

Bernard Grubble was a bum. At least that's what his sister called him. He was seventeen years old, couldn't find work, and dreamed of joining Al Capone in terrorizing Chicago. If he couldn't be a gangster then at least a conqueror of villages - someone like Hannibal or Alexander the Great. Presently though, he felt too awkward and shy to move away from his family home. He thought about this as he slowly climbed the stairs to the house that was now run by Alice, his older sister.

Alice Grubble took over the household after their parents died from the influenza pandemic that killed so many in 1919. She was stern and frightening with her brows drawn together, nostrils flaring as she shouted orders to the maid. Alice wore dark dismal Victorian frocks until the day she died. They were a black flag keeping all away from an infected ship drifting at sea. It was hard to imagine her as ever being warm around anyone, yet she must have once. After all, didn't she take in Bernie's son after the boy's mother died? "What money have you earned today?" Alice asks as Bernie opened the door. Then looking over her shoulder to the maid she snapped at the girl, "Take his coat and hat". Ginger Pepperton rushed over and took the hat and coat and hung them in the hall closet. The young woman tripped awkwardly over the hem of her long dress.

She had been reprimanded for wearing the newer fashion of short skirt and short hair. “We’ll have no sinful flappers in this house!”, Alice had told her, and gave her the heavy dark clothes.

Bernie stood looking at his feet with a silly grin on his face. He went over to the docks but nobody needed to hire anyone, not today. “My god, you completed high school, why would you go to the docks?” Alice pushed Ginger aside, “Get in the kitchen and finish dinner, you lazy slob”. The poor girl scurried off to fix the meal.

“Bernie, I am worried about your future.”

He hummed loudly then said, “Oh yes, sister dear, my future. My future as an accountant or a stockbroker or what? Don’t you mean you are afraid we might have to dip into our parents savings? That you’ll lose the esteem you seek to have in the eyes of our neighbors and the people at church?”

”Don’t talk to me in that tone of voice”, Alice said, forgetting Bernie was a foot taller and remembering this is what her parents said to her – *‘don’t talk to me in that tone of voice!’*. “I could care less about neighbors”, she said, then she threw open the kitchen door and could be heard berating the poor servant girl.

Some days Bernie watched young Ginger as she moved around the house carrying laundry baskets up and down the stairwells or trays of food to her mistress in the den. If he caught her looking at him he’d turn away - pretend to ignore her. This was more to avoid

Alice's wrath than anything else. He tired of Alice badgering the girl.

"GINGER! You idiot, come here!", Alice's voice echoed through the corridors and stairwell like a poltergeist. Bernie hated being shaken from a sound sleep to hear the insults.

One morning, as though viewing himself in the future, he jumped to attention like a soldier who'd slept through revelry. He pulled his trousers up over his long johns and flipped the suspenders over his muscular shoulders.

He jolted from his room to the bathroom with a full erection showing and there was Ginger. He was beside himself. He put his hand in front of his pants and rushed to the water closet slamming the door behind him.

Had she noticed ?- he wondered - both thrilled and frightened at the thought? Yes, he was sure she saw his tool. He shivered as his bladder emptied. He tried not to breathe too heavily as he abused himself, relieving another force of nature while thoughts of Ginger urged him on. Through half closed eyelids he savored her ankles, rosy cheeks, that outline of her hips, the breasts under the starched white apron, the welcoming flower between her legs. He had cried out and immediately coughed, then feigned a sneeze.

She was standing near the door when he opened it. He was fully awake and fully buttoned. He put his hands in his pockets and grinned shyly. She stood with mouth agape, toying with the feather duster in her hand.

Later in the day Alice gave him a proper three-piece suit and tie and told him to apply to the local bank. “Ask for Mr. Sty, Bernie. He approached me at church and told me they had an opening for a junior clerk”. Alice’s voice was especially sweet then.

Realizing he must do what she expected of him he took the suit and started for the stairs that lead to his bedroom. Alice’s voice changed and her shouting was disturbing, “GINGER, GET UP HERE!” She was in the basement. The woman he loved who saw his erection, who inspired his wet dreams. “I’ll go get her,” he stated in a most manly and disgusted tone. “She is damned ignorant! Excuse me, she is ignorant and I will let her know you are waiting.”

Alice was abashed with this new grown brother of hers. Was he finally grown? She would be pleased to brag about him at social gatherings. Not that she did much more than church choir since her parents died. Content with finally doing the right thing - finishing the job of raising her brother she said, “Just tell her the pots need scouring and the wall behind the stove should be washed down.” Then she, herself went up the stairs. “I’ll be napping for a bit.”

Bernie cleared his throat and tried not to race to the basement door. He skipped down the stairs two, three at a time, then tripped on the last and hit his head. Before he could pull himself together she was bent over him, concerned. He didn't speak. She may have said something but he couldn't remember. They seemed to move in chorus like all had been choreographed in advance.

Alice's napping was actually nipping whisky and falling asleep. The lovers met every chance they got. In the basement, the pantry, the parlor, under a desk, on a table, even behind a bush near the clothesline where Ginger was hanging the clothes out to dry. Their hungry mouths tasted one another in the kitchen between stirring soup. Their genitals were raw from rubbing and yet nothing could satiate them. One night they were in the basement, oblivious to the musty ambiance. They shared the basement with rats and other intruders of the dark. They probed and sucked and pushed and pulled one another. They were flooded in bodily fluids. It may have been the fear of getting caught that moved them to such obsessive pleasure. It was inevitable that Alice would find the lovers. Indeed, she went down to get more rot gut whiskey for her room one day when she found Ginger atop Bernie riding his erection to heaven and shouting, "Giddie up! GIDDIE UP, ahhhhh cowboy!"

Alice held the lamp in front of her, "How dare you! Get out of my house you damned by the devil whore! This is a God fearing house!"

So Ginger was left on the side of the road with two cloth bags. Word got around that she was a regular little tart and the only person who would hire her as a maid was an old blind woman who made her sleep in a run down shack behind the house.

Bernie got the job as a clerk at the bank. He hated it. After work he looked for Ginger until he found her. She shoed him away. She didn't want to lose another job. Unlike him, she had no family. At least not that she knew of at that time.

Bernie would not be swayed. He saw her carrying groceries and ran up behind her, pulled a bag from her hand and insisted on carrying it for her. "I want to marry you, please" he begged.

What he meant was he missed the sex. He found himself masturbating everywhere, even under his desk at work.

Ginger dropped the other bag and leaned over the curb and vomited. Just like that. Bernie was disgusted. How could she? He put down the bag and ran away. He ran home. Ran up the stairs to his room. There was a poem in his pocket that he wrote to her. It said:

Ginger with the soft skin

You make me grin

When we sin

He threw the poem in a drawer. He wanted to leave. Women were too mysterious. He realized many years later, when he grew too old for it to matter, that he was a coward. He should have saved Ginger from Alice. He should have married her, asked if she was pregnant.

Alice invited the bank manager to have dinner.

The new middle-aged Jamaican maid put too many spices in the food and now the tables were turned and Alice was fearful of the maid. India Turner was louder and more demanding.

”What 'ju mean do it dis way? Uh. I always do it MY way cause it’s right way!” So Alice would shrink and concede. Where would she ever find good help?

Alice showed the man to the dining room, “Mr. Sty is here... no, Stykes! Oh dear, I am sorry.”

“No harm done. How are you Mr. Grubble?

Bernie extended his hand, “Fine, thank you Mr. Stykes” . Bernie was not doing well at the bank. He lost his temper with one of the best customers, Mr. John Whitney. He was tired of everyone telling him what to do and he couldn’t remember how to spell or how to divide. His mind was on other things. Like right now seeing Ginger vomit and trying to forget the image of his parents in the hospital dying, drying up and turning to ash. Bern’s fork lay against his plate.

Alice was being flirtatious in hopes of saving Bernie from losing his job. She was impeccable with table manners. Her monogrammed napkin lay across her lap. The maid, who managed to be on her best behavior, served them as though they were in the best eatery in town. Alice ate her meat American style, cutting each piece with the fork in the left hand, knife in the right, then switching the fork to the right to bite the small piece of roast beef. She chewed slowly with her mouth closed, and covered her mouth with the napkin if she did need to speak.

“Mr. Stykes, I was wondering what you thought of this fellow John T. Scopes?” Mr. Stykes looked confused, “Ma’am?”

“You know, the teacher in Tennessee? It’s in the paper this morning”...”Bernie, get the paper.”

“Oh, oh yes” Mr. Stykes said pointing his fork absently toward a picture of Christ on the wall. “Scopes wanted to teach some pagan belief about how we were once monkeys and then we turned into humans.”

“Yes, yes, I did read about that. ‘Evolve’, that’s the word”, Bernie said with his mouth too full, “Evolution. And why not? Maybe we did evolve from monkeys.”

Alice turned beet red and gave Bernie a look that said just wait till later. Then through gritted teeth she said, “God created us and the

animals - separate - and you know it says it right there in his holy book.”

“That’s right son,” Mr. Stykes said in a compassionate voice, after all Bernie did lose his parents at a young age and that could account for his rebelliousness. “Your sister is right. The undisputed truth is in Genesis.”

Alice and Mr. Stykes locked gazes. Bernie was disgusted. They looked like they were almost drooling over one another across the table.

He tried to ignore them by gobbling his food. Mr. Stykes told Bernie he was lucky to have a sister who cared about his welfare. Bernie excused himself from the table, “I’m terribly sorry, sir, I am feeling a bit odd and think maybe I should lie down for a bit, I mean no disrespect.”

Alice looked alarmed, "Bernard, please sit back down," she said through gritted teeth.

“It’s quite all right,” Mr. Stykes said, “Maybe the lad needs to think about his mistakes and how to correct them.”

“You are more than generous with Bernard,” Bernie heard his sister say as he packed a shirt, a toothbrush, a pair of socks and long johns as well as a few other odds and ends and slipped out of the house.

He felt free. The cool breeze from the Great Lakes felt free. He could breathe. He would never look back. He had one last thing to do before he left for good. He went to see Ginger.

“I am so sorry” he told her through the window. She opened it a little and they whispered. “What will you do?” she asked. “I’m going to join the railroad. I want to work on the big engines and shovel coal into the burning ovens - I want to be covered in soot” he shouted.

She closed the window and thought she saw him leap into the air, dance down the street into the darkness. She never saw him again. He never returned. It was a long time before he learned he had a son who was named Joseph Grubble.

2

On the outskirts of Coville Washington, a young woman boarded a train headed for California. She was a tall woman with a pear shaped body and a tight perm holding a pill shaped hat with a rip in the veil. The lines she painted on the backs of her legs to imitate nylons were smearing. She sat next to a window and pulled out a compact to fix her makeup and lipstick.

There were few passengers on this route. She was glad to leave. Glad she had stolen money for her new life. Legitimate theater was not for

her. People liked movies these days. She hated the way the audience talked while she sang and how when the dust blew under the tent it settled in her makeup.

She slept again, feeling a rage for the manager. His voice haunted her. “You can’t sing, you can’t act. Why do you think we keep you on here? Cause we pity you, yeah, and you’re growing uglier by the minute.”

She was blamed for not bringing in more money for the show.

There were times she wasn’t paid. There were times the manager used the money for poker and other gambling feats. He did not influence her fate, no, because she knew his weakness for drink and gambling. She hid in his trailer. She knew that he kept the money from the proceeds of the weekend shows in a pouch. When he fell asleep she removed the money and directed her fate to the train station.

The train rumbled through acres of forest passing Blue Mountains, then on miles and miles of flat prairie and desert. After a number of changes the woman who sang in tent shows boarded the train in Oakland for her final destination, Lano California. She watched as a porter stacked her trunk in a corner with other luggage.

“I hope they don’t lose my baggage,” she said to the soldier sitting next to her. She looked around the car and was astounded by so

many soldiers. “Hey, I thought there was a Navy port around here,” she quipped.

The soldier in the next seat said, “Who needs the Navy?” Others laughed, “We use them to run the ships, yeah, but they're not allowed to stand on solid ground.”

“Makes ‘em land sick,” a young man joked.

“Don’t worry about your luggage, Ma’am.” The man extended his hand, “name’s Bernie. I won’t bother you with trying to get your tongue around the last name. Most of the guys just call me Sarg or Sergeant Bernard”

“Vera Johnson”

“Well, uh, Miss? Johnson”

“Miss.”

“Where are you headed? I’ll be more than happy to accompany you and see that your belongings are not misplaced.”

“I'm going to Lanoe but...”

“Porter!...” Bernie waved an elderly black man to him. The man pushed his way through the crowded car taking a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe the perspiration from his brow, “Yes sir, how can I be of service?”

“This young lady is going to Lanoe which I understand is the last stop. These boys are following me to the base at Richmond. Now how ‘bout you watching out real careful for her luggage.” Bernie put some bills into the porter’s hand.

Bernie settled in comfortably next to Vera and talked about his wife. “When this war is over, I’m going to bring her here. I like California. I have a baby girl and I want her to grow up in a peaceful land. Lanoe, now that is a pretty little town. What made you decide to go to Lanoe? Most folks coming out here want to go to ‘Frisco or Oakland for the jobs.”

“I read in the paper up there in Washington about a little shop. So, I made arrangements to see the people who own the building. They told me over the phone that lots of people are out this way and making money left and right. Thought I’d get in on it.”

“What kinda business you thinking about?”

“A restaurant.”

3

After Pearl Harbor was bombed, people headed west in the droves to cash in on war jobs. Vera rented a storefront on 7th Street in Richmond By the Bay. She bought chairs and tables from a junk store. She paid one hundred dollars to the owner of the building to

rent the shop for a whole year. Vera named her little restaurant Sweetpea. It took her all day to paint the walls and set up the chairs and tables to look like a professional place of business. She hung red and white-checked café curtains on the window and painted SWEETPEA in large red letters across it. The next day she found Joe.

Joe was in the Salvation Army Hall with the other morsels of men holding steel cups of black coffee and waiting for work. Any kind of work. 'Can do any kind of work anywhere'. He showered and shaved. When employers came in he tried to position himself in front but was more often shoved away by those anxious for raw labor. He was not a large man so he puffed out his chest and looked people square in the eye. Most were looking for house painters or yard sweepers or someone to remove the rubbish - not Vera. Vera chose him right off. He would do for washing dishes and cleaning up while she cooked and conversed with the various customers. She had planned it all in her head before she left. "You're too thin skinned," One of the ???? said to her.

Today she did not feel thin skinned. She felt cold. She rubbed her arms with her icy hands. She frowned and squinted. The smell of sweat and cigarettes permeated the dark hall. She chose her man and he followed her to the Sweetpea. Neither spoke until they were well inside.

“Now, you wipe down those tables good. Anything I hate is a table that sticks to the skin.” Vera checked the food again. Fourteen loaves of bread; freshly baked, meatloaf; fresh salad in the fridge and apple pie.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Joe answered carefully. He had never worked for a lady before. She made him nervous. He felt a slight twitch develop over one eye.

“How long you been lookin’ for work?” she asked.

He looked down, too shy to look directly at her, “Well, let's see, ummm, ‘bout a week.”

“Guess you're glad to get a job then.”

“Yes, ma'am, I sure am.”

“Let's talk some things out while it's slow. Don't stand around doing nothing, never. You better always look busy - understand?”

“Yes, ma'am, I understand.”

“Good, I hate lazy people. When I went over to the Salvation Army this morning, I looked around and said to myself, ‘What a sorry mess of humanity’. Wasn't one man there looked healthy enough to work. All of ‘em looked like they were hung over from Rot Gut Whiskey. Do you drink? Emm, uh, what's yer name again?”

“Joe, Joseph Grubble, ...and I have an occasional shot of whiskey.”

Vera appeared grieved, “Geez, what kinda name is that?”

“Grubble? Don’t know, ma’am”. “Hungarian, Romanian or maybe Scandinavian? No one ever said. That’s just the name I always had.”

“Well, I’d change it if I had an awful name like that.” Vera turned away from the man she just got from the Salvation Army and busied herself by polishing the coffee pot. Joe washed down the tables twice, three times, each time catching a spot he hadn’t seen before.

“I’m sorry Ma’am, but I don’t think I caught your last name.”

“Vera Johnson. Doesn’t look like the rain’s going to let up today. Funny how people, in these parts, don’t like to come out in the rain. They should try living where it snows all winter and your teeth freeze when you breathe the air.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

No one came on the first day the Sweetpea was opened. Vera told Joe it was the rain. She was sure that the weather would clear up.

“Tomorrow, so come on, let’s close up. I’ll see you in the morning.”

They put on their coats and Vera locked the door behind them. She left in one direction and he in the other. She had an umbrella and he did not. He had a place to stay at and she didn’t. He went back to the Salvation Army where he showered and ate with other men

who were noisy or shy. Joe slept on a cot in the room with the snoring masses. He thought about Vera and her little restaurant and how she must have a great apartment. Maybe over the restaurant or maybe she lived in a house.

He was too broken to wish or want for, anything. Joe realized he caught her eye only long enough to be hired. He had already forgotten what she looked like or how old she may have been. Her words did not bother him. After all, he had seen it all and done it all. He wondered who she was and what she was about. In the morning he arrived at eight o'clock.

“Joe, put those chairs on the table and then mop the floor.”

“Why?”

“Why? Why!?”

“Well, nobody’s come in to dirty it up.” Joe wasn’t paying attention. He should have known better than to ask why. He should have asked her when he was going to get paid. He should have asked for his pay and got out of there.

“Listen, I can go down right now and hire someone else for this job. That rain is gonna stop any minute and hungry people will pour through that door. I don’t want the floor sticking to people’s feet.”

She couldn't believe it was still raining. She pretended to ignore Joe who was banging the chairs around and groaning.

How would she pay him if no customers came? Was he a violent man? She leaned against a wall and lit a cigarette. Then she remembered the ashtrays. Joe cleaned them as she requested and sighed quietly.

At the end of the day, both put on coats and left in the rain. Vera walked away under her umbrella. She walked around the block, making sure Joe was gone. Then she went back to the Sweetpea. She washed under her arms in the sink. Vera used salt to brush her teeth. It was the night before that she found herself staring eye to eye with cockroaches. She went out in the rain to see if she could find something to put her bed on. She found two boxes and a fine thick board.

The rain made her want to sleep and sleep. She dreamed and was vigilant at the same time. She wanted to be sure she had time to hide her make-shift bed. She did not want Joe to know she was sleeping there and lose respect for her as an employer. The theater taught her presentation and propriety, so she thought she knew how to influence people.

Joe shook the water off his coat and hung it on the coat rack. Then he got the mop and began mopping the floor. He cleared his throat

and said, “Another day, another dollar. Another day of rain and no customers!”

“Oh, hush up! Yer gettin’ paid to work not talk.” Vera found smudges on the plate glass window. She got newspaper and vinegar to wipe them, when a man walked in and shook the rain from himself, much like a dog would. “Hi there,” he said with a big smile. “Some awful weather we’re having these days.”

Joe and Vera exchanged surprised looks. It was like they couldn’t quite believe there were other people out there.

“Phew, sure is,” Joe said.

“Take a seat, sir, and we’ll be right with you.” Vera hurried to heat the grill and pull out some eggs. The man was surely here for breakfast.

“Thank you but I’m a delivery man and I just need to know where 6th and Market is.” The man stood with his hat in his hands and grinned, “Am I anywhere near?”

Joe tried to suppress a chuckle after the man left. He watched Vera, whose back was to him, shake and thought she may be crying. Just when he began to feel a twinge of guilt for his hidden chuckle, she turned around and roared with laughter. He joined her only too pleased to share some emotion other than her dislike of him.

Joe shuffled the cards and dealt each of them five cards. “Seven days and seven nights of rain. How long was the rain in the Bible?” he asked, not looking up. Vera sat back with her feet propped on a chair. “Don’t know. Don’t know nothing about the Bible.” She looked at what Joe had dealt her and put a button on the table with the other buttons. She would win this hand.

“I believe it was forty days and forty nights.” Joe ran his hand over his closely cropped head. “My grandfather was a preacher.”

Vera emptied the ashtray. “My father had a blind pig.”

“He was a farmer? Or -“

“You know what I mean,” Vera said, her voice husky, “He made his own rotgut whiskey! Back in an old shed behind our house.”

Joe put his cards down and laughed and coughed into his hand. He pulled out a tiny sheet of paper and put strands of tobacco across it. Then he rolled it up licking the edges. He struck a match across his belt buckle to light up while he was listening to Vera.

“Paw use to say, ‘Don’t you go near that shed or I’ll whip you ‘till you’re blue!’ So I used to hide in the brushes and watch the lights go off and on. Couldn’t really see nothing except shadows passing the spaces between the slats in the wood. Occasionally, I’d see a

pickup truck and men loading it with what I guess was whisky. One night I was sound asleep and I heard an explosion -

V A R O O M M ! Knocked me clean out of bed. Ma pulled me from the house and told me to stand near a tree. Neighbors came from all around - from all directions with buckets of water, trying to put out the flames. Ma was so damned mad she couldn't stop screaming at Paw and beating him with her fists. He was a big man but he would just cower before her scorn."

"Ah Ha! So." Joe smiled, "Is this where you learned to be so outspoken?"

She looked at him with a cross between a twinkle and daggers in her eyes. The rain continued on and on. When Vera's landlord found out she was living in the storefront, he and his wife gave her a radio and some sheets for her bed. It was after days more of rain that Joe found out where Vera lived. Would he ever forget the night he stayed with her? Maybe that's why he never wanted to leave Lanoe.

Joe stood at the window. He ran his finger over the pane tracing the path of various raindrops. He looked like he may have been holding his breath. "After my mother died," he said slowly, "I left to look for my father. My mother told me he had been drafted to work on the railroad."

“Drafted?” Vera asked. She was sitting cross-legged on one of her clean tables. They had been talking for days. The steady rain was soothing. The rain, and the radio slinging the sounds of Billy Holiday and Tommy Dorsey.

“Yeah, I guess they did that in those days. Did it for Uncle Sam. You know the government can draft us to do anything they want?”

“Speaking of Uncle Sam, why aren’t you out there fighting for our country?” Vera said, getting off the table and pulling herself quickly to a standing position. Her inhibitions restored. “Maybe I should ask you that question first off.” She was disturbed by what kind of awful man refuses to serve his country. The word was everywhere, on posters, in movies, newsreels, on the radio. How could a man ever feel right if he didn’t serve his country?

Joe pulled off one of his shoes. A lit cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth. The smoke irritated his nearly closed eyes. He balanced himself against the wall and showed Vera his sock-less foot, “They wouldn’t take me ‘cause I got flat feet, see?”

Vera took in a giant breath. Joe may as well have taken out his most private part and swum ng it at her, “Okay, it’s okay, I believe you. Now, just cover that smelly thing up.” She thought quickly because there was always that twinge of fear when a woman was alone with a

man. She thought to redirect the conversation back to Joe's father, "Where'd you go after your father was drafted to the railroad?"

"To my dad's sister, Alice. I never met my father. He left before I was born." He sounded like a small boy with a man's voice. He put his foot back in his shoe. "Aunt Alice took ma an' me in cause she never had kids of her own. She was constantly scrubbing my face and put little ropes up at the entrances of the rooms I was not allowed to enter. You know, just like they do in museums? When I was fifteen, I left - left a note on one of the ropes. It said, "I'm going to find my father." I never saw her again, never did find my father for that matter. I hopped freight trains all over the country. I got jobs here and there. I ask and ask people that worked for the rails if they'd heard of him, but no one had. So I got out here to California and someone told me about a job on a turkey farm up north."

Joe threw his head back. Vera watched as a distinct glow from the gray, rainy light outlined his Adams apple. Joe began to gobble imitating the turkeys he hated. "Ya gotta herd 'em inside when it rains 'cause they open their mouths and drown." He put his hands under his arms and raced around the room. If he was trying to amuse Vera, it worked. She laughed. She pressed her hands to her stomach and bent over in a dance of laughter.

“It can’t rain forever, can it?” Joe said not wanting anything to change. He liked Vera more and more. And now he was imagining she probably liked him too.

Joe and Vera slept on the same make-shift bed in the middle of the Sweetpea café. There was no one left in the world. The rain kept them all away. Vera hoped it was all right. Hoped she wouldn’t regret this. Hoped Joe would never leave. She began toughening her psyche when dawn outlined the curtains.

Vera turned the radio on. She stood watching the tubes glow while the radio warmed to a mellow song by Frank Sinatra. She fried some eggs with long thick strips of bacon. Vera toasted bread and used plenty of black market butter. And plenty of black market sugar went into the coffee. War years would never end, she thought, just like the rain. Later she told Joe about her theater years.

“So I left Washington - took my money and ran. Bought all this stuff in this restaurant and paid for a year’s lease.”

“You left just because some guy?”

“Some guy - that actor is famous now!”

“That didn’t give ‘em any right to call you thin-skinned,” Joe said, wishing he could rectify her troublesome past. Vera stared at the steam in her coffee cup. She was studying the curves as they trailed

off into the distance. “Yeah, yeah. Maybe I’ll go to Hollywood. I’d surely like to be in pictures.”

Joe heard this and felt rejected. He had just spent the night holding her in his arms - listening to her breath - her heart beat... she seemed satisfied to me he thought, righteously. So what was this all about? I mean, Hollywood?

“I, ah, I hate to bring this up now, but um, you think you can pay me sometime soon?” Joe stood over her with his arms folded. He wanted her to fear him. He wanted her respect, her love. And all he had the right to demand was a paycheck.

“Pay you for what?” she knew she should not have let him stay. It wasn’t her fault the sky decided to fall just as she started a business. What was he complaining about? He could stay over there at the Salvation Army. She stood up and looked him in the eye, “Listen fella, you better start wiping them tables! You been sittin’ around here long enough.”

Joe pulled a chair out and sat on it backward. He rested his arms over the back, “Sure, sure, whatever you say.”

Joe went back to the Salvation Army that night and slept fitfully. The next day he showered with ten men and ate breakfast with ten men, and he grunted loudly like ten men, and at ten O’clock he went back to the Sweetpea. Not because of any residual love for Vera, he

told himself, but because he knew what was right. What was not right was that he had not been paid. He refused to let his heart control him. He refused to think of her touch or the way she lit her cigarette and blew smoke dreamily his way. But when he got there she was everything.

The radio announcer said, "After 20 days in a row of rain, the San Francisco Bay Area is finally enjoying clear skies and a light breeze from the west. Now, Jimmy Dorsey and his band." The door to Sweetpea was opened and music lifted to the streets. Joe and Vera began dancing slowly and sadly between the clean tables over the clean floor.

Joe pulled her closer to him, "Do ya hafta go?"

"Yeah, Joe, it's time for me to move on. Whad-ja say your last name was?"

"Grubble."

Vera pulled away from Joe and said smiling, "Well, my last name used to be Worm."

"Worm, like worms used to bait a hook ta fish with?"

"Yeah, yeah. But I changed it when I left home."

They stood at the door. Joe would have cried if he hadn't been a man. If he had been more of a man he would have told her she

couldn't leave. He would have yanked the suitcase from her hand, swallowed her car key and forced her to stay. He would have thrown her across a table and forced himself on her. But he didn't and he couldn't. There was a moment when he was frozen in time and he could not move. Maybe if he had said she really didn't have to go and that whatever was wrong with life, they could change it together and make it better.

"I can't seem to stay in one place for very long." Vera said, walking through the doorway into the bright sun. "This place was dreadful. Not a single customer in 20 days."

Joe put his hands in his pockets and looked at his feet, "If you change your mind, well, I'd be right honored to have you stay on as a partner."

Vera held her bag in front of her with both hands and looked away from Joe to the streets that were populated with folks like flowers after a spring rain.

"Like I said earlier, Joe, the rent's been paid for a year and everything here is bought and paid for."

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks."

"Oh, an' don't change your name. I'm getting used to Grubble."

“Write to me, Vera, an' let me know how you're doing. And let me know where you are so I can write back and tell you how much you're missed.” He couldn't believe he said that. That he told her. But then seeing her in the sun and imagining himself as the proprietor of the Sweetpea changed him some. He thought she would come back soon. Maybe even a week from then.

She didn't. She didn't write either. He thought he would never see her again, although, he suspected she might have been the actress he saw in the movie, “Call Me.” She just may have been the bleached blond who drank herself to oblivion in the film. No. She would never play a part like that, would she? He still remembered the resonance of her voice as she opened the car door, “You bet-cha, I'll get in touch.”

After Vera left Lanoe, Joe ran the Sweetpea capably. He cleaned and cleaned as though Vera was standing over him ordering him to do so. Business began to pick up after the rains. One day a disheveled fellow came in and ordered “bacon; crisp with two scrambled eggs and black coffee, cowboy style, plenty black, no sugar.” “Hey, I know you!” the man said, “You’re one of them guys from the mission, aren’t ja?”

“Could be, what’s it to you fella?” Joe answered in his best Humphrey Bogart imitation. The guy pulled off his coat and removed a black cowboy hat then brushed a large hand over his sandy hair. “Hey, I’m just trying to make small talk.”

Joe felt a cross between annoyed and embarrassed. Who was this guy and what was he doing reminding Joe about his misfortune. Then he immediately wondered why he behaved like such a spoil sport? There were so many customers and so much to do. He did not want to see himself as a drifter. Even though he had been one. He gave the guy some extra bacon and said, “Look here, I’m sorry for jumping on you. See it's like this; I inherited this place from the little lady I was working for. The rent is paid for a year so I’m saving for a farm.”

The man stood up and extended his hand to Joe, “Name’s Grant, Grant Taylor.”

Joe wiped his hands on the white towel he had wrapped around his waist, “Yeah, Joe’s the name. Joe Grubble.”

[This Grant’s a little strange but who was he to judge. Maybe people thought *he* was strange. Maybe people shook his hand and said to themselves, ‘boy that Joe is sure strange.’]

“I was working a farm not too long ago but injured my back.”

“That’s a shame,” said Joe and hated the man. Why did he shake like that? A boozier, probably, “So you looking for work? I could use someone to sweep up around here and maybe scrub a few pots.”

Grant slapped his hands on the table and said, “When do I start?”

While Grant scrubbed some pots in the kitchen *a couple of old women came in to sell goat cheese*. They were a mother and daughter from up in the hills.

“Hey there Joe,” the younger of the two said, “when you gonna get enough together to buy this farm you been wanting?” She pushed the older woman into a chair, “Sit down mother,” she said annoyed with her mother’s slowness. Then to Joe she said, “We want the same things again, short stacks and eggs over with the eyes glistening.”

Joe took the sack from them and looked inside where there was strong smelling cheese wrapped in cloth, “Smells pretty good. I’ll use it for the spaghetti Tuesday. Thanks, Muffy.”

“What’d you let that good fer nothing in here for?” Muffy said half kidding and point to Grant Taylor.

“I thought I’d put him to work. Why?”

“That’s my so-called son-in-law.”

Joe laughed a little and shrugged. Attitudes against this fellow had nothing to do with him.

After closing up for the night Joe pulled out the bed meant for Vera and knew he was lost, a real gonner for this woman. He was a one master dog baying under the moon. How would he live the rest of his life?

Just as sleep was about to carry him off there was a loud banging on the door. It was Grant Taylor.

“What the holy hell is the matter with you man, it’s after...” Joe squinted his eyes to see the clock, “Three o’clock?”

“You got to pay me. Got to!. Come on!” Grant was shaking. There was a car with men inside parked at the curb. Joe had a feeling Grant had some business with these men but could care less what.

“Wait here,” he said, and then he went to a corner of the restaurant

and lifted a mat where he hid the money. He brought back \$5.00.
“Why didn’t you tell me you wanted to be paid each day?”

Grant shaking and hugging his arms got into the car. Joe looked through the curtain and saw some activity. It looked like Grant was putting something in his arm. So that was it, the guy was a heroin addict. He figured as he climbed back on the bed that he wouldn’t have him around any more. At the time he could not know how this man would change his life.

Grant was back the next morning, “I am so sorry about last night.” With him was a pregnant woman with a tiny girl, “This here is my wife and my little girl.”

“Howdy, what’s yer name little one?”

The child took Joe’s hand, “Pedder.”

“Feather” Grant jumped in, “We named her Feather.” He was one minute sweet and in a second turned to his wife and said, “Now get out of here. Get back home where you belong... And clean the damn kitchen! What is the matter with you women, wipe that kid’s nose. I hate kids with dripping noses, don’t you?” Grant said wanting to pull Joe into his bad mouthing.

Grant cleared his throat, “Say, you wouldn’t have something for me today would you, Joe?”

Joe put a plate of hot cakes with sausage, eggs and potatoes in front of a trucker who immediately picked up the saltshaker and covered his meal with salt.

Joe walked over to Grant who was leaning against the counter, “No man, I don’t have any work for you. But I’ll fix ya a plate and maybe you can take one up to your ladies.”

“Well thank you. Say I bet you were really hooked on that little woman.”

“What woman?” Joe answered with a start. Then he remembered, Vera. Yes, he sure was sweet on her. But some part of him couldn’t keep up the act. He could pretend he didn’t care when he did.

He decided to join the army. After all they were begging for men. Uncle Sam was everywhere with his finger pointing - UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU! Yeah. So he went down to the recruiting office and signed up. They took him, flat feet and all.

When he got back to open the Sweetpea there was a small crowd waiting to get in to dine on his specialty, roast beet and yams with black berry pie and chocolate ice cream. All food from local farmers. The whole meal plus refills on coffee was \$1.50. Grant Taylor was there.

“Say Joe”, he said shifting his hat to one side, “You sure you don’t need somebody to wash dishes or maybe sweep the floor?”

“No”, Joe said pushing the guy away, “But I will need someone to take over while I go off and fight a war for my Uncle Sam. Are you that guy?”

Next there was something resembling mayhem. The customers clapped and wished Joe well and said they would be praying for him.

Grant went to the kitchen and began the evening meal. Someone turned on the radio. Joe left and the crowd that gathered sang and danced into the street and into the night. Grant Taylor tried to be an ‘upright citizen’ for a short while.

5

Joe sat on his helmet on the beach looking at the reds and yellows in the sky. He took a bag from his pocket and pulled out a sandwich. Bit into it. Chewed slowly as though his mouth could not possibly move faster. A sand crab raced under a strewn piece of seaweed. His mind was in a vague wandering state. For some reason his thoughts rested on a child’s chair, one that was given to him while he lived with his aunt. He tried to imagine where it was...what became of it. His eyes burned. He squeezed them shut and took

another bite of the sandwich. He was concentrating on eating the food and at the same time pushing the sand from where it was settling in between his teeth...near the gums. The first line of a song played over and over in his throbbing brain. 'On top of old smokey, all covered with'...what was it all covered with? He fought to remember. He was sleepy - sick - not sleepy tired - and the war was all around him. As he closed his eyes he knew this was a war not to remember - not for him.

He felt his arms being pulled through the sand. A nauseating odor followed him. A blur of dark clouds - of a seagull dropping from the sky - of two men pulling him and shouting...over here! Over here! His voice rattled out in pain from deep inside his gut.

His wounds were superficial. A bullet grazed the side of his head. A man who claimed to have the same last name stood over him as he sat on a bench at a hospital in France.

“Do you know were you are soldier?”

“No, uhh, yes. I must be alive and I must be in Normandy.”

“You lived through the landing on Normandy. We found you all alone, sitting on your helmet, eating a sandwich full of sand, shrapnel and blood.”

He put his head down in shame. Maybe he should have stayed home with his flat feet. What kind of man was he? He was no warrior. He was no-one no-where. He should have died.

“Were you drafted?” the man asked him.

“No, sir, I enlisted,” he said in barely audible voice.

“Then you are a good American and a brave man.”

An air raid rattled the building and approaching planes could be heard. The man shook his hand and introduced himself as Bernie and left. Joe couldn't be sure. But it seemed impossible that there was more than one Bernie Grubble in the world.

The man with the same name left before Joe could get the poem he had saved from his pocket. His throat was sore, his eyes ached and his face burned, but he had to know. “Hey you!..nurse. Yeah, could you give this to that guy that was just here? Tell him my mother saved it for me to give to him if we ever met.”

Ginger with the soft skin

You make me grin

When we sin

Vera strolled along the Marina in San Francisco. Fog rolled in through the spans of the Golden Gate Bridge. She had another week before she was to start singing for KOCC Radio. It was dumb luck finding the ad in the Examiner for a back up singer. Aimee McPherson was scheduled to have program through Sunday. Then Vera would sing backup with the Sons of the Prospectors.

She went back to the apartment she rented on California Street. The sounds around her were unfamiliar and often startling - cable cars rumbling past and foghorns crying from the sea. She was lonely, especially at night, and would think about Joe and his mournful gaze. At the same time she found the city stimulating with its many cultures and smells of food from around the globe. Here she was in this city founded by Spanish priests. Neon lights blinked through the dark curtains. She fell asleep remembering the monotonous sound of the train ride across country to Washington State - to the thick forests that keep the sunlight from touching the ground.

The morning she was to audition she walked and walked looking for the poorly marked building. Her feet ached in the high heel shoes. She stood for a moment at a plate glass window and put on lipstick,

then turned to check if she had the painted the seams on her nylons straight.

She held her purse close and climbed the stairs to the top floor where a sign read 'KOCC Studios, quiet please'. The building manager thought it would be prudent in this time of crises to save on electricity so there were few lights on.

Once inside the studio she was asked to sit and wait in an outer room. She could see Aimee McPherson through the glass as she waved her arms and threw her head back in worship.

She remembered Joe and the Sweetpea. She was so close...only fifty or sixty miles so why couldn't she just go back and see him. She loved him. No, she couldn't possibly love anyone. She was convinced her next step would be to the movies, yes, to be a star!

She watched Aimee as she floated with Christ right out of the building. A balding man with a goatee waved Vera into the main studio.

"Stand over there" he ordered pointing to the microphone.

The silence in the studio was oppressive. There were no street sounds and the man could hardly be heard walking across the floor.

"What ya gonna sing?" he said in a demanding voice.

Vera quickly rehearsed songs she had sung before and remembered one the audience seemed to like, “Dixie, I wish I was in the land of cotton...”

“No, no, no. That won’t work for us. You gotta sing somptin’ modern.”

Vera took a breath and thought a moment then belted out “Now is the time that we must say good-bye” not caring about the lack of acoustics. She closed her eyes and saw Joe standing at the door. There was tapping on a window just above where she stood. She looked up to see a group of men.

“Okay, you’ll do” the goateed man said. “You know who them guys up there are?” Vera squinted not wanting to be wrong. She thought they were the Sons of the Prospectors but shrugged rather than answer.

The Prospectors were silly boys, clowning - talking dirty, “Hey babe, how ‘bout coming to my place?” One giggled and another pointed to his burgeoning pants. This is not what she had in mind, but what did she want with her life? She just couldn’t seem to focus on how she fit in the world, “I’m joining you boys to sing and Yodel because that’s what your ad in the paper asked for.”

That was yesterday. She looked at the beach and the fishing boats sitting in the bay. She then looked across a large street to the

colorful mansions that lined the avenue leading to the Golden Gate Bridge. What must that be like to be so wealthy? she wondered. How many rooms does one family need? What do they put in all those rooms?

She crossed the street. Someday...she looked up at a rose colored stucco house with huge bay windows...some day I will live in a house like this. She would perhaps marry a rich man or get rich by acting - yes - or singing. She watched a woman in a maids uniform as she moved about the room with a feather duster.

She looked over to the boats on the marina. "Hey wanna go for a ride?" a voice said. It was the man with the goatee. "Oh you startled me."

"Oh don't worry about me. TJ Hass," he said extending his hand. "I must say you did a good job of putting those boys in their place." TJ spit into the dirt, "bunch o' arrogant bastards!" He caught himself, "Oh sorry, don't usually swear in front of a lady."

Vera put her hands on her hips and let a cigarette dangle from her lips. She looked strong into TJ's eyes and waving her head uttered, "I couldn't of said it better myself. They *are*, gad-damn it! A bunch of arrogant bastards."

She told TJ she would love to ride in his fishing boat. They climbed in and moved nets and oars and other sundry things around. The

smell of the fish caught in her lungs and the sea air blew through her hair. She told him that she wanted to be a movie star or a famous singer. She thought TJ an excellent listener. He said, “Oh yeah” regularly. She was in need of talking. She had struggled for months until finally landing the job at the studio.

7

The seagulls and lapping bay was calming to her shattered nerves. At one point TJ threw a line in and caught a few medium sized fish. The ham radio whistled and hummed - every now and then a voice could be heard, “Breaker - over, ... rodger ...over and out.” A voice was telling about the war and D-day. It was so very unimportant to her at that moment in time.

“You go to Lanoe often enough, have you ever been to the Sweetpea?”

TJ was quiet for a moment, “Yeah,” he said looking out over the rippling bay, “It’s a relatively new place. A guy named Joe owns it, nice guy, a bit serious though. Why?”

“He got the place from me.”

“What do you mean - got the place?”

Vera told him the story of rain and finding Joe but hid her feelings and her intimate relationship.

As they reached shore she felt a thrill rush through her veins causing her heart to race. She could see Lanoe in the distance. Was he still there? Did he marry someone? Did he go away? Did he love her? Was it unwise to leave?

The Sweetpea had become a sorry sight, with peeling paint and loose floorboards. It went into a depressed state almost as soon as Grant Lee Taylor took over. The atmosphere was dark and heavy. Regular customers left after seeing rats in the kitchen and roaches crawling over the food.

The only customers were travelers and Grant's in-laws, Muffy and Viola Lightfoot. Once a week they would board their *pickup truck outside of town* and head straight down those treacherous mountain roads to Lanoe. Many times they were the only customers. They supplied Lanoe with goat milk and cheese. Muffy came only to correct her granddaughter's bad behavior. It didn't matter that *Feather spent only two and one half years on the planet*. She must be taught who's boss. Now there was a second child, a little boy named after his father. Baby Grant was eight months old and his mother loved carrying him around on her hip and playing with him.

“You better put that kid down or you’re gonna spoil him rotten,” Muffy admonished.

“I won’t spoil him mom.”

“You heard your mother, now put that baby down.” This was *not* the voice of her father or her grandmother but the voice of Mattie Taylor’s husband, Grant.

Mattie backed away as Grant Lee marched across the restaurant in his dirty apron - grabbed the baby from his mother’s arms and put him in a pen that was designed more for wild animals. It was a mesh wire that was round with a top that could be locked down. Baby Grant screamed and the father yelled and yelled, “Shut up. Shut up you god-damned little brat.” Just as he slammed the wire lid shut two customers walked in, a man and a woman.

The woman stood looking around the café in shock. The man asked about Joe and was told he’d signed up. “But he had flat feet...” the woman said in disbelief. The couple left without ordering anything or saying anymore. Feather stood at the window waving her little hand.

8

The population of Lanoe, California in 1950 was 3,562. It is a town built from brick and wood. The rooftops are flat as in most places where it does not snow. There are four main roads plus an avenue that circles the perimeter of the town and where one of the few cable car lines operate outside of San Francisco.

The buildings have raised wooden sidewalks under eaves supported by logs brought in from the nearby mountains. *A long wharf with berths for fishing boats* invites seagulls at the south edge of town next to the bay water's edge. The birds compete for scraps left by fisherman and shopkeepers.

Approximately 100 yards from the water's edge to the east is the train station. Three times a day the locomotive is followed with its collection of boxcars, flat cars, passenger cars, and a caboose signaling the end. The train comes in from Truckee bringing ice for the town's iceboxes, and supplies of meat and produce from the Sacramento Valley. It then makes its way over the Bay Bridge to San Francisco, then south down the Pacific coast to Los Angeles.

The town in 1950 was populated by Miwok Indians, Chinese laborers, and one black man who was the signalman for the train. The rest, Europeans from places within the United States. The mayor, Paley Jones, was also sheriff, volunteer fireman and a

distant relative of the Lightfoots. His sons and their wives ran the general store. The general store also served as post office and a small locked room off to the rear acted as a jail. That was where Grant Taylor was placed before the county sheriffs took him to be tried and sentenced.

As of 1950 there were no stop signs or signal lights. The mail truck always had the right of way and hopefully the cable car didn't come down the hills too fast to stop. And, of course, there was the Sweetpea where people from all walks of life began coming once again. Vera moved back and with the money she made singing on KOCC she put a down payment on the building the Sweetpea occupied. She hired Iris Wong who lived with her husband in one of the apartments over the restaurant, to be a waitress. She lowered Mattie Taylor's rent and spent time watching Feather's rapid growth.

9

Iris Wong burned incense in front of her father's picture closing her eyes as she recited a Christian verse from the Bible in Cantonese. Her thoughts often blended from Chinese to English and back.

Chan Wong or Wong Chan as her father was known in the Chinese community, gave her small red envelopes with money when she did well at school. He picked a husband for her but was out voted for another suitor by the female relatives. The chosen suitor, Charlie, was a popular boy, however, not expected to amount-to much. He loved Iris from a distance until they went to High School. It was there he met Betty Wu the half Chinese, half Dutch girl. Iris spent four years feeling like the ugliest girl in school while Charlie ignored her. But in the end it was Iris who was Charlie's wife. She ran her hand over the duster and laughed. Ah and where was Betty now? Probably six feet under the way she lived. It was Iris' good fortune that Betty decided to run off to Hong Kong with a Chinese merchant.

Iris had three miscarriages. This may be why she became so attached to little Feather and her baby brother, the children who lived above the Sweetpea where she and Charlie worked. She was around for the horrible incident that robbed Feather of her baby brother. Hopefully Feather was too young to remember.

Iris kept busy cooking and cleaning the kitchen and waiting tables while Charlie went off to Nevada to gamble. She felt tears well up in her eyes. She found it difficult when the customers complained. Other times she couldn't stand the cheerful chatter of the customers. "Why don't you just shut up" she wanted to scream, "My husband is gambling our money away. I have no children and you treat me like I'm invisible or you make fun of my race and accent in front of me." Once when a man asked for 'fled wise', she burst into tears, to the dismay of most of the customers. The tears just wouldn't stop. Some men in Marine uniforms physically threw the man out.

Vera owned the restaurant until she married Joe when they combined their properties. But it was before she married that she and Iris became close friends. Iris kept up the payments to Vera for the lease - no thanks to Charlie. Iris loved it when Vera, Mattie and she would get together after closing up the restaurant at night.

"I can't do this anymore!" she told Mattie and Vera one day. "I work and work and he takes the money and gambles." "Oh Iris, I am so sorry," Mattie said reaching for Iris' hand. No one was aware of how ill Mattie was at the time. She always seemed a bit frail. Iris and Vera talked on about their problems only occasionally stopping to ask Mattie about her life. Perhaps there was a fear that all the past

would gush like blood from wounds. Certainly no one wanted to talk about what happened when Grant stopped in that awful day.

It was twilight when Vera swung open the restaurant door, “Okay everybody out!” she shouted that evening while carrying a package in her arms.

“Oh, it’s another slow day. Hardly anyone came today,” Iris said. “I’ll lock the door.” She locked the door and put up the closed sign while Vera, with a cigarette dangling from her lips, banged on the ceiling with the broom handle - a signal for Mattie to come down. Mattie told Feather to go back to sleep as she would be down at the Sweetpea with Vera and Iris.

Iris poured everyone a glass of wine. “So Vera what’s in the bag?” Vera pulled out a scale. “I just got this in the mail from Montgomery Wards and we are going on a diet, even you, Mattie dear.”

“What’s a matter, you don’t like my beer belly?” Mattie held her hands over her stomach. Iris chimed in hitting her thighs, “Look at these thighs they look like cows legs.”

“Mine too,” Vera said as she put the scale in them middle of the floor and stood on it. AAhhhhhh!” she screamed, “185 pounds! Okay, so I did it, now you gals have to. Come on! - no fair if I’m the only one telling my secret.”

Iris agreed and stood on the scale, “Oh my!” then she jumped off and drank down a glass of wine.

“Well, well? What is it? How much do you weigh?”

Iris giggled, “Nope, not telling.” “Come on Iris,” Mattie teased, “Look, I weigh 135 or is it 6 pounds?”

“Iris,” Vera said in a half teasing, half threatening voice, “Get back on the scale and let us see how much you weigh, eh?”

Then Mattie and Vera each grabbed an arm and tried to put Iris on the scale with Iris throwing her legs all about. They began laughing in such an infectious way that passers-by must have thought they had caught an exotic hysteria virus. They were soon bent on the floor, holding their sides and wiping tears from their eyes.

“Okay girls,” Iris announced. “I’ll weigh my tits, each one at a time then we’ll see if you know how to add two and two.”

“Well, I ain’t weighing my tits.”

“Me neither.”

Iris put the scale on the table and placed one of her large breasts on the scale. “Three pounds this one is. Let’s see, and a tiny bit more on this one.”

“Iris you’re leaning forward.”

“No I’m not! Look.”

Mattie placed her hand on one of Iris’ breasts, “Hey, I bet Charlie likes these.” “Why Mattie, I can’t believe you’re touching her tits like that!” Vera then held one of Iris’ breasts in her hand and teased, “Emmm yeah, so Iris, does Charlie like these big ol’ boobs of yours?”

Iris held both breasts in her hands and said, “I don’t need him. I can take care of these on my own,” and she placed one of her nipples in her mouth and began sucking. The other two stood watching in amazement. “What does it taste like?” Mattie wanted to know.

“Here try one out for yourself,” Iris pushed a breast in Mattie’s direction. Mattie poured wine from her glass over the large breast and placed the nipple in her mouth and began sucking.

Vera jumped back and shouted, “I gotta get my camera for this!”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Iris said, pulling Vera to her.

When Iris, Vera and Mattie petted and kissed and blissfully felt each other’s bodies in the Sweetpea they called it too much wine and didn’t mention it when sober. It was the cancer that ate Mattie up and kept her from joining Vera and Iris.

FEATHER

Every morning before her mother died, she took the train to the hospital in San Francisco. Mattie had become so sick that she couldn't do even the smallest chores for herself. Feather did as much as her small body would allow. She changed the sheets on their bed; poured milk into a bowl of corn flakes and fed her dying mother. She dressed her and called the taxi to take them both to the train station.

How could a seven year old know what death is? Maybe an older child would have imagined the grim reaper. What she tried not to think about was that mommy was going to leave her alone - forever. One time she asked, "Mommy are you going to leave me alone when you die?" Feather couldn't imagine life without her and the struggle they shared. Mattie only groaned and tears fell from her eyes.

The last train ride before she died was forever etched in Feather's memory. She took mama's bowl, the one she'd eaten from and carried it to the sink careful not to spill the left over contents. Then, climbing up on the stool used just for kitchen duties, Feather put the bowl in the sink. She slipped and fell on her arm. It could have been broken but she didn't care, no, she squeezed her eyes shut and

rocked back and forth in a ball until the pain left. Mother called out in her faint voice, “Feather, Feather, are you all right?”

“Yes, Mama.”

Then she got her coat and her little girl’s from the closet. Feather would not want mama to see her cry. Who would take care of them if she cried?

Mattie sat next to Feather on the train, curled like a bundle, with her head resting on the window. Some people behind them were talking in an animated way - laughing and clapping their hands and stomping their feet. Feather climbed up to see who they were.

They were two men. Mattie patted Feather’s leg in an attempt to get her to sit back down. But she crawled up further falling and landing in a man’s lap.

The man laughed setting Feather back on her seat.

“Mattie?”

“Joe?”

Feather was confused because she had never seen this man before. She wondered how they knew each other’s name. “And I’ll bet this is Feather,” he said to her.

“Who are you and how do you know my name?”

“Oh! So you don't remember me, eh?!”

Feather squinted her eyes and shook her head. She listened intently to Joe and her mother whose voice was so weak and now had a slight ring of happiness.

“You know Vera is back at the Sweetpea and she sings on the radio.”

Joe tried not to look excited and asked what he thought would be an ordinary question, “What’s Grant....”

Before he could finish Mattie was nearly out of her seat, “No, no, no! Don’t mention ‘im, don’t mention!”

Feather was confused. She wanted to know who Grant was and how this Joe fellow knew her friend Vera.

Vera was wonderful to Feather letting her climb up on a chair in her apartment to help mash potatoes and shuck corn and sometimes wipe smudges off of the windows. She taught Feather a song, Freight Train. Iris taught her to make change for the customers. After Mattie got sick, Vera went up to their apartment and brought them a pot of soup. There was some mysterious chemistry between the women. Something they shared and from which Feather was excluded. This was such a strong thing that Feather didn’t like to see the two together. She wanted one or the other, not both.

“I’m sorry...I...” Joe said looking confused and yet knowing what Grant was like. Frankly he wondered when she’d unload the bum.

“It’s all right.” Mattie said looking over at Feather then back to Joe.

Joe started to sit back down but stopped, “Oh, yeah, this is my father, Mattie. Bernie, why don’t you say hello.” Bernie moved out of his seat and took Mattie’s hand in his, pulled it up to his mouth and kissed the sick woman. “I am so pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said. He was a large frightening man to Feather, until she noticed he had watery eyes when looking back at her.

“Com' on Bernie, it’s alright now,” Joe said taking the sad man’s arm and helping him back to his seat. “Tell me again about the pranks you pulled in boot camp.”

Feather heard the sad man say, “Tell me, why we don’t head back to Lanoe to see that Vera you told me about!? You the fisherman said she sings on the radio and lives in Lanoe.”

“Oh yes, that’s true,” Mattie said weakly, “She owns the building the restaurant is in and she has leased it out to some nice Chinese people.”

Feather tried to be a good girl and not squirm and annoy mama but something inside made her want to race here and there with arms apart - to whistle and shout with the wind as it hit the sides of the

train. Instead she sat still watching Lanoe, as it got smaller. Ahead was the Bay and San Francisco, the biggest city in the world, or so she thought. To one side there were open farms, then the deep blue-green Bay.

“Mommy,” she said wanting to ask her something. When she realized mommy was asleep she mouthed, “Mommy, I’ll be right back, I’m going for a little walk.”

Feather found all of the seats behind the talking men empty and sat in each of them. She pretended she was going to work, as she'd seen others do who took the train. She was a nurse - a man who climbs the telephone pole - a lady who types letters with her long fingers in an office.

One seat was next to a window. She scooted over to the window and made believe she was a little girl with oodles of friends. As a matter of fact, all the passengers were her friends the real ones as well as the made up ones. They were little children taking the train to the never-never land of the story mama read to her.

While she was deep in fantasy, her hand resting on the seat, she felt something touch it. She was chilled to the bone. When looking down there was an enormous spider seated on her hand. She didn't know if she was lunch or dinner to it - only that she was filled with terror. She screamed and shrieked as though death were imminent.

Through clouded tears she could see mama as she moved slowly and painfully down the aisle to rescue her frightened child. The scary man with sad eyes said, "What's wrong, little girl?"

"Big bug!" she uttered through sobbing. Joe spotted the creature and stomped it to death.

"Something has got to be done about these tarantulas," he said.

"I'll personally call the authorities about this," Bernie announced loudly and adjusted his tie as he sat back down.

Someone helped Mattie to her seat. Feather clung to the arm of her camel haired coat and felt her voice as she talked with the passengers. She didn't remember the words just the comforting sound of voices in pleasant conversation. Everyone was safe. The spider was dead and could not kill them. It laid in pieces embedded in the wooden slats of the floorboards.

It could have been raining the night Mattie died. It should have been the worst storm ever. It could have been dawn or the middle of the night,

while crickets sang with frogs from the pond that overflowed when the tide was in.

Feather was curled next to her mama when she woke and saw by the light through the curtain, Mattie's face inches away. She was

not snoring or moaning. She was on her back instead of her side. The arm that crossed Feather's body was lying across her own while her other arm rested over her heart. Feather couldn't move and she was straining to breathe. She closed her eyes. It was only a dream. The conductor would wake them to say they'd arrived in the City.

11

There was a knock at the door.

It was Vera. Feather held the door slightly ajar. She wanted to talk to Mattie, to tell her to be careful to lock her door and windows because one of the tenants had been robbed. The room was gray. It must have been raining. It was cold and the walls felt like her mother's body. There were insects everywhere and she couldn't scream loud enough to get rid of them. She just opened her mouth, began screaming and couldn't stop. Vera called the police. They stood around awhile and talked about what to do with the body and what to do about the kid. No, Feather didn't know she had a father, let alone where he was. The tenant who was robbed said Grant was in jail somewhere. Then they took Feather to the station.

Feather was numb to the sounds and sights around her. She had one grueling fear - insects, any type, but most especially tarantulas.

Joe and Bernie carried a board from a pile to the site of where their new home would be. Bernie led the way. They stood the 2 by 4 up against the pilings and nailed it in. Joe suggested a cigarette break. “So what was your mother like?” Bernie asked, striking his match on a rock. Joe looked down and shuffled his feet. “Well, I guess she was a good woman, always though, a little afraid of Aunt Alice.”

“Umm, yeah, well can’t say as I blame poor Ginger. She was a sweet girl. Hey, you know what? I sure am sorry... I didn’t know about you.”

“Ah, Bernie, it don’t matter now.” Then Joe thought about it and felt a bit irritated at his newly found father. “Why didn’t you write to Aunt Alice, I mean she was your sister, your only relative?”

Bernie started walking away then stopped and throwing his hands out said, “I didn’t have any reason that I could think of to go back or write.” Then turning to his son he said, “I thought about... I thought about Ginger and writing to her but I just figured she must be married and not interested in me. Then I signed up for the Army and ended up in France and the only - and I am sorry to say this, but the only person I want to see now is my wife and my little girl.”

Vera fixed three roast beef sandwiches with mayonnaise, mustard, sliced tomatoes with lettuce on Wonder Bread. She wrapped them

carefully in waxed paper and placed them with the bottles of Coke and half dozen apples in a wicker basket.

Joe found twenty acres to farm five miles east of Lanoe. Vera wanted to bring some cheer with a picnic basket full of food.

She put the basket on the seat next to her in her Ford with the one broken side window.

She paused, lit a cigarette then trucked up the hill toward Joe's land. She was impressed with his kindness in bringing his father with him from the war. She smiled at how everything was working out so well.

She didn't question her own intentions in surprising them with lunch. At one point she would have told Mattie about Joe. About the powerful feelings she had for him. But Mattie was dead and she didn't know what happened to the poor little girl, Feather. The Wonder Bread deliveryman said he saw Feather with a lady on Ocean Beach in San Francisco. She'd guessed it was a foster home Feather went to or some sympathetic family members. Hopefully not the Lightfoots, Feather's grandmother and aunt - those awful mountain people. She couldn't take her because she was single and the Wongs weren't allowed to take her because they were Chinese. Poor little Feather, everyone hoped she was doing all right.

As Vera approached the farm she saw Joe and Bernie hammering nails into a wooden structure. They stopped and watched her drive up the unfinished path. Bernie nodded to Vera and walked toward some tools, determined to finish the house they started. Joe walked shyly over to Vera who held up the basket with lunch.

Vera put a blanket down and gave Joe a sandwich, "What about Bernie?" she asked.

"Hey, Bernie! You want a sandwich?"

Bernie took his sandwich in three bites and went back to work. Joe stood up and threw his arms out, "Isn't this something?!"

"What?' Vera asked smiling.

"This view, Vera. Don't you love it! Smell that great crisp air. Look at those wild flowers and rolling hills...."

"Umm. And trees and dirt and weeds and..."

"Ah, Vera. I think you must be a city girl and nothing will cure that."

Vera blew dandelion seeds in his face. He feigned fright and soon fell into quietly eating sandwiches. Vera had sliced them in half so they were two evenly cut triangles. She took small bites from each end. Joe, like Bernie, was not given to propriety and gobbled his sandwich starting from the middle.

“Joe, why'd you come back here?”

“Where else? I thought Grant would still be running the Sweetpea,” Joe said looking away from her. “When I found my father I thought it might be a good idea to live here where it's not so crowded like in the cities. He's been through a lot, you know.”

“I'm sorry. I sure didn't mean you shouldn't have come back...”

“Well, good, I was beginning to worry.”

There were awkward moments between them. Vera jumped up and said, “Well, let's go help Bernie since he seems to want to build that house by himself.”

“Okay” Joe said putting his arm around Vera. “I came back here because of you. Grant Taylor's wife told me you didn't go to Hollywood after all.”

“Mattie?”

“Yeah, I seen her and the little girl on the train. I was sorry to hear of her passing.” He pulled Vera closer to him, “Don't leave me again.” She pressed her head into his shoulder.

“I don't want to get married,” she giggled.

“I didn't ask, I just said - well, stick around.”

They laughed and kissed. Then Vera felt the vein in Joe's neck throbbing against her cheek. Bernie's hammering seemed to take up the same throbbing rhythm. "I hated being away from you," Vera said.

"Boy, am I glad to hear that, 'cause lady, I went to war for you, because of you." He kissed her tenderly on the lips.

"Hey, you two!" Bernie shouted.

"Cut that out and get over here. Com' on now. Look at all this work and you just want to play!" He was standing up straight in his overalls and wiping the perspiration from his forehead and around his face and the back of his neck. He held terrible memories of the war that his son would learn about later. Joe learned about his father's suffering after Feather came to live with them. Vera held the beam in place while the men hammered and adjusted.

"Ya mind if I ask what happened to Grant Taylor?" Joe said through a cigarette held in his teeth.

"Oh, Joe, please don't ask. It was awful. He's in prison where he belongs. After what he did? Poor Mattie."

"He's in prison for hitting his wife? That's awful. Nobody gets put away for that." *Vera dropped the beam causing a crash resembling a bomb.* Bernie looked like he was going to run for cover.

“Oh God, Joe, you just don't know and I can't tell you!” She didn't look back and ran for her car as though a monster was chasing her. Joe stood still watching her, feeling confused and angry - he remembered Grant was a heroin addict, of course, that was it. Bernie went back to work and suggested Joe do the same and forget about this volatile woman. But he wouldn't forget and was down at the Sweetpea the very next morning.

FEATHER AND JESSIE

Feather went to live with her father's sister, Jessie Taylor. Bless her. She also hated insects and they nearly died from the insect repellent she used. She was between husbands when Feather arrived. Once she met Ed Lessing, Feather was again sent away. It was a miserable two years before she finally landed at Joe and Vera's place. Aunt Jessie was not a warm person, nor was she pragmatic. She'd say, "Get up and eat breakfast." Then a little later, "Now we will walk to the sea." Her distance comforted Feather. She didn't want slobbering pity. She preferred to hold her sadness close and private. She watched Jessie as she sat cross-legged on the sand and chanted. "Ouu-HUM ouu Hum ouu Hum." Feather raced along the shore and tested the water with her bare toes. She felt the wind against her body and a passion as she ran against it in protest. A fisherman swung the long pole back over his shoulder then slung the bated hook back into the sea. An Asian fisherman gave her a fish on a string. Feather was elated and thought Aunt Jessie would be thoroughly appreciative of this offering for dinner. As it turned out, she refused to eat anything that had a heartbeat. She took Feather by the hand and led her to the water where they ceremoniously returned the fish to the sea.

She recognized the man who delivered milk in Lanoe. He waved as he walked past her with his dog. She lowered her head holding her hands to her mouth as though to speak would make everything awful return.

Then Aunt Jessie met Ed Lessing at the Ashram of the God Krishna. Feather went with her to the Ashram every Monday and Wednesday at 6:00 O'clock in the evening. They wore orange robes and chanted 'ouu HUM ouu HUM ouu Hum ouu HUM'. Ed more or less ignored Feather except one time when he looked down at her and said, "Don't you have a father, little girl?"

She felt she should have known what was coming when she heard Aunt Jessie and Ed talking one night - one night when Feather was supposed to be asleep. She heard the drifts of conversation, like Ed's voice, "She can't go to India with us." Then Aunt Jessie's, "I told you her father's getting out of prison soon and he can take her." Jessie wrote to her brother who she thought was in prison for bank robbery. That's what Grant told her when he wrote. She never liked Mattie's sister and mother who lived in the mountains near Lanoe and wasn't even certain they were still there. Mattie's mother Muffy was Feather's grandmother. She didn't know what in the world was going on, so she left the Ashram in Texas and headed North. Her sister-in-law died and left a little girl. But what happened to Grant's baby son? She assumed he must have been adopted out

somewhere. When she got to Lanoe the police told her where to pick up her niece. Jessie wished to think Grant stole the money to help feed Feather and her mother. But this was not so. He had done something unspeakable.

Fortunately Feather could barely remember the last time she saw her father. Fortunately because of what happened. One time before the very last time he was shouting at Mattie to please give him money. He was frightening. His eyes were large and bloodshot. He shook her then threatened to sell Feather if she didn't give him money. She gave him some bills and after he left she and Feather threw his clothes from the window. Then a baby cried and did he come back?

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Aunt Jessie left Feather on the doorstep of the county home for abandoned children. "You'll be just fine," she told her, "I wrote to your father and he'll be here as soon as he can." Then she and Ed left hand in hand. Feather was led to the day room and was *just fine, thank you*. Well, that is until she saw the cockroaches. The other children told the director that Feather nearly broke their eardrums with her screaming. Death and abandonment were nothing compared with the fear of insects. It was as though death was familiar and could be dealt with. She could understand Aunt

Jessie not loving her. She could accept her mother's ascent to heaven - what was beyond all comprehension were insects.

She waited and waited at the home for her father to come and claim her. The kids teased her with cockroaches they had captured. After a little girl who slept in the bed with her bit Feather's arm, she was taken to live with her maternal grandmother.

THE LIGHTFOOTS

So, before Feather Taylor was moved to the Grubble's, she lived with her great grandmother Viola Lightfoot and her grandmother Muffy. Viola lived in the mountains near Lanoe for ninety-six years. Her Indian father's family lived in the old growth forest longer than anyone knew. He was mauled to death by a bear when Viola was too small to forgive. He lies deep in the earth with a wooden cross marking the spot.

So much life is lived in a century, and so many loved ones died, leaving Viola with only one of her ten children, Muffy who lived with her. Often times, she looks out of the kitchen window at the hill of wooden crosses and says, "Man-made laws mean nothing to the land. Only what God deems..." She looked away and repeats, "Only what God deems."

The sheriff brought her great granddaughter from a children's home. He didn't even come in, just left her on the doorstep. Wasn't it enough trying to remember her own children? Who was this little creature? Feather had tags all attached to her coat and dress as though she were a package. The tags were instructions on how to feed her. Viola was fed-up with taking care of people. She drifted in and out of here and now. Feather Taylor was barely four feet tall

and only occasionally came into her vision. She slept in a bed next to her own and was annoyed when the child woke her and complained about her snoring. “Willful child, get away!” Viola would say in her phlegm voice.

Viola’s daughter, Muffy, occupied the largest bedroom in the house. There, on a king sized bed, she kept all her stuffed animals and cloth dolls. But no bears. Not even a teddy bear. Her mother would not have so much as an image of a bear in the house. They are unwelcome in any form. Muffy’s other animals such as the kangaroo and the green dinosaur were welcome entertainment. She once was married to a kind man. She gave birth over and over including the latest daughter to die, Feather’s mother, who now lay under a cross.

Ah, poor Muffy. Her seventeen-year-old husband was killed in battle in a far off land in a war to end all wars. Muffy told the man that she was pregnant and he married her before he left. She wracks her brain trying to remember if he was the father or, or - ah well, what difference does it make now? Her daughter Mattie is dead and now she has her baby doll. A doll so perfectly formed that anyone peeking into her room from the doorway would think it was a real baby just ready to open its mouth and cry.

“Mommy do you want a root beer float?” Muffy asks Viola.

“What, who are you?” Viola demands, sounding a bit confused. This memory loss is a product of what the visiting doctor referred to as “tiny strokes.”

“It’s me, mamma, Muffy,” the child she nursed the longest - “It’s me, your baby!” Viola looked surprised at the old woman who claimed to be her daughter. Then she burst into laughter. Here she was in deep thought remembering her Scot/Irish mother milking a cow and suddenly the very next minute she, herself was the mother of a graying woman.

“Grandma, I’d like a root beer float,” Feather said boldly, maybe not realizing where she was and what her place was.

“I don’t remember asking you what you wanted. Now you just be quiet and when I’m ready to know what you want, I’ll ask - you understand - little lady!”

To the casual observer this must be the easiest of lives to lead. Three female relatives sharing the endless land. No more toiling as everything can be bought right down there in Lanoe - twenty miles west of their small home. But as in any family, there are problems. As time claims the two women, the problems between them had been fewer and farther apart until Feather came to live with them. Like the incident with Muffy’s doll.

Baby has soft round cheeks and a dimple in her chin. Her blue-as-the winter sky eyes close when she is laid flat on the bed. Her eyes seem to watch her mother as she props her up next to her breast. The intimacy shared by mother and baby doll is so private and so special that Muffy closes her door to be alone with it. No one is allowed to touch her baby, which is why something must have cracked below the surface in her, the day Feather went into her grandmother's room and held the baby doll.

It was a sultry day. Rain clouds ready to burst hung over the tops of the mountains. Feather was humming "She'll be comin' 'round the mountain" for hours. Great grandmother was dozing in and out of today and yesterday.

"Would you stop humming that same song!?" Muffy screeched at Feather, holding her tongue for as long as she could stand.

"I can't help it grandma," Feather wined and continued humming.

"I hate you when you act like this, Feather!" Muffy jumped up from her chair and through her hand back as though she held a club and walloped Feather who held up her hands just in time. Muffy went back and turned on the radio. She huffed and puffed and pouted as she waited for the sound to stop being scratchy and began adjusting the stations with the big knobs. Only one came in clearly. She

listened to the man shout “Jesus saves” and crowds could be heard in the background shouting back, “Amen, Amen!”

Feather and the devil held her ears and shouted her song, “She'll be comin' round' the mountain...” This time Muffy decided to ignore her and was pleased when it worked.

Feather stopped singing and began moving slowly in the direction of her grandmother's room, much like an axe murderer might, like something inside of her broke in two. She was her father's bad seed. Nothing could change that. Her grandmother told her that time and again.

Muffy sat rocking back and forth in her recliner and smugly held her hands to heaven as the radio preacher instructed. The room was filled with praising Jesus with occasional fading and scratching sounds. Meanwhile, Feather swept Baby Doll up in her arms. As she approached the living room she could feel a surge of adrenalin thrusting the blood through her veins. Her heart pumped loudly. She sat on a stool between her great grandmother and grandmother. Her breathing was deep and heavy while she waited the few seconds for Muffy to notice Baby Doll in her arms.

Muffy's peripheral vision caught the dreadful sight and she slowly turned her head around. Her distorted voice became an anguished cry; a cry like someone was being attacked by a bear.

“My baby!” she screamed out.

“I’m not hurting your baby!”

“Feather, please put the baby back on my bed” she said pleading for her doll child’s life.

The bad grandchild held baby close to her and hummed a lullaby. A woman on the radio cried out her sins to God and begged to be healed.

“Let the baby go, Feather, *please*. You’re holding her too tight!”

“I know how to hold a baby, grandma. I ‘been rockin’ this poor baby every time you go off to town.”

Muffy knew raging at Feather may prove to be dangerous to Baby so she lowered her voice to a pitch reserved for calming psychopaths.

“Give me the baby, Feather, please, please.”

Then the contemptible happened. Feather dropped Baby on her head! She didn’t mean to. It was just the precarious way that she was holding the doll - balancing it on her upper arms with her palms supporting the head. She sang her lullaby louder and louder to overpower Muffy’s pleadings. As she got to the part where cradle will fall, down came Baby, head first on the floor at her feet. She froze as Muffy screamed out.

Feather crossed the line. There was no turning back. She killed Muffy's baby. The porcelain head cracked. "Oh, Here!" she said, "Take your stupid doll." Feather was holding the doll out by one of its feet.

Meanwhile, Viola had been inside her mind, planting beets and beans in the garden of fifty some years ago. She was finding the bickering irritating. The screeching hurt her ears.

"What in the world is going on over there?" Viola demanded turning her head, straining to see.

"Feather dropped Baby, Mommy."

"For heaven sakes," Viola said over the radio preacher, "Why don't you jes' take that doll and put it in a box in the attic?"

Muffy held Baby in her arms and walked sadly to her room and closed the door. Within days the county workers came to claim Feather. "She is just too much for my mother and I to handle," Muffy sniffed, "My daughter, her wonderful mother died and she is more like that dreadful father of hers - and you are well aware of why he's in prison."

The county worker looked at Feather and Muffy and wrote something on a pad of paper. She seemed alarmed at this grandmother who could not handle her own granddaughter.

“Her daddy’s sister ran off to India ‘cause she was just fed up with the girl.” Muffy didn’t let up, “She’s too wild, probably influenced by some evil spirit. We’d send her to India to be with her Aunt Jess but she jus’ might become a pagan.” Muffy folded her arms under her breast and said, “I’d guess Jessie wasn’t a Christian and that rubbed off on Feather. But I am telling you this kid needs more than a good whooping.”

BERNIE IN WAR

In 1945 when the war was nearing an end, Bernie, weighed down with military gear, walked down a narrow walled-in street to the wooden door he was so familiar with. He moved his French wife and their daughter to the *Alpes de Haute Provence* during the worst of the bombings. Josette had just had her third birthday. He expected to see the child playing with the children or her mother among the people passing him. She was the prettiest and smartest child in the world and no one could begin to convince him otherwise.

His pockets were full of chocolate candy bars. Françoise, Franny, his wife of four years loved chocolate. She never went hungry as some Europeans had because he brought her food that was smuggled from Allied warehouses. She was an excellent cook and housewife. Wherever they lived she made it cozy and inviting. One time he found a cave for her and even that she fixed up. It was hidden behind shrubbery and dark inside. He would have been happy forever just sitting on the carpeting she fashioned into chairs and watching her move around humming.

She was plump and her face drew her to him like a fragrant flower. When he thought back on it - it was not that he didn't find her

attractive, he certainly did, but he would never have dressed her in a bathing suit and pinned her picture on the wall of some dirt trench as many of his buddies had done with their dames. He looked forward to being with her, to telling her how much he loved her. He would make all the arrangements to bring her with him to the States. She was quickly learning English. He was fortunate enough to know some French.

Planes roared overhead. An air raid siren echoed off of the stone walled buildings. As he turned the corner, a German tank could be seen speeding toward him. *He positioned his machine gun and raced toward the tank that was trampling people in its path.* It was long seconds in time...old men, small children; women with scarves in their hair were gobbled up by the tank. Then to his horror he saw his child step out and his wife who was trying to stop Josette who heard her father's voice shout at the Germans, "No, STOP!, you son-ov-a-bitch!"

The bombs...the Allies...the war was won - like some dangerous ball game the Yanks won. Should they celebrate? Bernie was anesthetized. He was alone in the world. He sat in the hospital staring up and mumbling. He felt nothing. A nurse dressed the wound on his leg. He saw her lips move. She must be asking a question or stating something. He couldn't listen. He was really

dead. He heard there was joy in the streets of the United States. He didn't care. He decided to stay in France until he died.

“Hey, are you Bernard Grubble?”

Bernie didn't answer.

The younger man said, “You don't remember me do you? You came to the hospital after Normandy.”

Bernie sat like a stone, like he wanted the world to go back and freeze in time.

“Man, you are really shell shocked.” The younger man took a cigarette and offered it to Bernie.

Bernie still didn't move.

The younger man went to another part of the room and spoke with the nurse. “Listen, I am pretty sure this guy is my father.” The nurse had seen too much to question why the man didn't know for certain whether the man was his father or not. She had never heard the name Grubble before this day. She helped expedite the paper work that would send the men back to the States.

Then as Joe approached Bernie again, Bernie pulled the yellowed paper from his pocket... The one with the poem he wrote for Ginger, “So I have a son,” he mumbled to the paper as though it held Ginger's spirit.

Joe stayed with his father throughout the long trip home, to Lanoe. There were military planes to this place and that. There were long waits and trains and busses and jeeps. *Joe looked for Bernie for so long that the thought of a father as a protector or any of the other fantasies he may have harbored were gone. He accepted this blood relative, this brother in battle, for what he was and what he had become, and nothing more.*

Feather was eight years old when a social worker drove her to Lanoe to meet and stay with Vera and Joe Grubble, who lived on a farm. The social worker was in a hurry. She didn't look at the child when she said goodbye.

The little girl stood fixed, like a tumbleweed rooted in dirt. It was Feather who grew smaller as the nameless social worker drove away. The social worker, who was responsible for her best interest, who held her life in her hands, was not in the least bit interested. On the ride to the Grubble's, she cranked up the radio and refused to answer Feather's one question, "When is my father going to come and get me?"

Vera was glad to see the social worker go.

"Do you remember me?" she asked the child.

Feather nodded, numbed by the swirling events of her life. She was left a homeless orphan in the wake. “Feather, darling, I am so sorry you have had so much to deal with in your young life.”

Feather froze when Vera tried to hug her. Vera looked pained, “Darling let me show you your room.” She took the child to a room she and Joe had fixed up just for their foster child.

It didn’t matter that she knew these people, the room only made her lonelier. She clung to a small bag of things. A plastic bag was all she possessed. The once white bag was covered with smudges.

Feather closed the door and opened her bag. She took out a pair of jeans, a dress that was too small and ten color crayons. She also had a framed photograph of Mattie Taylor, her poor sick mother who fled a cancer-ridden body for a coffin. She knelt down next to the bed and arranged her things in a line, starting with her crayons and ending with her mother’s picture.

After putting Mattie’s picture back in the bag and tucking it under a pillow, she crawled under the bed. Maybe she could spend the rest of her life living under a bed. She took out a dark blue crayon and drew a picture of a girl on the wall. A small girl. A girl so small no one would ever know she was there. She climbed back on the bed and just as she was about to draw a picture of a scary green monster, the door flew open.

“Feather, would you like to go out and look around?” Vera said, “Don’t go too far, 'cause I’m fixing dinner.” Feather did not assume she was fixing dinner for her. Her guess, at the time, was that she was planning to send her back and she’d eat at the home. Feather sucked her lower lip in and held her breath as she passed the kitchen through the back door.

Outside the child broke into a run, crossing a field of poppies and wild oats. The sweet smell of grass filled her nostrils. Flowers danced in waves around her and she stooped to examine a golden poppy. She loved the way its silky pedals sat in a petite green cup. She saw a ladybug perched on a long strand of oat.

“Ladybug, Ladybug, fly away home. Your house is on fire. Your children are alone.”

Ahhh! So, she wasn’t afraid of Ladybugs, as Bernie later pointed out.

She saw something in the distance through tall green and gold weeds. She had trouble focusing on it because the sun was in her eyes. It was something silvery. She began walking toward it, although something inside said ‘don’t, Don’t!’,...while another voice said ‘you must!’ ‘Go and learn, - go on now - find out what that is’. The child inched closer and closer.

She realized that if she backed up and to the side just a bit she could tell what the object was. It was a rounded silver trailer. It was someone's house because smoke was coming out of the smoke stack. It was almost a dolls house with cute little windows and a small round door. Feather peeked in the window from a crate she found to stand on. She saw an enormous man with a balding head. She watched him as he walked from one corner of the trailer to the other; book in hand, his bulk rocking the habitat like a ship on the high seas. She had no way of knowing, at that time, how this bulk of humanity would influence her life.

Later, when Bernie joined the newly formed family at dinner Feather saw that he was not at all frightening

He looked at her and asked Joe, "The kid from the county? ...Poor little thing." He put a scoop of mashed potatoes on her plate *and smiled with crooked yellow teeth that peeked through an unkempt beard causing Feather to cover the smile on her face with her hand.*

"Say, I'll bet you like dolls."

"Nope. I like insects," the child told him in a bare whisper.

It was heart warming to see a man resembling an axe murderer put potatoes on her plate. Everyone laughed. "Insects?"

Feather couldn't believe she had said that. It was a brave thing to say. She must have figured if she let anyone know of her phobia someone would find out and torture her. She was a clever little girl.

"Insects?" Vera said looking sideways at Feather. And everyone laughed again.

17

GRANT IN PRISON

Grant Lee pulled himself to the window and clasped the bars. He watched the seagulls and breathed in the salt air. This was the first day he felt human - ever. He was an unnatural beast, caged by society. No punishment was enough. Death would have been too easy. He was a drug addict and he murdered his only son. He was in solitary confinement so the other men wouldn't try to kill him - again. He believed the guard when he spat "You ought to be beaten to death for what you did to that baby." When Grant tried to explain how he had only meant to frighten his wife the guard kicked him into the cell. But now he had Jesus in his heart and soul - he was forgiven and free. God bless America, no one can stop preachers from coming into the prisons.

He looked forward to his only visitor, the Reverend Klerk. He looked forward to the only book he could focus on to read, the Bible. He was the thief on the cross with Jesus. He was Job of the Old Testament. He felt Jesus in the room with him healing his wounded soul. He saw his baby son with Jesus, yes sir, standing with Grant's little baby in his arms. He wrote and told Lily Schumacher the nice lady who brought religious material to San Quinton. He wrote to Lily every day and she promised to let him stay with her when he was released.

Dear Miss Schumacher,

I have a little girl. She lives in a foster house down there in Lanoe. I know the folks and they sure seem to be nice people but I would like to have my girl back when I leave prison. I will get her and bring her to your place. She is no trouble.

Yours truly, Grant Lee Taylor

Grant had memorized the address and wrote it on the envelope...
Miss Lily Schumacher, 1030 Post Street, San Francisco, California.

He did not hear back from Miss Schumacher for a long time. Meals were slipped under his door through the slot. Sometimes he was so hungry he could swoop up the cockroaches in his cell and eat them by the dozens. Other times he looked at the cold potatoes and hash

and couldn't stomach another meal. He dreamed of being back at the Sweetpea. Only this time he would do it right. This time he would marry him a nice girl and treat her right. He would teach his little girl, Feather how to read the Bible and how to love and fear God so she didn't end up like him. As he paced his cell he was sure now how he would change his life for the better. No more drugs or alcohol.

Samuel Spenster, the only decent guard in the place came to his cell to play chess. He cared enough to call the preacher from his own church. Perhaps Guard Spenster recognized the good in this prisoner. Perhaps because he knew Mr. Taylor would one day be released having served his sentence he would be a changed man. Grant wanted more than anything to love God and be a proud father to the child he had left.

"You had it tough growing up, didn't you, Grant?" Samuel said moving the chess pieces around the board.

"That's why I want to get out and get my little girl. I lived with these people over there in Oakland who were as mean as could be. Man, I get angry just thinking about it."

"Grant, I know you have a sister, do you have any siblings?"

"Siblings? Whatz at?"

“You know, brothers and sisters.”

“Ah, yeah. No, only me and Jess.”

18

FEATHER

Vera ran the bath for Feather - dear little Feather who barely spoke. She sang to the child, “I use to sing on the radio. Did you know that?” Feather nodded. She wondered if she should tell Vera that she was quite capable of bathing herself but somehow she didn't want to. She felt a deep satisfaction with the warm water and Vera's soothing voice and the soft soapy washcloth against her back.

“Do you know my father?” Feather asked in a barely audible voice. Vera stopped singing and looked away. She wrung out the washcloth and stood up. “Yes, I'm afraid he is, well he is ah, in the hospital.” She looked down at the girl who looked so small now, “Do you remember your father?” “Yes, I think so. I don't know why he left us.” “He was sick, and ah, well, he may never be well again.” Feather did not belong to Vera or Joe; her family rejected her but not her father. He just couldn't see her because he was so sick. It must be like when she had the measles only his sickness lasts longer. He was her father. Fathers and mothers know who their

children are and don't leave them with strangers. That is not unless absolutely necessary.

Vera dried the child with a large yellow towel with *hers* embroidered across the bottom. She helped Feather put on the flannel nightgown they'd got from the Wards' catalogue. "I can dress myself." Feather said a little hesitant, not wanting to offend her protector. "Oh, of course, you can." Vera said laughing a little, "You can do it yourself."

The little girl with the bad father and the dead mother crawled under the foster bed and drew a spider web on the wall with a red crayon. A real spider crawled over her picture. The girl was so tired she fell asleep. She woke to a small spider sitting on her red web. "Hello, baby spider." Feather heard someone calling her name but paid no attention. Vera was frantic. Where had the child disappeared too?

Feather blew on the spider and watched the tiny thread as baby Spider swung this way and that attaching herself to a web she must have spun some time before. "I'm sorry that your mother was killed on the train," Feather tried to explain.

"I found her," Bernie shouted. He pulled the sleeping child from under the bed. He gathered around the bed with Vera and Joe watching the tyke breathe and breathing with her. What a scare

they felt. Bernie whispered, "Thank God that bastard didn't break out of jail and take her."

Vera pulled them from the room, "Did he escape?" she was frantic. "Not that I know of," Bernie said matter-of-factly.

In the morning Feather awoke in her bed with another little girl jumping up and down on it.

"Feather-in-your-cap, blow-away-in-the-wind Feather, Feather, Feather!"

Feather thought she must be dreaming. "Are you in a dream?"

The child stood still on the bed a moment contemplating, "emm, yep, guess I must be a dream. Silly, I climbed in your window. She said look and the window is open. Ahh, maybe I'm a robber! I know your name, Feather, Feather, Feather - My name is better, Anne, my name is Anne."

Anne jumped up and down on the bed again while Feather giggled. Soon both were jumping up and down on the bed. The bedroom door flew open and what looked like a gang stood laughing and shaking their heads. Feather looked frightened until Anne took her by both hands and said, "Come-on, keep jumping. That's just my mom and dad and your new mom and dad and your Gramps."

“Come an' get your pancakes before I throw them out” Vera shouted teasingly over her shoulder. The children scrambled from the bed to the table.

Ann's parents were new neighbors and Vera, ever the friendly person, invited them to have breakfast that morning. The Gapens came to the Sweetpea the week before asking for directions to the ferry to San Francisco. Vera noticed the neighbors when they moved in but thought twice about going over to visit. After all, people were sometimes running away from their past and didn't want interference. Plus Joe said they seemed an odd sort of people.

Iris and her husband adopted a boy from an agency who though he might be Chinese, although he could have been from some Native American tribe or part of this race and part of that nationality - it really didn't matter to Iris, she was finally a mother and fussed over the boy like no other mother. The agency said the boy's name was Evie. Mr. Chang did not like the name and renamed the boy Everett. He was about eight or nine - no one was sure.

On a warm autumn day in September, Feather was dressed and ready for her first day of school. She had never been to school before. Her mother could not be alone and without her little helper. Aunt Jess did not believe in public education and Feather was not at the Lightfoot's long enough to start school. Her new friend Anne was almost the same age and already in the third grade.

She stood at the window and watched the children run to the school bus. She pressed her face against the glass pane and wished she were with Anne who was laughing with the other children. She felt a twinge of jealousy - why couldn't she be there now? But on her first day she must be with an adult who could sign the papers verifying who she is.

Vera took her charge to school, walking down a hallway hand-in-hand to room 10 of Lanoe Elementary School. Feather was wearing one of Anne's discarded dresses and socks that would not keep from sliding down the backs of her ankles to pile up under the heels of her shoes. She held up one arm over her forehead and would not take it down. Vera tried to remove the arm to place it at Feather's side but the child resisted.

Mrs. Pierce stood near the door to room 10, the first grade and tried to coach Feather inside. Some of the children from the class

gathered around the teacher - some with fingers in nostrils or mouth , staring at Feather with mouth agape.

“Feather? Oh dear, do you think we can, perhaps call her Frances instead? Does she have a middle name?”

Feather crumbled to the floor and sobbed loudly. “I hate you, I hate you, I hate everyone! I want my mommy!”

Mrs. Pierce, placing her head to one side a little, said in a low voice, “Mrs. Gra eh...”

“Grubble”

“Yes, well, why don't you leave the child with us and I am sure she will be fine after a bit...”

Vera picked up Feather, wiped her face and nose with the end of her dress and said, as she pulled Feather away, “Thank you, Mrs. Pierce, but maybe I'll just take her back to the home.”

Feather stopped crying and didn't speak in the car, but neither did Vera.

The child decided she would never have friends, didn't need them. The silence between the two continued as they rode country roads toward a small inlet leading to the bay.

The quiet was not difficult like one might imagine, but soothing - each unaware, unconcerned of the other. Feather didn't have a clue where they were and so she didn't realize that they were not going to the county home. Vera drove down a road ending at a beach. There were boardwalks and boats, pleasure boats and fishing boats. There were sheds and booths where vendors sold hats and fishing tackle and all assortment of things. It was enchanting and Feather wanted to ask Vera what they were doing there and whether she was still being returned to the Home, but the excitement of the colorful scene stopped her.

What if Vera got mad and told her to get back in the car? What if she forgot? She took Feather by the hand and said, "Now, little girl, I'm going to teach you how to fish. There's nothing more relaxing than fishing." Then she bought the sad child a pair of shorts and a boy's shirt with an emblem sewn on. "Hey, Vera, how is life treating you?" It was her friend from San Francisco who had a boat. "And who is this little fish?" Feather studied the features of the weather blown man. She wondered how he lost his front teeth and laughed when he took a fish bone from his pocket and combed his hair. "Look at her," he commented when they were on the open sea, "She doesn't get sea sick. Why, you're a regular little sailor, aren't ya?"

"Yeah," Vera said, "I told her - when all else fails - fish. Forget everything and throw your line in," Vera fixed the fishing poles with bait. Then she and the fisherman each threw in a line and opened two cans of beer. "I don't usually like to go fishing with anyone else," Vera told Feather, "But you seem the type that would appreciate the sport."

"My Aunt Jess doesn't like fish," Feather said feeling the wind against her face. "She made me put a fish back in the sea."

"Jess did that?" Vera asked, "I guess nothing Jess did surprises me."

"So, little girl, do you like the sea?"

"Oh, yes."

"Ah, look at the gulls, some have beautiful feathers." TJ Haas pointed to the birds circling the boat waiting to share the catch.

"What I want to know," he continued, "is how you got the fish Jess made you give back to the sea?" "A man with a long pole was fishing from the beach," Feather said, "And he had lots of fish and gave me one."

The boat rocked gently and they each caught fish. They were not trophies but large enough to clean and freeze for later. They were a type of bass. It was a wonderful, yet exhausting day.

All hell broke loose when they got back home. It was well after dark and no phone call had been made. Joe pounded his fist on the table, because it was TJ Haas who he was certain had a thing for Vera. Nothing Vera said calmed his rage. Vera couldn't figure out which he was maddest at, TJ or not having dinner on the table. Vera always had dinner on the table.

Vera kept the Sweetpea and worked waiting tables while Everett's mother cooked and cleaned the kitchen. The restaurant was a mess after Grant left. There was black grease everywhere and dirty dishes stacked sky high and copious cockroaches. Feather collected a cigar box full of cockroaches and hid them under her bed. Vera screamed and shouted when she found them. Bernie, on the other hand, seemed to understand. After this incident, he helped Feather collect insects and created a laboratory out of an emptied tool shed. They used egg crates and toothpicks to mount and store this unique collection. Feather collected all sorts of bugs. They were large and small. They were all colors and shapes.

Bernie gave her a book entitled, *THE STUDY OF INSECTS* by Gretchen S. Offenbrack where she learned that there were different groups of insects like *diptera* and the *hymenoptera* and

neuroptera. Bernie found a microscope at a yard sale and the two spent long hours studying insects feet and strange bodies. But Feather's favorite bugs were the unpopular cockroach.

Cockroaches invade home using guerilla warfare tactics. They area not like ants that march in predictable armies. They are anarchists and look frightening. They use their foul breath to ward off enemies. A cockroach chooses the size wings it want to have. They clean themselves immediately upon having been touched by humans. Humans are that offensive to them. The mother lays her eggs in a magical shell and hides them. This is all she does for her young. Then she leaves her babies to fend for themselves. Which, it might be added, they do quite well on their own. They have outlived other prehistoric creatures. They own the night. Many methods have been used to kill cockroaches but they adjust and rise up even stronger. Now, one just has to admire a creature like that.

Anne came by after school with Everett. She called Bernie, "Hey Burned Knee." Feather and Bernie just took to one another like fleas to a dog, or bees to honey, Joe didn't know which. Bernie took the kids to town with him in his old Ford pickup with different sized wheels. They were often at the Sweetpea where he bought them each a donut or a bear claw and a maple bar. Anne stole away with Bernie's cigar and the three delinquents were never caught. But when he swore, they all swore.

The little girl, who once upon a time, lived with her sick mother, was changing. She was beginning to sound like Bernie. She even learned to tell Bernie's stories like they were her own. Years later when she'd tell her husband about Bernie he'd just guffaw. All Everett remembers of years ago was his wife as a scrawny kid hanging out with an eccentric old man. He was a paper boy and as a teenager he worked at the Sweetpea.

When Vera captured a guinea hen in the yard and cut off its head with a butcher knife it was the first inkling that Feather may have some memory of that awful day with her father. Anne seemed gleeful at the slaughter. She even laughed when she noticed Feather's face turn ashen. It was Bernie who took Feather to town and bought her a banana split, eating what she couldn't. Some one had to take her mind off what must be locked in the recesses of her brain.

It was a spring day when Joe, Vera, Bernie and the kids were out repairing a fence. Bernie remarked, "That little Feather is a smart kid."

Anne and Everett were left out of the conversation. Vera praised Feather, then Joe. Then Anne who seemed to have enough said, "Dif you ever visit your dad in prison?"

Everything stopped. Even the air stilled and the leaves stopped rustling. Slowly the crew turned to look at Feather.

She felt the revealing words stabbing her bones. She could not accept the awful truth... her very nightmares were of blood and babies and women screaming and her father... yes, it must be him... a stick... a rifle... a loud bang... no that was a nightmare.... She pulled herself up and with tears flowing in a pounding-heart cry she shouted, "My father is in a hospital! My father is in a hospital, he is sick!"

22

Bernie drove to the post office to collect his war check. After cashing the check he had his hair cut. His routine rarely changed but after a while Feather had. She became a proficient reader and read most of Bernie's science books. Plus more books about insects. She made friends with a small eccentric group at school who also collected insects. Anne never liked those people and tried to lure both Feather and Everett away.

Feather caught up to Anne in school when a social worker called to say Grant Taylor, the legal and legitimate father of the child contacted the county and wanted his daughter back. Feather was

glad that he cared enough and was reformed enough to come and get her.

She and Vera became closer as she grew older. Vera explained that Grant was around bad people and used drugs but was trying to be a better person. And, yes, he was in prison. The hardest thing to tell her was how her little brother died. "It was an accident - I'm quite sure the gun went off accidentally." Vera could never bring herself to criticize her charge's father. Feather got letters from him and she wrote and sent pictures she drew. He told her of the seagulls and insects he saw and encouraged her telling her to read her Bible. He had one sent to her.

Now she was wanted by at least one blood relative. Aunt Jessie sent a post card from India. She sent it to the county home and Feather got it months later. It had a picture of the Taj Mahal on the front and on the back she said, "Hi hope all's well! Love, Aunt Jess."

Bernie knew the law and that was that Grant was Feather's real father and he was coming to get her - to claim her like one would land. She didn't want to leave but after all, she did have a family of her own. She had someone whose blood was the same as hers. It was Bernie who came on Father's Night at school. He even went to PTA meetings but this guy was her real Dad. Everyone should have his or her own family. She didn't want to be like Everett who had no

living relatives. The Lightfoots stopped coming from the mountains...no one came to visit. Her father at least wrote.

Vera took Feather shopping, "As I said earlier, Feather, you have to go and live with your father. But you also know that you will always have a home with us."

"I don't know if I want to live with him, I just want people to know I'm not an orphan, that's all." Everything seemed out of control. Feather crawled under her bed and saw the picture of the small girl she drew when she'd first moved there. She had become small again. She was as small and unimportant as the insects she collected.

Anne sat on Feather's bed the night before the long lost father was to claim her friend. They painted each other's toenails. "I sure don't want you to go," Anne said, "You're the best friend I've ever had."

"And, you're the best enemy I ever had," Feather teased.

Bernie stayed out back the day Grant Taylor was expected to arrive. Everett said later that the big man was pacing back and forth, back and forth. "Now when I die, Everett, be sure my books all go to Feather. And if her father doesn't tell us where she's at, you go find her. Okay?" Everett said he had no trouble agreeing with hunting his friend down but he thought the books should go to some charity.

On the day Mr. Taylor was to come, Anne stayed home from school. Vera and Joe sat next to each other on the couch and Feather stood by the window watching for the county car. Few words were spoken. The hum of an electric wall clock was all that could be heard. Feather quietly wondered what he looked like, how tall, how handsome.

It isn't that she didn't love the family she was forced into. After all, aren't all biological families forced assemblies? This was about a blood relative, like her friends had at school. He would be hers. He was a cowboy galloping through the dusty plains to capture his daughter, his only child. He was a movie western coming alive. He was decent and would fight to the death for his child's honor.

23

Grant Lee Taylor was angry. He had been angry all of his life. Just when he thought he had it together she up and leaves him, "I ain't taking care' no brat," she said. And now that he thought bout it, he couldn't remember a single thing he liked about his new girlfriend. Why did she bother writing to him in prison? Why'd she want him to stay with her in her home - the house she inherited from another marriage?

All he wanted was to get his little girl - to save her from the harsh life she must be living in foster homes. He named her Feather because she was so light he knew she'd blow away in the wind. Okay, okay. So he was a drug addict but he stopped in prison. Some folks start when they go to prison, but he stopped. He thought his girlfriend would help him. She was not like Mattie. She was not smart or sweet. He would have the weight of Mattie and Feather's fate on his shoulders forever. He thought this was the only woman in the world who would even look at him after what he did - and she knew he killed his baby boy. She seemed to forgive him and understand that it was the drugs or it was Mattie or maybe it was that he didn't know any better until he got Jesus in jail.

Grant Lee grew up in foster homes. The last one, before he ran away, was on a narrow street in a quiet neighborhood. It was a large old house with a basement. He bristled when he thought of the time he spent among cobwebs and rats, huddled in the cold, trying not to cry out.

The man at the pawnshop told Grant Lee the gun he was buying was a collector's item, "It's a Colt, like cowboys used at shoot-outs."

Today was the day. Grant Lee must kill his foster father now. He did not mind the thought of going to prison or dying in a gas chamber. Not now. After all he was a living, walking prison. He

was choking to death on life. After all he did to convince the court that he could take care of his own child, now he had no home to bring her to. What could he tell the social worker who would bring him to pick her up? He didn't know what the child looked like. Then he comforted himself by believing she was all right. Not all folks are like the vicious people he lived with... They made him vicious.

He boarded the train. Then he was on his way to the house where foster father was curled limp in his bed. He pressed his face to the cool glass of the train and saw himself as an eight year old; then ten, then twelve. The father loomed in the darkness beyond the glass. His hand pounded something that looked like Grant Lee. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the train had stopped at a station. It was not his stop. There were people huddled on benches trying to keep warm. And he sure knew what that was like. Boy, then he really got into feeling sorry. He decided that he'd been homeless all his life. Mattie tried to give him a home but he chose drugs instead.

The train moved again into the darkness. A big man grabbed a little boy. He beat the little boy and, yeah - Grant Lee was a man at 16 and it was the last time foster father hurled insults and punched his face.

If you had been a passenger on this train that was bound for killing, you would have admired the young man sitting there. He was a clothed statue of David. His head fell back and eyes closed in the pain of Christ on the cross.

If he had only grown into a massive man, he thought, a man who always wins, a man who gets what he wants and doesn't care who gets hurt. A man who never killed his own baby son - but his feeling was somewhere else. He could only think of killing as though remembering a movie.

And his foster father? Believe it or not, he admired him at one time; admired him for his strength and ability to control foster mother as well as himself. Grant Lee Taylor thought the man could control the thoughts of the customers who wandered the aisles of his store.

Grant Lee got down at the next station. The street seemed too well lit. Is it late enough? Are the neighbors asleep? He drew the collar of his jacket over his ears and stood in front of the house. It looked the same - well perhaps a little more worn. Had it really been that long since he'd been there? Not really. He carried the house inside of his head as he now carries the gun in his pocket.

He shook the basement door gently then stuck a penknife into the slot between the molding and the lock released.

The night is very still. Every sound intensifies the silence.

He slips up the steps through the basement and past the kitchen. He moves slowly allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. As he approaches the livingroom, a shadow lurks in the grimness.

He freezes. It doesn't move. It waits like a nocturnal predator hungry for someone to step into its trap. He focuses on it long enough to see that it only a lamp. Another flight of steps. The wood under his soles is weak - is tired - has just enough bounce to jump up and kill.

The low sound of rhythm & blues seeps from under a door. It is foster mother. She is talking on the phone. He can't make out what is being said. The phone cord is stretched from the hall. Grant Lee watches it move a little as the mother talks and laughs.

He almost trips on the cord. He suddenly feels he is gasping for breath. Will the mother rush from the room and spoil everything? The father's room is at the other end of the hall. Grant Lee thinks it may take hours and hours to get there.

The father is nearly deaf. Someone told him the man had been ill. He couldn't imagine it. But he was glad. The father, once upon a time, listened to his screams of anguish. He listened with pleasure. Grant Lee knew he had. May his ears burn with a piercing fire. These were his thoughts as he moved closer to the room.

Grant Lee is at his bedroom door. He turns the knob then slowly spins around, quickly, closing the door behind him. The full moon shines on the bed. He is amused as he imagines the face of the moon smiling encouragingly from the window.

Then he hears the father snore and is suddenly afraid - flooded with perspiration. His memory is stricken with lightening like images of the father coming - holding him down - panting - his body is somewhere else - is chilled - something is sticking pins in his fevered brain. He felt his lips swell and tasted the blood oozing between his loosened teeth. The mother said he deserved it - even asked for it.

So...Grant Lee must kill him - must do it - yes - cannot back out after all of this. Is there a higher purpose? Is there a better reason to kill him than for this? Perhaps he can come up with something. Had he been exposing himself in playgrounds lately? Isn't he a menace to society? Will Grant Lee be doing the world a favor? Will he stop feeling dispensable? He sat next to the open closet and listened to his heart - a drum in the thick jungle of thoughts. The man moved on his bed.

Grant Lee's small body tried to stop this heart from beating when the man could be heard coming down the basement stairs, one

heavy step at a time. The boy pretended to be dead as the bad man grabbed him here and here and there.

Foster father groans - the grown boy anticipates what will happen after he pulls the trigger. Will the mother come to see what has happened and need reassurance. Well, perhaps not from him. After he pulls the trigger, then that's that, he is to be feared more than the father.

He walks over to the bed. The light from the street distorts father's face. He wakes. He says something. It is Grant's name, so he jumps on top of father and presses the gun to the side of his head and sticks his face threateningly close and says, in a hoarse yet whispered shout, "Remember me, you piece of garbage?"

Unyielding spirits possessed Grant. Fate ordered his hands. His hands no longer belong to him. He was a raging militia and the enemy was within reach.

"I said, do you remember me!" Grant Lee held the gun so the moonlight flickered against it. "See this? See this gun? Isn't it wonderful?" He asked echoing the words the father once forced on him. "This is the demon that is going to kill you." Then he could barely stop the grotesque laugh that pushed its way up from his guts. He pushed the gun back to the father's head and listened to his raspy breath. He begged the grown boy not to kill him, "Please

don't hurt me." He said this in an unfamiliar voice. But the angry boy could not stop. So he grabbed father by his neck and stuck the gun in his mouth, "Suck on it!" The boy/beast said and it was then the boy/man realized something was different. Had he broken into the wrong house? Was he going to kill the wrong person? He could make out a toothless gap. The father coughed.

"Don't make so goddamned much noise," the boy/man/beast said, again echoing the father's own words to him from another time.

"You thought you got away with ruining my life, didn't you? I said didn't you!? Well you didn't, because here I am to cut you up in little pieces, to castrate you then shoot you! Good for me, bad for you, eh, creep?" The boy/beast could feel the tears salting a wound inside.

The father was crying and begging, "Please, leave me, please."

Grant Lee reached to turn on the lamp at the bed stand. He held the gun in both hands, squinting in the bright light. "I've been wanting to do this for years!." He blinked and drew a quick breath. He was confused. This was not the person he thought it was, yet, he had the right house. There was a picture of mother, carefully framed and hanging over the old man's bed. Yet, "Who was this old man?" This was not the man who terrorized Grant Lee - who convinced him he was rotting meat, who twisted dreams into nightmares! Had that

much time passed? This is the grim reaper himself, fragile enough to crumble into a heap of ashes.

Foster mother called the police and the gun went off just as the police entered the room. The boy/beast died with eight police bullets in his chest.

24**JESSIE IN INDIA**

Jessie motioned to the porter. She wanted him to put her two small bags under the berth. She handed him one rupee and he wiped his forehead to show how heavy the luggage was. "I wanted to carry them myself but you insisted," she snapped. She waved her hand as though she were shooing a fly. The man who wore a tall red turban stayed and wouldn't be shooed. "Ok, ok." She reached into the pocket of her blue jeans and got another rupee. He wanted more. After three more rupees the man left.

The first class compartment she was in was empty. There were four berths, all hers. She liked the solitude that was a haven from the masses of humanity. She did not know, at this time, that she would be expected to share her compartment with strangers. So she rode on contentedly with three empty berths until evening when she began to feel a bit lonely, and the compartment seemed too large.

When a porter brought her tea she was tempted to ask him to stay awhile. Instead, she asked him to leave the door open. The train raced through the ageless Indian landscape. Someone smiled and said hello to her as he passed her compartment.

She had bought a post card to send to Feather. She hated Edward for leaving her for the Guru, "I love him more than I have ever loved

anyone," he proclaimed sadly, sighing as he looked at the ground. He shifted his sandal back and forth making an arch the red dust. She should have insisted on bringing her niece. The poor little girl. She got a letter from her brother in prison who said Mattie's family didn't want her so she was with a foster family. Now what should I tell her?

Jessie pulled a piece of cloth from her handbag and wiped the shelf under the window. She could see a station approaching. The train slowed to a stop. She pushed her one piece of luggage under the berth and held another smaller bag on her lap. In a moment's time a red turbaned porter poured through the door like a tidal wave; trunks on his head, bags and suitcases under each arm. A woman with a tiny baby followed. Another porter brought in two more trunks followed by a large, heavily jeweled woman in a brightly colored sari.

Jessie was glad for the company but now the compartment became frightfully small as the three women moved about hopelessly trying to rearrange the baggage. Just as this was being completed a fourth woman arrived with slightly more luggage than the last. Finally, the top berths were neatly packed and the women lined up facing one another on the lower berths. The last woman to arrive was an army officer who wore little jewelry and who's head, unlike the others, touched the top berth. Jessie's knees nearly touched the officer's.

“Hi, there, I'm Jessie.” Jessie may have said this a little too loudly because the others jumped as though startled. The army officer looking amused said, “You may call me Lakshmi. I'm on my way to Madras and where are you going?”

I'm going to Madras, too.” Jessie said, her shoulders rolling back and forth with the movement of the train. Jessie fingered the half moon charm that hung on the chain around her neck - a farewell gift from Ed Lessing. The metal turned green and black from her perspiration. She looked around her and noticed that each woman wore a gold chain, obviously real gold, unlike hers.

“Hello, it is nice to meet you. My name is Adisakti.” The woman who sat next to Jessie nodded her head back and forth. “Where is your destination in Madras?” “I'm going to look at the temples,” Jessie told Adisakti. She gazed at the diamond stubs in her nose then up the nostrils. Jessie rubbed her own nose. Adisakti's thick arms shone from coconut oil. The sleeves on her blouse were so tight that they dug into her arms.

The woman who sat next to Lakshmi spoke as she fussed with her baby, “My name is Gan'gamma.” She giggled and then spoke nervously in Tamil to Lakshmi and Adisaki. Gan'gamma may have envisioned her old English teacher prompting her to speak up - you

just never know when and where you will meet an English speaking person.

The train howled and screamed dark smoke signals over parched bare flat lands. Hills were barely visible in the distance. They came closer until the train cut through them and circled around them. Jessie thought the hills looked like pointed heads with long flowing golden hair.

“What intriguing hills,” Jessie said awe struck. The other women laughed a little.

“Yes, but you would not want to get off the train here.”

“Nooo! No! We do not want the train to stop here,” Lakshmi said in English and then in Tamil for the benefit of Gan’gamma. All laughed except Jessie who smiled and frowned at the same time.

“Why?”

“The hills are full of Dacoits,” Lakshmi said, “and I don't think you know what this is. They are gangs of bandits. They sometimes pretend they are traveling merchants and rob people.”

Adisakti twisted one of her diamond nose stubs and said, “Yes, they are thieves. They live in tents and they ride horses.”

The baby began to cry. Gan’gamma gave him a small bottle with formula. Jessie wondered if it was an American formula. She had

read in the United States that a company was discouraging mothers in third world countries from breast-feeding so that they would use *their* formula. The baby was not happy.

“In the days of long ago, the thieves would lure a traveler into a wooded area and hang him with cat gut.”

“Yes, there were stranglers in every gang and grave diggers who buried the bodies out of sight.”

Jessie looked out of the window and thought she saw a shadow or something hit the train. But, of course, it wasn't possible because the train was moving too fast. “You know all this talk is spooking me!”

“Spooking?”

“Yeah, you know - scaring.”

“Oh, no! Don't be scared. You see, they never kill women. But we must all remember to guard our jewelry. They will definitely steal our jewelry.”

Jessie covered the dirty chain on her neck with one hand and toyed with an earring with the other.

“There is some consolation, you see, these fellows are very superstitious. There are many bad omens that will stop them from

going out. One is if when they are getting ready to leave and a member of the gang sneezes, they will not go."

"Yes, the other is if they see a pair of jackals crossing the road or a woman carrying an empty pitcher."

"Are they all Hindus?" This information was testing Jessie's idea of religious virtues.

"Yes, and they worship the fierce Goddess Durga. They bring the blood of their victims to wash her image."

"No, no. Some are Moslems. And they believe Durga is really the daughter of Mohammed and that she invented the use of the noose to strangle a great demon." "A few weeks back the police shot a woman dacoit. She was the leader of several gangs. The paper said she was from a good Moslem family."

"Yes, but her family had disowned her before this, isn't it - because she refused to marry a man her parents had chosen?"

"Wow - phew!" Jessie said out loud, but privately held the Moslem woman in awe. "Wow, so she didn't marry the man and instead ran off with a bunch of wild eyed dacoits?"

"Yes, and it is said she was filled with anger and revenge on these missions."

“And she would enjoy seeing others suffer. She didn't know where she got the strength to snatch ornaments from women nor the courage to kill and order killings.”

Jessie leaned against the window and looked through the bars. She had a fascination for notorious women, or women who were less than reputable. She felt a yearning to get off the train and hike into the hills where she would join the dangerous women dacoits.

The train was nearing a stop. Jessie re-focused her eyes and attention on a man who stood watching the train pass. Another man led a small herd of sheep. Then like a movie with passing images, came a family squatting in a circle near a hut then a man urinated while watching the passing train. A dozen children ran along a hill, racing the train and waving.

Gan'gamma's baby refused the bottle his mother was forcing on him. He was crying in gasping heaves. She went to the latrine at the other end of the bogie to change the tiny underpants she had for him and wash them. The women soon abandoned English and spoke with each other in rapid Tamil. Just when Jessie was beginning to feel excluded, Lakshmi pulled out two photos. They were glossy photos of two little boys in Little Lord Fauntleroy suits. Both children were grinning from ear to ear. Jessie and Adishakti made cooing sounds and Gan'gamma who was obviously fatigued

from her child nodded her head from side to side. "They are quite lovely," she said in slow deliberate English, again looking at Jessie in a distrustful way - waiting to be judged.

"We have a problem finding playmates for these fellows," Lakshmi said, "You see, most of our relatives have grown children and our neighbors on either side have small babies so they become bored with one another and squabble." Adisakti chuckled to hear something so familiar. She then told how her four children only had one another to play with since they moved from their village where many cousins lived.

Jessie, the perennial agitator, asked, "Do you have servants and don't they have kids?" The women fidgeted in their seats.

Adisakti said, "We could not possibly allow them to play with the servants' children."

"No, no. They might learn bad habits!" All three women nodded in agreement. Then no one spoke. The hissing and rattling of the wheels on the tracks filled the unspeaking air.

The sun was setting and the train was gathering passengers at a crowded station. The soot from burning coals stirred the air.

Vendors hawked their goods in operatic tones. A rusty brown man with silver hair showed Jessie some magazines from the cart he pushed. Lakshmi stepped down from the train to follow the aroma

of cashews. She returned with cashews and bananas to share, but not for everyone.

A small girl in tattered clothes and a hoarse voice pressed her head against the bars of the window and pushed a dirty little hand at Jessie's face. "Amma. Amma. Amma." The small girl stopped and waited for Jessie to give her something. Tears welled up in her eyes as she imagined little Feather. Jessie began digging in her bag when Adisakti jumped up, pushed the child's hand back through the bars and motioned with her own hand for the child to leave. "Such a nuisance - these beggars!" She said. Not a moment later Adisakti again jumped up, this time to toss a banana to a monkey that jumped on the bars and chattered. She was delighted at the monkey for catching the banana. Gan'gamma and Lakshmi laughed.

The tattered little girl threw a stick at the monkey and screamed. The monkey found its way to a high place and the little girl walked away whimpering. Jessie wondered if she were the only one who noticed. Gan'gamma tickled her baby's feet "ooohing" and aaahing" at him. In spite of the intense heat, Jessie's bones were chilled. A young well-groomed child from another compartment slammed a window, nearly breaking a beggar's hand, "Dirty fellow" he said.

A woman carrying a large, wide basket on her head moved along the edge of the train, stopping at each window. She was selling a

collection of different types of fruit. Jessie bought two apples, two bananas and two mangoes. She gathered them into a piece of cloth and left the compartment. She went to the door leading to the train station and motioned to the tattered little girl. The child approached cautiously squinting and pushing a strand of hair from her face. Jessie gave her the fruit and she pressed her hands together in a greeting, or a prayer, or simply "thanks." She watched the child as the train pulled away from the station. She was squatting on the edge of the platform smiling with a mouth full of banana.

Jessie's companions seemed to avoid her. She felt like a *Commie Pinko*. They now spoke in Tamil and did not attempt to translate until Jessie finally said, "That little girl was hungry." Adisakti pulled her sari tight around her shoulders. Lakshmi sat up straighter and looking very dignified said, "It is not likely she was really hungry." Gan'gamma tried to feed her squirming baby from the little bottle. Jessie looked at them appalled, "You can't really believe that!"

"Yes, yes, my dear, it is true," Lakshmi insisted, "You see some of them act like beggars but they have more money than we do." The companions all nodded vigorously. "You see, just last month I was taking this same journey when a young woman was begging in the station and I said, "You do not need to beg; I will hire you as a maid

servant in my house. Get on now. I will pay your way." She did not get on the train, no, she disappeared somewhere in the crowd."

"Yes, yes. You see" added Adisakti. "She would rather make ten rupees a day begging than to work. You must not encourage begging."

Adisakti and Lakshmi then turned to Gan'gamma to translate. Jessie felt she had made a terrible blunder by feeding the little girl. She had come to India to escape her problems in America and to find enlightenment. She did not feel enlightened and she was not ready to go back to America.

Suddenly, the women began rearranging the baggage. Jessie's initial response was that they were going to throw her out. But this was not so. It was bedtime. The luggage was soon piled up on the floor. Jessie was lying on the upper berth facing the ceiling in inky blackness. The women around her wrapped themselves in saris and elaborately woven blankets - the kind that people "ooh and ahh" over in America. In her effort to pack lightly she had not brought a blanket. It was cold.

The woman with the baby had to sleep so everyone else had to sleep. "Well, I'm not sleepy," Jessie wanted to say. She was not used to sharing such close quarters with complete strangers and was not pleased with the fact that she had to adjust her time to the

miniature human in the berth below. The enormous train rocked precariously over tiny tracks. Jessie attempted to climb down the ladder and caught her hair on one of the bars that held her berth to the ceiling. She bit her lip rather than cry out. Then, with the finesse of a drunken sailor, made her way down the ladder to the cluttered floor.

She opened the door of the compartment and slipped out into the hall. She was rather shaken by the ordeal of being made to go to bed early like when she was a little girl and had done something bad. She looked at her watch in the dimmed light of the hall. Eight o'clock? She rarely turned in before midnight. Every compartment appeared to be in a sleeping state.

On either end of the bogie there were sleeping guards. She went up to one. He was on a stool with his head thrown back and resting in a corner. He was snoring loudly. His rifle was chained to his wrist. She bent very close to his face and breathed her garlic/onion breath on him. He did not move. She stood studying the curves in his beard and the straight clean teeth.

Then from the corner of her eye she thought she saw something attach itself to the train. Impossible! The train was really chugging along. They jumped into the train from nowhere and anyone would have thought there was no way they could have gotten in. But there

they were, two rather small people each wearing a turban and dressed like something out of nineteenth century India.

Jessie fell against the guard who shouted and woke the other guard. One of the dacoits held a knife in her teeth. Oh yes, at least one was a woman. Jessie was in the way. First the guard pushed her, then the dacoit pushed her. There was a struggle at the other end of the bogie between the other guard and dacoit. There was shouting. Jessie managed to make her way to a corner and squatted down. There was a gunshot and the train whistle blew. Jessie froze, unable to blink or breathe.

The guard motioned for her to go back to her compartment. The dacoits were both tied up. One was sitting under a window. When her eyes met Jessie's there was a storm of curiosity. Tabla drums beat in her chest. The woman looked back - a steel gripping stare. A voice behind her repeated, "Madam, madam!" The guard pointed his finger to the compartment where she was *supposed* to be. Before entering her compartment, she looked at the other dacoit who was tied up at the other end of the bogie. The other guard stood holding his rifle by his side.

Jessie finally slept after tossing and turning - after fantasizing joining the dacoit - racing on horseback, terrorizing ordinary citizens. She was awakened by one of her companions pushing her

arm. Her eyes opened to Lakshmi's mouth moving rapidly.

“Something terrible happened last night while we all slept. You must be very careful going to the latrine.”

The baby was crying. The luggage had to be rearranged. Jessie made her way down the hall where a crowd stood waiting and staring. They watched the dacoits as one would wild animals, with fear and respect. Jessie looked at the woman, who appeared uncomfortable from a night of being tied up. Jessie winked at her and said loudly, “Hi there and how are you this beautiful morning?” The woman's face softened and she smiled, but only a little. The other passengers looked behind them at Jessie, then at the dacoit, then back at Jessie. There was a hush, then mumbling.

“Excuse me,” Jessie said, “If none of you are waiting for the latrine, mind if I go?” Jessie pushed her way through the crowd.

By the time Jessie got back to her compartment a small gathering filled the doorway. Her excited companions wanted to know what happened the night before, while they slept. The guard told them that she had been present when the dacoits appeared. Jessie puffed up at the opportunity for popularity. She thought about telling them how they may have come in through the hole in the latrine. Then decided against it. “They appeared mysteriously from out of

nowhere," she told her anxious fans, "One minute there was no one and the next there they were!"

"It is fortunate both are ladies?"

"Ladies?"

"Yes, this was easy for the guards."

So the other dacoit was also a woman. This was too much for Jessie. The two who jumped a train to rob the people were women. Jessie felt a thrill rush through her. While her middle class fans spoke of despicable behavior in British English, Jessie was transported to the hills and the hidden women in the crevices.

The excitement went on for the better part of the day. People stood and gawked, first one dacoit, then the other. At one point the dacoities shouted out to one another. There was a common gasp from their unwelcome audience as people turned to look at one another, then to each of them.

At some point the excitement wore down and one by one Jessie's companions began to disembark at different stations. They had shared a light dinner together. They became best of friends, exchanging addresses. Jessie took the addresses and believed for the moment that she would contact them when she returned to America. Meanwhile, she had grown fond of the little baby and

even held him for a spell. The excitement of what happened dazzled them and removed barriers that previously kept them from knowing one another.

First, Gan'gamma left with her baby. A noisy crowd of friends and relatives circled her. Jessie decided to check on the dacoits. They were nearly trampled by people leaving the train. Each dacoit pulled herself closer to the wall. She stared at the dacoit who sat closest to Jessie's compartment. She did not look fierce or frightening, as the passengers seemed to want her to be.

The guard had told Jessie that the dacoits were, "riding their horses along side the train then jumped from them, grabbing the ladders. Then they found a door that was not locked properly."

"But that's wild! These people have horses that can race trains?" Jessie was truly amazed. She listened to Adisakti and Lakshmi and tried to hide the thrill of her fantasies when the dacoits shouted out at one another. Her companions looked embarrassed and giggled a little. "They are dirty people and they say dirty things," Adisakti said. Adisakti left at the next station. Jessie became somewhat reserved.

"She looked like she was plotting something," lieutenant Lakshmi told the police later, "The American seemed to be too much interested in the dacoits."

Lakshmi had left the train at the next to last stop. The dacoits, at that point, were being transported to the very end of the line. And that was Jessie's stop as well. "What do they keep shouting at one another," Jessie had asked Lakshmi. Lakshmi remembered then she took a deep breath and said, "They were vowing their devotion to one another as, a ah, as lovers do. It is strange, isn't it? Well, what can be expected of such dirty people?"

When Lakshmi got down at her stop, she dug her fingers into Jessie's shoulder, "You must be very careful. Your stop is the last one and no one is on this car except the two dacoits and only one guard!"

"One of the guards has left?" Jessie's mouth felt dry. Every compartment in first class was empty and doors were banging loudly back and forth. Cans, paper and scraps of food rolled back and forth in the coal soot left by the rolling train.

Jessie followed Lakshmi to the door and watched her embrace her children and watched her husband grin. Meanwhile, behind her were the two lovers who rested their heads against each other. The guard stood by looking bored.

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As of this writing, the American woman who apparently helped two dacoits escape in 1955 has not been captured. There have been numerous sightings of her in the hills. Our sources state that she is involved with an all woman gang who ride horses and rob men in train stations at night.

IN THE END....

Vera watched Iris coming down the road toward her. She was carrying her famous noodle dish that customers at the Sweetpea bragged about. Vera smiled and waved to her old friend - now in-law. It was the 4th of July and Everett just got home from the Navy, his tour of duty in Vietnam finished. He and Feather had been married on the 4th of July seven years prior to this day. While he had served his country on the aircraft carrier USS Ticonderoga, his wife finished her Ph.D. in entomology. They moved into the trailer

after Bernie had his stroke and Bernie moved into Feather's old room.

Charlie and Joe were still in the process of making the doorways larger and creating ramps for Bernie's wheelchair. "I can smell my wife's noodles coming down the street" Charlie said taking in a deep breath.

Feather brought potato salad from the deli to Vera's frowns. "You spent all those years in my restaurant and still can't cook!" "Hey, come on" Feather laughed, "I do other things, like keeping the ants away without poisoning the clientele!"

Muffy pulled up in her Chevy pickup with Jess. Her mother, Mrs. Lightfoot, died around the same time Feather's father did. Jessie came back from India, barely escaping with her life from the Indian police who had 'Wanted, Dead or Alive' posters up with a two thousand rupee reward. It was decent of Feather's grandmother to take in this stray family, her daughter's husband.