

from My Ghosts

That summer she sometimes came home in the long dusk, with her fingers stained green from pulling weeds in other people's gardens. A small trowel held loosely in one hand and limp bits clinging to her shoes, threaded through her grey hair. 'There you are, Edie,' Uncle Robbie said, 'just in time for *The Whistler*.' As if he hadn't been pacing, and peering out the screen door. As if he hadn't just finished saying, 'Another ten minutes, son, and we'll go find her.' *I'm not your son*, Alan thought, though it didn't matter. Uncle Robbie wasn't even his uncle, Aunt Edie not his aunt, but some kind of cousin on his father's side. His mother had explained it when she drove him to the station, but he'd been too angry to listen.

I am the Whistler and I know many things, for I walk by night. He sat on the floor, close to the radio, and it was a good story, nothing quite as it seemed. The Whistler knew everything, he always did, but he revealed it slowly and in the end no one was blameless, everyone got what they deserved. When it was over Alan said goodnight and they smiled up at him from their chairs, the batty old woman and the one-armed man, and he didn't know how he'd survive it; the war was over but he was a prisoner in a town so small he could walk down every street in less time than it took to go around a city block, trapped in a strange house with people he'd never heard of, who didn't know a thing about him either. He climbed the stairs into stuffier air and his hands hung heavy at his sides, as thick and clumsy as his father's were, his brain just as empty.

There were fathers who had come back with medals and fathers who hadn't come back at all, and then there was Alan's father, sometimes sleeping in his hospital bed and sometimes sitting in a chair in the noisy room at the end of the dull green hallway. He was still a big man, his knees bumping the underside of a muddy brown table, the top of it scraped and scarred. His thick white fingers pushing around the oversized pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Sometimes he said *horsey* and sometimes *yup yup yup*, but mostly he said nothing at all. Most times he didn't even look at them, not even when Alan's mother said his name, touched his cheek with the palm of her hand.

Once a week, for as long as Alan could remember, his mother painted on a bright red smile and backed the big humped car out of the garage while he stood behind, directing her right and left. Sometimes he thought about doing it wrong, thought about the screaming scrape of metal on brick, but his mother was counting on him; she told him so all the time. On those days the hard knot in his stomach was there when he first opened his eyes and clenched tighter and tighter as they crept through the streets, his mother hunched, peering through her thick glasses with her chin almost touching the steering wheel. His job to call out the street signs, although she had to know the way by now. 'Here we are already,' she always said, when the hospital came into view, dark brick and creaking trees and sometimes people outside, nodding and drooling in their chairs. That was the only good thing about being sent away, Alan thought, not having to go through those Sunday visits.

