

# Lights and Shadows

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## Friday

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# Friday

Nancy Olson Lynn  
*Short Story/Third Place, Tie*

My sister says houses need people to live in them and love them or they begin to fall apart. Nobody has lived in the old house next door for over twenty-five years and I think it knows it by now. Its grayed weathered boards, rusty tin roof and rotten porch have no useful purpose—except to bring back images to me. Back then I was only allowed to go over there on weekends when Daddy was home from work to be with me.

That's all I lived for then. Daddy. Actually, I lived for Fridays, because that was the day Daddy came home for the weekend from his job ninety-eight miles away in Huntsburg. He would drive up in our metallic green Pontiac with a trunk load of groceries and smelling like Old Spice. God, I can smell him now, and feel his wool suit scratch my face as I leaped into his arms the second he got out of the car.

I remember that February when Daddy called the night before to say that he might leave work early. He was in his small hotel room on the lumpy bed where he ate cheese and crackers while he read paperback detective novels. Ma let me say hello to him—but not for long—it was expensive.

Every Friday after Daddy got home, he would call my two sisters and brother together and give them their allowance for the following week. They were all more than ten years older than me. He only gave them each one green dollar bill, but one Friday it occurred to me that I wasn't getting anything.

"I want some money too!" I said, and Daddy laughed. I didn't think it was funny, but figured I must have said something to make him laugh, and that made me feel good.

"Here's your money, Peanut," he said. All I got was quarters. "You can have paper money too, when you're older."

Ma handed me the phone. "How's my Peanut?" Daddy asked in his cheerful voice.

"I'm O.K. Daddy—we made a cake for you tonight," I said, embarrassed.

"You're a smart girl, and I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

I reluctantly handed the black receiver to Ma. I hoped Ma and Daddy wouldn't fight this weekend. I thought about the time they argued over a cup of coffee. Well, actually it was about whether or not Daddy had drunk a cup of coffee. He said Ma never had brought him one, and she said she had given him a cup. He was sitting at the kitchen table looking out of the window kind of distracted, like he was thinking about something far away.

More hot words passed between Daddy and Ma, neither one backed down.

Daddy went into the bedroom, opened his cigarette drawer and took out a pack of Camels.

"I'll go stay over at the Rissie house tonight," Daddy said angrily. I had followed him into the room.

"Please don't go, Daddy!" I begged him. "Please stay here with us."

He put the cigarettes back into the drawer, and looked at me, smiled and picked me up. "I won't leave you tonight, Peanut," he said.

He made me feel so important—I followed him everywhere he went when he was at home. I was with him when he and my brother would go over to the old Rissie house to work on something. Daddy showed me how to drive little nails with a tack hammer into a big block of wood he had inside. He was very patient with me, and soon I was driving nail after nail. When I accidentally hit my finger, I would say a curse word, and Daddy would laugh. He was an honest curser and I wanted to be one too.

The old Rissie house wasn't really a house anymore even then. Daddy used it for a workshop-storage area. An old white-haired lady who wore pink cotton print aprons used to live there. She used to walk through our yard on her way to buy groceries and sometimes on warm summer days she would stop in and "Catch her breath," she said, before she went home.

When Ma went to fetch her a cold glass of lemonade, I would climb up into her soft, cottony lap and she would smile, laugh and say, "How's my little sweetheart today? Have you been a good girl?" and I would nod my head.

Ma said Miss Rissie gave us her house when she died, two years before I was four. I came back one day and said "Miss Wizzie won't let me in—I knocked and knocked. Where is she?" I didn't know she was dead. She was dead and buried and I didn't know about it.

Ma let me help her knead the white rubbery dough out on the kitchen table. She had started the weekend bread baking on Friday afternoon. I knew Daddy would be happy to smell the hot loaves in the oven on such a cold winter day.

I was not sure exactly what Daddy did at his job in Huntsburg—something to do with engineers and wind tunnels. He talked about rockets and people going to the moon and he wore a badge with his picture on it that he let me play with when he was home.

While I was squishing the dough down I wondered what Daddy thought about when he was in Huntsburg. He lived in the old hotel there on weekdays. Ma used to write him a letter or two during the week. I couldn't write so I drew him crude pictures of people and horses that Ma labeled for me and placed inside her letters. I refused to use a pencil so I made blotches with Daddy's fountain pen and Ma would yell at me. I don't remember Daddy ever yelling at me—not even the time I spilled a box of Cheerios on him as I was climbing into his lap to help him watch Perry Mason.

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because that was  
the day Daddy came  
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job ninety-eight  
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I always remembered Daddy being in a good mood most of the time, but I have a copy of his diary now that says otherwise. Ma actually gave the diary to my brother, but he made copies of it and gave us three sisters one each. Joe got a lot of Daddy's stuff, "Because he's the only boy..." Ma said. Now that I've read it, it's just as well that I never got the original. I'm not even mentioned in it, but then none of the rest of the family was either. Seems like he must have only written in it when he was depressed as hell. I hardly ever remember him being depressed—maybe that's because I only want to remember the good things about him.

That gray Friday I waited for him from early in the afternoon. When he called the night before he'd said he would be home early because he wasn't feeling well. Ma and I cleaned the house with our special Friday ferocity—I dusted and straightened, Ma cleaned the floors and high places. When we'd finished we sat down on our new blue sofa. I laid my head in Ma's lap and she stroked my hair. Every time she heard a car drive by on the dirt road outside she'd say, "Is that Bill?" By then I'd be up.

"No, Ma, it's just another car," I said, peeking out over the window sill. I got worried when the time came for Daddy to be home. I never said anything to Ma—she looked worried enough for both of us.

"Let's go get a book," she said, "he'll be here soon. What do you want to hear, *Jack and Janet*?"

"No. I want *The Black Stallion*," I said.

"You're too little for *The Black Stallion*," she said, "you won't pay attention."

"Yes I will," I said, "please?" We got back on the couch and as Ma began to read I pretended to listen the best I could. Not much later the phone rang.

"Hello," Ma said, "what is it?" I was already scared. I saw Ma's face go white and she looked strange, I knew something was wrong. She began to sob, checked herself, and asked, "Where did they take him? Was he—dead—when they found him? You told the big kids at school? Yes. Thank you for calling—yeah—I'll be all right, goodbye." She hung up the receiver, and instantly reached out for me with both arms and we held each other and cried. I knew what had happened—I could barely hear Ma telling me what Grandpa had said on the phone. I felt like I wasn't there at all. I cried and died and cried and felt the whole house crashing down over me with a deafening roar—but it never did. We stayed like that a long time until it began to grow dark.

My aunt and another lady came over after my brother and sisters got home and finished cooking our supper. I guess we ate it, maybe we didn't. Then they washed the dishes, and as they were draining the water out of the sink Ma remembered the crack in the drain pipe under the house. "Oh no—the cellar will be flooded again!" she said.

"I'm sorry Sue, we didn't know." My aunt Ruby said, "When did it break?"

"Oh, this week sometime. I was going to ask Bill—to fix it—when he got home," Ma said, beginning to cry. "I appreciate you coming up to help."

"Isn't there something we can do for you Sue?" my aunt said, wringing her hands.

"No. We'll be O.K.—just pray for us," Ma said.

I remember them making me go to the funeral home to see him. I didn't want to go. Some woman, I think it was Ma's cousin, picked me up after we got there. I know I must have been angry—but I didn't feel anything then. It was like a part of me had died, the part that loved me and felt positive, and I didn't know what to do with that part.

I was hiding in my usual place behind Ma's skirt, holding on to it, and the woman picked me up and carried me over to the silver casket. I kept my face buried in her shoulder. Finally, after some coaxing, "It's O.K., honey, why don't you look?" I turned around then, and saw him.

He looked strange and still. He had never been that still before—he was always in motion. I kept searching for the rise and fall of his chest, anything, surely he must be asleep—but it never did move. Once I thought I saw him move, but he didn't really, I only wanted him to. I began to feel funny, like I wasn't really there at all, and started to cry. The woman took me back to Ma.

"It's all right, baby, that's not really your daddy over there" Ma said, "It's just his body. Jesus took him to be with him in heaven."

"Why?" I said, "Why did he take Daddy?"

"He must have needed him more than we did," she said. □