

The Warm Kitchen

by Wendy Sarkissian

September 1978

The young woman sat gazing out at the moonlit garden, folding and unfolding a letter. A desk lamp illuminated a face marked by pain and anger, framed by the upstairs window—a soft, childlike face with pleading, yearning eyes. She read the letter again before slowly shredding it and dropping the pieces into a straw basket at her feet. Another letter from her mother—demanding, full of jealousy, complaints and bitterness, blaming Lucy for her empty life and treating Lucy like a child, always like a child. Lucy felt the paradox: to her, it was the other way around; she blamed her mother for *her* empty life.

Lucy turned to catalogue her feelings in her silk-covered journal on the wooden desk. “I’ve failed again,” she wrote. “I should have taken my therapist’s advice about dealing with my mother.”

Michelle, her therapist, had laid it on the line, months ago while Lucy was still living in Australia: “Be your own parent, your own best friend, Lucy. Only you can take care of yourself and soothe yourself. You can’t expect that to come from your mother, especially not after all these years.”

Michelle had continued, “You’ll never succeed in getting your mother to acknowledge what really happened in your childhood. Her amnesia about your life serves her well. Yes, you were hurt, by both your parents. True, you did not get what you needed. That’s a fact, Lucy. You missed out on things all children deserve: love, respect, consistency and attention. It’s not surprising that you’re angry and often sick but you can’t expect her or your father to help you now. You’ll have to make your own peace with the past and move on. Trust me, your approach to self-healing will never work. Give it away, Lucy, and concentrate on loving yourself. Forget the past and focus on the present, the now.”

Stormy, Lucy’s sister who was also a therapist, had the same advice. Why did Lucy have so much trouble heeding it? Every time they met in Vancouver, when Lucy flew up for visits from her new home in Berkeley, they’d discuss their shared sense of despair, their feeling that they were not “quite right”. Like Lucy, Stormy was often sick and had not been able to conceive. She, too, was lonely and unhappy. She was a successful therapist and wise in many ways, but not in others.

Sometimes Stormy seemed to be on Lucy’s side, sharing her pain. Lucy remembered one particularly poignant episode in their favourite Vancouver restaurant, the White Spot, their teenage haunt. Now in their thirties, they were discussing the perennial issue between them: their sense of not being whole.

“It’s the same with me,” Stormy said, stirring her coffee intently. “I feel incomplete, like I’m missing some ingredient that would make me happy. I feel haunted by some secret I can’t understand. I have these flashes of terrible memories but I can’t tie any of them down.”

Lucy nodded in agreement. Behind Stormy she glimpsed the cloud-shrouded mountains of her childhood home. “I don’t know, Stormy. It’s an awful feeling but I can’t figure it out either.”

For all the benefits they gleaned from these occasional conversations, Lucy and Stormy were estranged. They had much in common but the two sisters had never been close.

“You always seem to be on Mother’s side,” Stormy would admonish her when they talked over the phone.

“I can’t see where you get that idea,” Lucy would retort. “I hate her.”

But Stormy could not be convinced. They tried at a distance to be friends—sending cards, gifts and letters—but it never really amounted to much. Too much water under the bridge. Lucy felt that Stormy blamed her for leaving her to marry Alan—and leaving her alone with Mother. Stormy never exactly said that but Lucy still felt guilty about it.

Lucy stared down at her words in the journal. Pages of frustration, recrimination, pain, chronicled in her neat, confident hand, like the steady letters that marched across the assignments piled on the desk where she sat. If her students knew the pain she was going through, they wouldn’t recognise their bright, self-assured professor.

She’d have to stop this and get back to her work. Lucy sighed deeply and closed her eyes. Her stomach tightened; her head throbbed, a kaleidoscope of colour swam before her eyes and at the periphery of her vision: bright triangles of purple and black, clashing with yellow and silver. The triangles always appeared at times like these. My self, she thought, would look like that if I could draw it—all competing bits, odd angles, out of sync. How could she embrace or reconcile those sharp edges, that chaotic confusion? She couldn’t control their whirring traffic. Stormy told her that those images were a bad sign: they foretold migraine headaches. Lucy sighed and massaged her aching forehead. Then she raised her head and turned to look out onto Christine’s moonlit garden. It was so beautiful. Why couldn’t she enjoy it? Nothing seemed right with her. She longed for the state the great teachers achieved: peace, total peace, a soft rose colour. She longed to feel at one with all life, accepting and tolerant. She dreamed of herself accepting herself, graciously and peacefully.

Lucy rose and walked to the full-length mirror. She smiled at her Berkeley clothes: hippie dress definitely out of place in conservative urban Adelaide. I'm quite presentable, she thought, not bad for thirty-five. Good skin, clear eyes, nice hair, a shapely body. Overweight but nicely proportioned and cuddly. As she stretched her arms above her head, she recalled her painful shoulders. Turning sideways she examined her dowager's hump, which she knew to be part inheritance, part endurance. Her body spoke its mind, reflecting the burdens of her life, the pain she'd borne. Or rather, she corrected herself, remembering Michelle's admonitions, the ways she'd chosen to deal with life's challenges. It hadn't been a bad life, really, but she'd been pretty humourless in dealing with it.

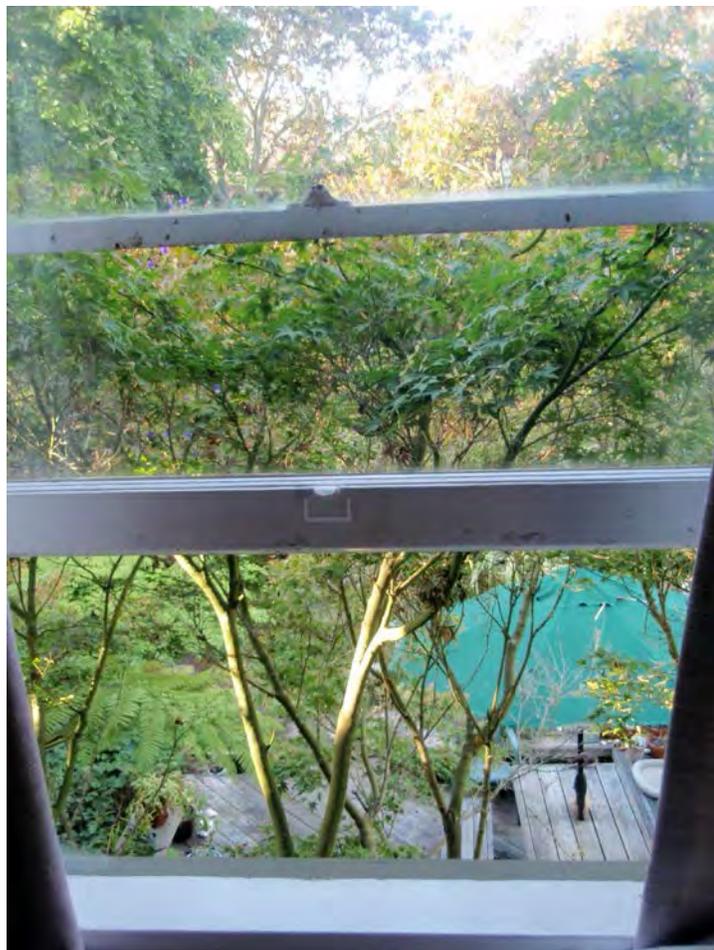
In Adelaide before she left for California, the therapy sessions often focused on Lucy's body. "Push me away," Michelle had instructed her, forcing Lucy's arms in front of her and bracing herself against her palms. "Come on, Lucy. Push me away!" They were trying somatic psychotherapy, which Michelle explained as bringing the body in line with the psyche. Lucy couldn't do it, couldn't push her away. Michelle kept at it: "Lucy, come on, put some energy into it. Try to imagine that you're pushing your mother away from you." That made it worse and the energy drained from Lucy's arms as though she'd been hit. She stood there, arms dangling helplessly at her sides.

They were both horrified by her instantaneous weakness. Pushing away was certainly not Lucy's forte. She was equally unsuccessful at pushing away her memories, her rage at the pain and disappointments of her childhood and yet, quixotically, she couldn't remember much of it, just a diffuse sense that it had not been right. The early years were especially vague: she recalled only dream-like fragments.

That was then and this is now, Lucy thought. Adelaide and Michelle belonged to another life. The loneliest girl on the block didn't feel so lonely any more. Now she was living in California, feeling more alive and young again and things were certainly looking up, Lucy reflected, returning to her desk by the window. This Escape was going well. It was so peaceful here: this tiny room in a house she shared with Christine and some other Berkeley types was a world way from Adelaide's staid mansions, marble halls and formal dinner parties. How she'd loved making this new place her temporary home: she'd bought a deep blue cotton quilt, a Japanese rice paper lamp, a print of a dramatic skyscape by her favourite painter, Georgia O'Keeffe, and a coffee mug, lavishing the same care on each purchase as if they were precious antiques.



Christine's garden shimmered below her window, glimpsed through the leaves of a gigantic avocado tree. Remembering Michelle's instructions, Lucy let her eyes soften to take in the richness of the moonlit garden's flowers, apple trees, the tumbledown fence, the greenhouse, the compost heap, the last of the summer vegetables. She picked up the fragrance of the fresh coffee her housemates were brewing in the kitchen below. Soft voices, good coffee, comfortable, relaxed domesticity. Home. Not permanent, but home nevertheless.





Since her first visit to California five years ago, Lucy had loved that kitchen in Christine's timber house for its qualities of warmth and friendliness. The house communicated safety and sturdiness. Built in 1905, it withstood the San Francisco earthquake. Its gracious porch, overflowing with pot plants, welcomed her. When she sat in the kitchen talking with Christine, her stomach felt settled and her mind spacious. The kitchen was her meditation hall, her haven. Lucy chanted as she kneaded their weekly loaves of wholemeal sourdough bread. *Om mane padme hum*. From the kitchen window she could see Christine kneeling in denim overalls, pulling weeds, her grey curls tied back in a blue cotton kerchief. Very domesticated for the eminent Berkeley professor. It was a kitchen for creativity, conversations, forging great projects. A "farmhouse kitchen," Lucy's architecture students called it. The autumn northern California light filled the room from windows on three sides. It reminded her of a kitchen somewhere. She loved its warmth and conversational comfort. African violets flourished on a wide timber window sill next to piles of tiny stones from the sacred Scottish island of Iona—Christine's spiritual home. Over the kitchen sink were tiles made by Christine and her two children, a homey touch. Christine had decorated the kitchen with mosaics made from beach-combing on Iona. "Mosaics are easy and forgiving," she said.

Christine, older by nine years, was her mentor and they were becoming close. The Englishwoman, still homesick for London after twenty years in America, and Lucy, an expatriate Australian-Canadian, trying to find her place there too. Lucy would sit for hours at the kitchen table listening to Christine describe her adventures, her lovers, her research, her spiritual journeys. As Christine busied herself preparing their meal, Lucy's eyes took in Christine's pottery and paintings, her travel mementos. She felt nourished and supported by the love of her friend and their best times together were in that warm kitchen, where their friendship blossomed as they poured their passion into the housing design book they wrote together. This was to become one of the most joyous times of Lucy's life. A photograph of her standing by the sink in Christine's kitchen became a treasured memento.

In those early days, Lucy did not realise how important Christine would be in her life. Lucy was self-absorbed and needy, searching for a home. She did not know that the book they'd write together in Christine's kitchen would be a huge success, cementing their friendship and their professional relationship.

With a grateful sigh, Lucy turned back to her evening's work, locating her notebook on the desk. Christine had placed a pot of pansies there, wine coloured with white and yellow centres. Yes, she was blessed. Christine had taken her in and she was having a belated chance at a misspent youth. Her escape. She was still young and she was free. It was Berkeley in the seventies: great weather, good friends, lots to smoke, wonderful food, interesting men. . . Berkeley was so different from Adelaide! The first day she spent at Christine's they'd gone to a feminist bookstore in Oakland. It had free coffee, muffins and a notice board. Lucy collapsed in laughter in front of a notice advertising a support group for Armenian

lesbians. Not that she wanted to join, mind you. But the specificity of it tickled her fancy. Something for everyone in Berkeley in 1978!

It was lovely here. She had friendship, comfort, enough money to live on. So what was her problem? Her shoulder ached; her head pounded. Letters from her mother always had this effect. She smiled at the aloe vera in a clay pot on the corner of her desk: a healing plant. There is not enough aloe vera in the whole of California to heal my pain, she mused bitterly.

Opening her notebook, Lucy reflected on her circumstances. She was teaching part-time at Berkeley, a big accomplishment for her. She could hardly conceal her delight when she opened that first letter addressed to “Professor Balian”.

As Lucy was examining the entries in her notebook, the telephone rang in the hall.

“It’s Ingrid,” Cindy called up the stairs. “She says she’s calling about the assignment.”

Lucy walked down the stairs to the landing and accepted the phone from Cindy, one of her housemates.

“Hi, Ingrid, how are you tonight?”

“Fine, Lucy, just checking up on you to make sure you’re ready for our class tomorrow morning. You seemed a bit upset by your mother’s letter. Are you managing all right?” Ingrid’s sounded worried.

Lucy lied, yes, she thought so, said she’d see Ingrid in the morning and returned to her room.

Ingrid was Lucy’s teaching assistant, a German landscape architect of forty-five, who lived with her young lover in what appeared to be a state of perpetual orgasmic readiness and contentment. Lucy envied her good-humouredly. Ingrid was too lovely not to love, with her soft knitted wool scarves, long flowing skirts and deep brown eyes. She was the most desirable woman Lucy had ever met. Just being with Ingrid brightened Lucy’s sombre moods.

Ingrid knew her way around the University and a great deal about environmental psychology so they were getting along fine, with Ingrid showing Lucy the ropes. Berkeley fostered new friendships easily, with its comfortable cafés and bookstores. The week before at the Edible Complex they had discussed a new subject Ingrid was taking in the Ph.D. program. She encouraged Lucy to audit it. The graduate seminar focused on the design implications of different stages in the life cycle. Taught by an eminent psychiatrist, it had only six members, ranging in age from nineteen to mid-fifties (the professor).

“You’d love it, Lucy,” Ingrid enthused, sipping a short black while Lucy stirred honey into her decaf cappuccino. “I’m sure it would appeal to your cosmic side and Len’s a real sweetheart. He’s a great teacher.”

The professor welcomed her on Monday morning. “Your presence will be good grist for the class’s intellectual mill, Lucy. You’re just what we need to balance things out in our seminar.” At thirty-five, Lucy broadened the age range and introduced the perspective of a woman from another culture.

The first assignment was simple enough. “Just record the earliest environment you can remember,” Dahl instructed. Reading her notes from the class, Lucy shrugged, dislodging the familiar pain in her shoulder. She disapproved of Professor Dahl’s laconic approach. In Lucy’s classes, such creative assignments were always accompanied by more preparation, more structure: at least some visualisation, meditation or deep breathing. “Forget that New Age crap,” he’d responded good-humouredly when she questioned his approach. “Just think of your earliest environment and draw something—anything—for Monday’s class.”

Lucy didn’t expect much from Professor Dahl’s exercise. Her mind was occupied with other things—her loneliness, a recalcitrant young man she fancied she loved, and Tuesday’s half-prepared lecture for her landscape architecture class. Then she located a familiar sense of apprehension under her ribs: fear. She had left things very late. Perhaps she would not be able to do it, or not do it properly, as she was supposed to. It was after nine; the class met first thing in the morning. She groaned as she hauled out a tin of coloured pens and a piece of watercolour paper from her box of treasures in the closet. This felt like hard work.

Lucy turned to face Christine’s garden. It was fully dark now and the lights of the neighbouring houses winked through the dense foliage of the avocado tree whose branches brushed her window. She could hear the rustle of squirrels and then it was still—a gentle autumn evening. She closed her eyes and sighed.

Suddenly and without effort, she saw another room. She was *in* that room. She opened her eyes and drew it effortlessly, pulling her pens from their box and vigorously laying on the colours: orange and blue. She drew a kitchen, warmly coloured orange, a *Warm Kitchen*. Lucy quickly drew a large table in the centre of the room, a sink with windows above it on one wall, a stove, counters, a back door on another wall, an interior door leading into the rest of the house and a large item of furniture which appeared to be a Welsh dresser on the right wall. The kitchen was warm orange inside; the outside was icy blue. It was one floor up. She imagined steep exterior stairs. She could not see the rest of the house.

Lucy breathed in the bright colours as she drew the details. Normally she was a hesitant artist, a planner intimidated by years of teaching talented designers. But this kitchen was drawing itself. The room felt comfortable and safe. Lucy knew she belonged there, would be protected and cared for there. She propped the pad against the lamp, settled back in her chair and stared at the drawing. She had never seen this kitchen. Or had she? She must have been in this kitchen. When? What to do? This must be an early childhood memory but where was it?



Steeling herself, Lucy rang her mother in Vancouver, seeking clarification. After several rings, the elderly woman hesitantly answered the phone. The effects of her sleeping pill were evident in her trembling voice.

“Oh, Lucy, thank God it’s you. I thought you’d died. I was going to ring Gail tomorrow to see if she knew where you were. I’ve not been well, you know, with the new pacemaker and this bum knee and it’s been months since I heard from you. It must be at least four months. I don’t even know which country you’re in. Why do you treat me so badly? Lucy, you know I’m not getting any younger.”

“I wrote last week and rang a month ago and a letter from you arrived today, thanking me for that card, Mother,” Lucy pleaded, her jaw tense. She leaned her elbow on the desk and spoke slowly into the telephone. “Please listen to me, Mom. I have something important to ask you. It’s about my childhood.”

Lucy heard her mother make an impatient clucking noise but she persevered. She was not going to be sidetracked this time. She described the room she had drawn—its inner warmth, the icy blue outside.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, dear,” her mother stammered, her voice trembling. She sounded angry and evasive. “It’s late and this is just something you’ve dreamed up, Lucy. It’s better not to talk about things like that. You probably just imagined it.”

Her voice was shrill and tense.

Lucy hung on with her questions. “Mom, what can you remember? Where was that room? How old was I when we lived there? Do you remember that kitchen at all?”

It was clearly too much, whatever it was. Lucy’s mother hung up abruptly.

“I knew I was onto something,” Lucy explained to Ingrid later the next morning. “so I called Daddy on Vancouver Island. He was living in a trailer in the bush. The house-building business had gone bust. He and Mother hadn’t spoken for fifteen years.”

“Well, I certainly got a different response from my dad. Like night and day, those two. He totally got into it,” she continued. “Occasionally he asked me a question like, ‘Where was the dresser? Could you see it clearly from the table? Could you see out the window if you were washing dishes at the sink?’”

Lucy imagined a smile turning the corners of Donald’s questions when she communicated the details from her drawing to him. He seemed delighted.

When Lucy finished explaining her drawing, Donald responded instantly.

“You’ve got it exactly right, Doll,” he laughed, delight colouring his voice. “That’s the Copper Cliff house in Ontario, where we lived when I worked as a bookkeeper for International Nickel. We had a little apartment on the second floor with an outside staircase up to it. I spent three weeks building that dresser while you lay in your bassinette on the kitchen table. And then, when we moved, we couldn’t get the damn thing through the door and I bet it’s still in that kitchen. If that old house is still there, of course.”

“And the cold outside—you bet it was cold, too. Don’t you remember? It was 52 below the day you were born! The diapers would freeze before your mother got the clothes pegs on ’em. After they’d been on the line for a while, still frozen, we’d bring them in and stand them up in the kitchen to thaw in front of the fire, like rows of white soldiers standing at attention. And don’t you remember the story of the night your Mother went out and I gave you all that formula when I had the boys over for bridge? That was in the Copper Cliff house when you were about two months old. We lived on Diorite Street, just down the road from the curling rink near the main gate to the INCO smelter.” Lucy remembered the story about Donald’s bridge night but she’d never thought of its location before. As the story went— in that exact kitchen an enthusiastic first-time father eager to quieten his crying baby so the card game could proceed fed her eleven bottles of formula.

Father and daughter laughed companionably. They were good friends when they were talking about buildings or projects but not so good when emotions had to be shared. But when it came to Lucy’s early childhood, Donald always had good stories. Since she couldn’t remember, Lucy assumed that it was true that as a toddler and preschooler she had bitten a boy in the Orillia post office and charmed grumpy old men into smiles. She loved it when Donald filled in the details of her life because she had only fragments of early childhood memories. It was like reliving the good parts and leaving out the rest.

As Donald itemized the kitchen's minute details, she could see his calloused hand with the gold signet ring deftly sketching the *Warm Kitchen*. He went on to describe the Copper Cliff house—actually an apartment—on the upper floor of a big house.

“We moved there three months before you were born and left before you were five months old,” he explained. “and I mostly took care of you in that kitchen. Your mother was quite depressed and spent a lot of time in bed, so I took care of you and changed you and gave you your bottles. I remember it as my time with my new baby and it was a good time, too.”

Lucy was born in January; it would have still been pretty chilly in that mining town when they left in May.

Now Lucy's questions rattled across the long-distance line.

“Dad, this is really important to me. Did we ever have any photos of the Copper Cliff house? Did you ever have any photos of that kitchen? Did we ever go back there after we moved? Did I ever go there when I was older?”

Donald answered patiently, “No, we never went back and as far as I know there were no photos. We were pretty poor, Doll, and we didn't even have a camera then. Within a short time we were living out West—a world away. No, you never saw that house later, Doll. Or a photo of it. Definitely not. Not since you were five months old.”

It was wartime and things were difficult, he reminded her. He left his bookkeeper's job at the mining company and joined the Air Force to get away from Mother. And things didn't get better for them, with the second baby dying two years later and him having to come home from the War on compassionate leave.

“Why was Mother so touchy and evasive when I tried to talk to her?” Lucy asked, shifting uncomfortably on her wooden chair.

After a long silence, Donald replied, “I don't know, Doll. Honestly, I don't.”

Lucy asked again. Again a silence and then Donald answered: “Look, Lucy, you know I'm no good at this. I'm just guessing that she doesn't want to remember your childhood. She's forgotten it and I think maybe she's hoping you will, too. We had some hard times when you were young. But I don't know, Doll. It's all a long time ago. Some things happened that she's ashamed of, I think.”

Lucy tried hard not to let that one in. How could a mother forget her daughter's childhood? Donald sounded uncomfortable talking about this, as though it hurt him deep inside. He was never much good with feelings. He kept to stories, music and dancing. With them he knew he couldn't be trapped. If Donald was just being a storyteller, he was completely in control, the raconteur. Force him off that safe territory and he got very nervous.

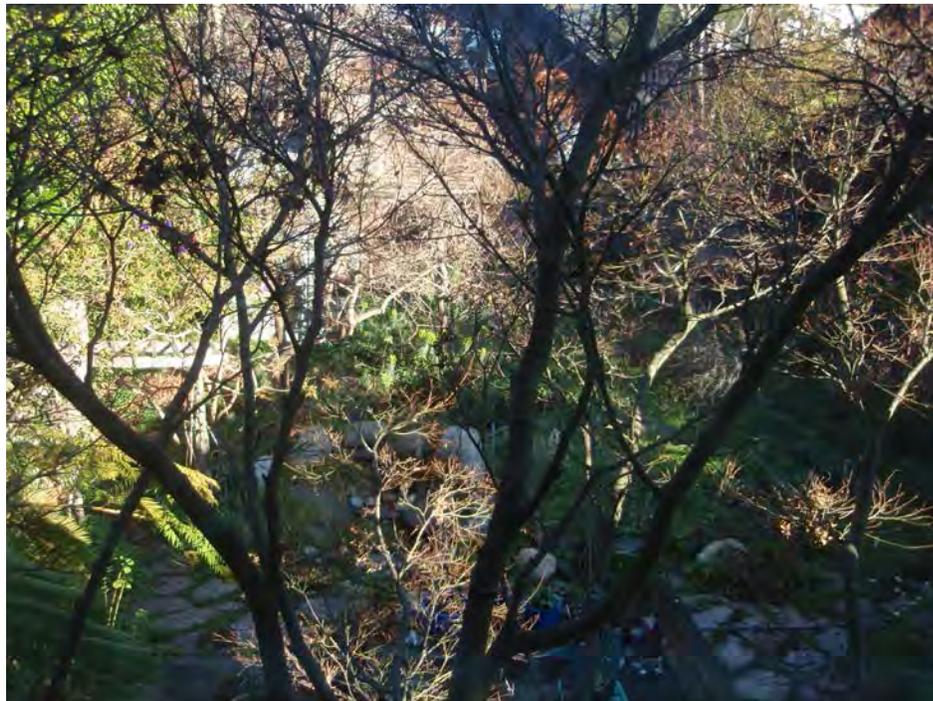
“I’ll just go and take one of my angina tablets, if you don’t mind, Doll,” he said, and excused himself for a moment. When he returned he said simply, “Sometimes talking about the past is hard for me.”

Lucy changed the subject to his stepchildren and the visit she was planning in a couple of months.

“I love you, Dad,” she found herself saying at the end. She loved the sharpness of his memory. It was reassuring that he remembered her life—especially the early years. Somehow it gave her substance, filled in the empty spaces and made her feel more complete. One thing about Donald: he was really interested in her. At least nowadays. He’d been a woeful, absent father and she still couldn’t forgive that. But nowadays he was really trying.

Lucy felt silly about sleeping with her drawing under her pillow but she did it anyway. In the morning, she felt as though angels had visited her. It was a feeling she sometimes had at Christine’s place—a sense that healing had been occurring while she slept. She woke with a sweet, openhearted feeling but her mind was confused.

In the kitchen in the early morning, everything seemed to shimmer. Lucy carried her coffee onto the porch and sat under the avocado tree, reassured by the foggy comfort of the garden. Two trees laden with apples nodded at her. Leaves still fluttered from the tall maple at the bottom of the garden. She nibbled her toast, spread thickly with blackberry jam she had helped Clare make only last month.



Lucy attended the class at 8:30, clutching her drawing, and Professor Dahl began the seminar with her work. Lucy placed her drawing on her knees and started explaining the details. As she explained it and more of her life than she'd intended, she stumbled over her questions, realisations coming rapid-fire.

"It's not possible, Professor Dahl," she exclaimed, pointing to the drawing of the Welsh dresser. "You're not supposed to remember places you experienced only *in utero* and up to five months of age. The tiny baby's brain can't cognise their environment in such a holistic way," she cried. "Babies are not supposed to be able to remember things like that—not in such detail, not so accurately. You're not supposed to be able to put the bits together at that age—to make a complete picture—like a whole room. It takes years before that's possible. How could I remember a whole room?"

"Can't you understand? If this is real, this memory, this kitchen, what does this mean for me, not to mention for the whole field of environmental psychology? What does it tell me about my mother's blocked memory of my childhood, my childhood traumas... How do I make sense of my own memory... my pain...? Can I use it for my healing...?"

She knew she wasn't making sense. Interesting content, wrong context, a voice inside prompted her. Stop talking. This was not therapy, Lucy reminded herself. Not appropriate material for an architecture class. She slumped back into her chair, her right hand moving automatically across her breast to caress her painful shoulder.

Professor Dahl didn't seem to agree. He couldn't see what all the fuss was about. It all seemed perfectly natural to him and, as a psychologist, he knew more than Lucy did about environmental psychology, perception and cognition. His eyes were smiling as he listened. "This is excellent work, Lucy," he responded calmly, reaching out to reassure her. "There is the potential for great wisdom here."

"But where did it come from, that Warm Kitchen?" Lucy moaned.

Dahl avoided the question. "Your past is a rich resource for growth, Lucy," he continued. "It's the same for all of us here. Your memories hold healing images that you can summon to heal your present pain."

Lucy reminded him of the research literature. If it was possible to remember this, what else might she remember? A tear was making its way down her cheek. Ingrid searched in her briefcase for a handkerchief.

Professor Dahl turned his warm brown eyes toward her and smiled, settling the matter once and for all.

"This is your memory, Lucy, yours alone. Where else could it have come from? My advice is that you treasure it and the comfort it brings you. Such a powerful image contains the germ of a great lesson."

Lucy winced. More lessons.

Dahl continued, “Some day you may find yourself in a kitchen that reminds you of your Warm Kitchen and when you do, I predict that you will feel nourished as you did in your original Warm Kitchen. You will feel secure and at home at a deep, symbolic level, at an archetypal level. You will know that the sweetness of that early experience is present again, informing and enriching your life and that your healing is proceeding. When you can know that, Lucy—truly know it with all your senses—then you will know that you are truly blessed.”

