom and Dad had died smoking in bed and the house had gone up in flames with them. We'd get a settlement from the insurance company and that would have been the end of it. Now we're stuck with a house to sell."

"I don't think we'll be stuck with it," Connie said. "It's a nice house. A little cleaning and fixing up, maybe some painting, and I think it'll sell real quick."

"A little?" I asked. "Open your eyes. This place looks like a '50s cultural museum. There's an oxymoron for you. I mean, look at that wallpaper. They haven't changed anything since we were kids. God-damned doilies and cutesy knickknacks everywhere. You could fill a trash dumpster just with bric-a-brac and cheap souvenirs. It'll take us months to get it ready to show."

"No it won't. You'll see. Let's get together over here after work tomorrow. We'll bring out the buckets and mops and rags and get to it. We'll be done in no time."

"But it'll still look like the place got stuck in a time warp or something."

"Some people like that sort of thing. The '50s are having a big revival. We'll find somebody who feels right at home here."

"Huh," I said, doubtfully. "Wards of the state can't own property, and I don't know who else you think we're going to find to take it off our hands."

"Just quit worrying about it, will you?" Connie urged. "Let's get going. I'm tired. We've had enough hassles for one day. Tomorrow we'll start fresh."

I pulled the door shut and locked it. I thought maybe I should've left it open. If we were lucky, someone might come after dark and steal the whole damn house, from attic to cellar, doilies, plastic slipcovers, geisha TV lamps, scratchy Elvis records and all.

The next night I waited until Connie arrived before going inside. I believed our parents haunted the house with their weird, ghostly presences even when they were alive. I'd never be able to spend a single night there alone.

Connie came with a shopping bag full of cleaning supplies. She was very organized about what we needed to do. She had a checklist. The first thing she did was clean out the refrigerator.

After the Flood / Coming Home

I stood around with my hands in my pockets until Connie had enough for me to cart to the trash cans in the alley. She'd cleared out the refrigerator completely, chucking even the beer and ketchup and relish, things that wouldn't spoil. I rummaged through the plastic bags when I reached the alley.

Connie had gotten carried away, throwing out foodstuffs that were perfectly all right and other items that'd keep as long as they stayed cold. Instead of dumping everything, I carried the bags down the back way to the basement. I plugged in the old dome-top refrigerator and filled it with all the cans and bottles and jars and packages Connie had so thoughtlessly tossed out.

As long as there remained hunger in the world, especially in Asia and particularly in China, as my parents had been so fond of pointing out at mealtimes, I couldn't throw out unspoiled food without suffering a stab of guilt worse than any pang of hunger. Beside that very adequate reason to counteract my sister's mania for tossing out anything our parents had touched, I thought it reasonable to expect we'd want a sandwich and a couple of beers at the end of our dusty labors. It'd be more convenient to just reach into the fridge and take out what we needed rather than chase after take-outs. I didn't want to get into an argument with Connie, though. She'd likely turn the anger fueling her house-cleaning on me for opposing her policy of sparing nothing.

I quietly carried the still useful items down to the cellar, restocking all the empty shelves, careful to circumvent the sweeping fury of her broom.

"What takes you so long out there?" Connie asked. "All you've got to do is lift the lid and dump it in. What gives?"

"Uh, it'll never all fit if I just dump it in, Connie. I've got to compact stuff and break down the cartons and fold the cardboard. It's quite a load to be tossing out all at once. Maybe we should go a little slower and be a little more selective, don't you think?"

Connie took an angry swipe at the dusty, discolored patch of linoleum where the refrigerator had been standing, sending yellowed macaroni noodles and fossilized Cheerios skittering across the floor. "You want to finish, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, but…"

"Then let's just get it done. If you go picking through things, we'll still be at it next year. Come on. Let's get after the cupboards and closets next. You'll have to open up that other box of heavy-duty garbage sacks."

The pots and pans and dishes Connie instructed me to carry away were in far better shape than the blackened pots and chipped plates and mismatched cups I hid in the cabinets of my apartment. I taped up a few of the folded cartons and repacked them with the dishes and kitchen utensils, setting the boxes to one side near the cellar door. I planned on putting them in my trunk and taking them home when Connie wasn't keeping such a close eye on me.

While I went through Dad's closet and chest-of-drawers, Connie rummaged through Mom's things. Dad had been a foot shorter and a foot wider than me, but he had dozens of nice dress shirts and ties and even some underwear and socks still in their packages that would fit me. It seemed a shame to throw them out, and I doubted Connie wanted to be bothered with packing it up and carting the boxes over to the Salvation Army. I put all Dad's things down in the basement, stuffing them into the empty wardrobe and the old bureau.

After the Flood / Coming Home

It was nearly midnight when Connie and I collapsed in the living room chairs, our limbs heavy and our throats coated with dust.

"We should've got something to eat before," Connie said. "I could go for a nice cold beer, too. Now I don't feel like moving."

"I'll get us something, a couple of sandwiches, anyway," I said. "I'll be right back."

"Where'd you get all the energy? I've really had it."

I shrugged. Connie put her feet up on Mom's footstool and closed her eyes. I slipped down to the basement and brought out bread and butter and lunchmeat and two beers. I opened the box of kitchenware and took out plates and knives and trudged upstairs to make our late-night snack. Connie was snoring like Mom did when her asthma acted up. She shot awake with one final bovine snort.

"You're an angel," she said. "Where'd you find a deli open at this hour?"

I thought of lying, but feared she'd probably recognize the brand of beer and the kind of bland bologna Mom and Dad always ate, not to mention the insipid white bread no self-respecting deli would ever use, even for croutons.

"I couldn't see throwing all that food out," I admitted. "You know, all the starving children in Africa. I turned on the old dome-top down in the basement."

"I should be mad at you," my sister said, "but I'm grateful you did it. Maybe I got a little carried away."

After our late supper, Connie fell asleep again. I covered her with one of Mom's shapeless afghans from the piles of things lined up against the wall on their way out to the alley. I crawled up

to my old room and pulled back the musty covers. Too tired to undress, I kicked my shoes off and fell back on the bed.

My feet hung over the end of the mattress; the walls seemed closer in than they had; even the forked pattern of shadows from the hawthorn tree outside the tiny window, writhing in the wind and folding themselves into the corners of the room, were not the same shadows once cast over me. Those limbs and branches had grown upwards out of the frame of the moonlit window, as my own limbs now stretched beyond the bedframe. The room had never felt entirely like my own, but now neither did my body.

Only my excessive tiredness permitted me to sleep. I drifted down into an old dream, running sluggishly in my hand-me-down body to escape tormentors borrowed from the worn-out waking world.

When I awoke from my faded dreams, the morning wind was already stale, the sunlight wilted by a humid haze. My clothes were damp, and everything in the room smelled of mildew and the moldy mementos of an attic trunk. I heard shuffling and scraping on the unfinished floorboards above me.

Connie had been rummaging through things in the attic: the source of the stale air wafting languidly into my room. I startled her. She'd just raised the stepped trap-door in the hallway when I stumbled out of my room.

"You trying to give me a heart attack?" she groused. "Come on. I'll fix us some breakfast."

"Is there something packed for me to carry down?" I asked. "It'll save me a trip."

"Uh, no, there isn't. Maybe later. I'm still sorting through Mom's stuff."

After the Flood / Coming Home

The aroma of perking coffee greeted me as we descended the stairs. “I’m glad you’ve decided to take care of the attic,” I told Connie. “I can’t stand that musty odor. To me, it’s the smell of a life poisoned by the past and left to rot.”

“I’m happy you’re straightening out the basement,” Connie said. “I can’t go down there. The damp, moldy smell is part of it, but I feel so claustrophobic. I think of all the times we were locked in the coal bin, Sam scratching at the door to let us out and howling until Grandma or Uncle Ernie whacked him one.”

“Well, that’s how I feel about the attic.”

“Why? Did something happen to you up there?”

“N-no,” I said, “n-not that I remem-mem-ber.”

“You sure convinced me,” Connie remarked. “God, this place is filled with such wonderful memories, isn’t it? Want some coffee?”

“Yeah,” I said, fearing to say more, in case my stutter had come back for good.

“You’ll have to bring up the coffee mugs then, unless you’ve already thrown them out.” Connie looked at me wryly, with as much piquant humor in her voice as disapproval.

As I descended the cellar steps, Connie hollered down to me. “When you get the bacon and eggs and bread from the fridge, would you mind bringing up one of the skillets?”

We sat down to a huge breakfast, the first meal I didn’t have to make for myself or eat out since leaving home.

“I’m not going in to work today,” Connie announced. “I’m exhausted, and I couldn’t concentrate anyway.”

"I'm not either," I said. "My boss was surprised to see me yesterday. He put his hand on my shoulder and drew me aside. 'You take the rest of the week off, son,' he told me. 'You deal with your grief over this terrible loss and come back next Monday. We'll get along without you.' He's putting it down as sick-leave. I guess I can be grief-stricken as long as I'm getting paid for it."

Connie laughed. "Yeah, that's part of why I'm not going in either. My co-workers kept asking me how I was holding up. I couldn't tell them I felt worse when Barney died."

"Barney?" I asked.

"You remember. My parakeet."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I think I'd rather go to work, though, than deal with all this shit. Where's the marmalade?"

"Still in the cellar, I'd imagine."

I came upstairs with a whole box of things. There was no sense pretending. We didn't unpack everything, only the items we'd be using, but the cupboards were soon full again.

Connie went to her apartment to pick up a change of clothes and a few other things. I made use of the time alone to stash some more of Dad's belongings where Connie wouldn't find them, that is, down in the cellar. Then I went through the stacks of boxes on their way out to the trash and hid more stuff away.

I drove to my own apartment later that afternoon, gathering enough clothes so I wouldn't have to go back again, a few books to read late at night, and my iPod so we wouldn't have to listen to Mom's and Dad's collection of Perry Como and Dean Martin records over and over. My trunk

and the back seat were full. I didn't bring it in all at once, but waited until Connie lay down for a nap. I wondered if she felt all right. She hadn't made much progress in my absence.

My sister and I found more energy for the tasks at hand with Led Zeppelin and Aerosmith for background. The acoustics of the old house, however, seemed to soak up the sound, even with the stereo cranked all the way up. You had to be right in front of the speakers to catch the subtleties and nuances of the Heavy Metal music we listened to.

We remained busy in the house for the rest of the week, often long into the night. It became difficult to gauge our progress with so much stuff around. I rented a carpet cleaner. We washed all the walls, which looked good except for a few stubborn stains in the living room wallpaper, and then painted the ceilings.

On Friday, the real estate agent came over. Her arrival was so punctual we almost missed her. The sound of the doorbell was absorbed in the chiming of the mantle clock striking seven.

Mrs. Springer handed me her silk jacket and scarf as though I were the doorman. She took an iPad out of her leather handbag and began tapping away, chattering into the device as much as to Connie and me as we went from room to room. She took pictures with her iPhone, waving us out of the way. She went snapping and scribbling and muttering throughout the house.

"This is a wonderful little place!" Mrs. Springer said. Nearly every utterance was an exclamation. "I'm surprised you want to give it up! This would be ideal for a young couple just starting out! I wouldn't worry about the furnishings. The '50s are very in these days! You might consider selling it furnished. If not, I know a dealer in collectibles who'd sell his mother to get the

first look at this place! Here's his card," she said, whipping it out of thin air as though she were a magician.

"I suppose we'd better have a look at the rest of the house," Mrs. Springer said, gathering pod, pad, and phone.

"The rest?" my sister and I chimed.

"The basement and the attic," Mrs. Springer explained. "The buyers will want to see those, too. I need to know what we're dealing with. Don't worry if things aren't in the best of shape. I'll give you my recommendations for things that should be taken care of before we list the property."

Mrs. Springer already knew her way around. She grabbed our hands and led us to the basement. I heard Connie suck in a big gasp of air. I went down the stairs first; the real estate lady pushed Connie on ahead of her.

"My goodness! Your parents sure accumulated a lot of… things," Mrs. Springer remarked, entering the first box-walled aisle of the maze. I half expected the old family beast, Sam, to come roaring and snorting out of the next gap in the maze like the Minotaur.

"We… we w-were p-planning t-to discard m-most of this s-stuff," Connie said, shooting me a stern glance. Her own stammering was a basement stutter that had something to do with Sam and Uncle Ernie. If not for her stutter and the presence of the real estate lady, I knew I would've got a ringing earful from my sister for salvaging what should have been in the trash bins.

"It's otherwise in presentable shape," Mrs. Springer said, checking the dials on the furnace and following each tentacle of the old behemoth to where it met the registers in the floor above.

"Looks good, but we'll have it inspected. I know a fellow in heating and air conditioning. I've got his card some place."

We followed Mrs. Springer out of the basement and continued on to the second floor. She pulled down the trap-door and ascended the steps, driving me on ahead, I suppose, so I wouldn't be tempted to look up her skirt. She seemed to know every angle.

My heart pounded. My attic stutter returned. "W-what's all this c-crap?" I said, glaring at Connie as she climbed the final step.

"I wanted to save some of these things," she replied, more in explanation to the real estate agent than to me. "I need a little more time to go through them."

"I understand completely," Mrs. Springer remarked. "You've both had quite a shock! This house holds many memories for you! I'm sure you'll want to keep several mementos. I'll wait till you're ready. I'll get the contract to you by Monday."

She led Connie and me down. While waiting for her jacket and scarf, she spun around to take one last sweeping look, as though trying to fix in her mind whatever her iPhone may have missed.

"We'll be in touch. Nice meeting you both!" Mrs. Springer said, extending her hand and her business card to each of us. Her strong perfume lingered in the house. The exhaust of her silver BMW trailed after her along the Chevy-lined street.

"She seems kind of slick," I remarked.

"But she knows her business," Connie said, "and that's what counts. What do you say we take the night off? We'll order out for pizza or something and just play *Scrabble* or watch TV."

"Sounds good to me," I said. "We worked pretty hard this week, didn't we? Especially in the attic."

Connie laughed. I was glad she hadn't taken my remark as an invitation to argue. "And what about the cellar?" she asked.

"I just didn't want you doing all the work."

"You're so thoughtful."

The pizza arrived while I was in the shower. I put on Dad's terry cloth bathrobe and his stretched-out slippers. His brand of after-shave wasn't too sweet and I splashed a little on, just so it would get used up.

Connie divvied up the pizza and we ate it in the living room. I didn't really care for Dad's beer, but that's all there was in the fridge. I told Connie she looked silly in Mom's fuzzy bathrobe and bunny slippers. She told me to get a load of myself.

I set my plate down and leaned back in Dad 's recliner.

"Dad used to do that," Connie remarked.

"What?"

"Pile all the olives and green peppers on the side of the plate. I thought you liked them. "

"Yeah, I used to," I said. "Think we'll ever get rid of it?"

"The pizza?"

"No, the house."

"Maybe we shouldn't rush into it. Just think of not having to pay rent. Wouldn't that be great?"

I nodded. Connie's shadow filled the hazy outline where the stain of Mom's shadow had seeped into the wallpaper.

"I can live with that," I said, reaching for another beer.