I listen for my father and I hear his heavy footsteps down the hall. It's not really my father anymore but rather a ghost, his ghost---
the one that has haunted me for years. Every evening, as a child, I
would listen with heart pounding, for those dark steps. I knew what
those steps meant to my family, to my mom. Each step, heavy, loud,
taxing, full of stories, stories I knew—my stories. Of course, it’s
been years now since I last heard those footsteps but the memories are
still alive. Every now and then I catch myself straining to hear those
pounding steps which seem to be coming for me.

My mother left my father when I was about eleven. On that day,
we saved each other. After that, I was no longer forced to look at his
yellow, drunken eyes—avoiding them by looking at my feet and
murmuring, “yes, Daddy.” She no longer wore sweaters in summer in
order to conceal bruises or pasted together our fragmented posses­sions—only to have them broken again the next night.

My father taught me the harsh realities of life at age six. He made
it very clear what I could expect out of life: “Don’t expect anything,
and if you do manage to get something, someone will come along and
take it away.” Every night was the same. He entered, slamming the
door behind him—jailing us with him for the night. Then he began to
terrorize his small, helpless family. Mom said that the less human he
made us feel the more like a man he felt. By the age of six, I knew all
too well the meaning of empty bottles, broken furniture, shattered
glass, yelling, screaming...the sacrifices of our family.

My mother was the focal point of my life. She was my sun, my
food source. Her love nurtured me; gave me the strength to survive. I
remember endless nights lying on the floor, watching monsters dance
around me on the walls, chanting evil curses and talking
of ways to carry out the sacrifice. To my young mind, they were
fantasies rather than manifestations of my own entrapment.

Our home on Sycamore Street was beautiful with its white
picket fence, well-manicured lawn and roses that climbed up the
trellises toward the sun. What was seemingly the epitome of the
American dream was, in reality, a dangerous maze where the frailty of
mother and child was abused nightly.

I was eleven when mama finally found her way out. It started like
any other morning with the sun, ablaze with oranges and pinks, peek­ing
over the horizon. I turned my head just in time to see it rise—a
perfectly round, serene planet—in stark contradiction to my dark
world. Although sunrises always infused me with hope, the hope was fleeting. I decided that a perfect sunrise was merely a compensation for the harsh day that would inevitably follow.

As I yawned I looked out the window at the perfectly aligned houses with the identical sycamores that flanked the street. My eyes then wandered back to my room. Suddenly I noticed the stark contrast of the cherry bedroom furniture against the white washed walls. The trophies and posters of a child’s heroes broke the sterile monotony of the contrived and dead setting. As I drifted in and out of consciousness, I thought, as usual, of ways to escape. However, as I thought my mom would never leave, I abandoned these thoughts as other girls abandon romantic fantasies. I could never leave her behind. My thoughts were abruptly pushed aside as my father’s loud cracking voice filled my head.

“What the hell are you doing up there? Get up right now...miserable, good-for-nothing...”

“Sorry, Dad. I’ll be right out.”

My heart pounded and my pulse quickened. By eleven years of age, I already had an ulcer. I could feel the familiar sharp pains, working slowly up my esophagus until the taste of blood hit the back of my throat. My chest tightened as a feeling of foreboding filled my body. I wondered why my father came to my door this morning instead of my mother. I knew it would be another bad day. I would have to hurry now. Hurry, hurry, hurry! Don’t make him mad. Even though he makes you sick—God! Hurry!

“If you’re not out here in two seconds I’m going to come in and get you!”

My hands fumbled to find a pair of matching socks. I quickly pulled two socks out of my drawer. I’d have to live with mismatched socks for today. Hurriedly I put them on, ran a comb through my hair and crammed my feet into my shoes. I knew within the two seconds there would be more than verbal reprimands.

I looked at my mother, standing in the midst of broken dishes and over-turned chairs. My eyes were drawn to her curio cabinet. There was not much left of what had once been a magnificent display of my mom’s delicately hand crafted crystal and porcelain figurines. The glass had been punched through and I could see the smashed carousel horses and the delicately carved heads of clowns lying in a pile of glass and blood.
As I stared at the destruction, my father roughly grabbed me by the collar. “Listen,” he roared, “when I call, you come. Understand?”

“Sorry,” I said, staring at my feet.

“Look at me,” he yelled, grabbing my chin and jerking my face only inches from his. I knew if he sensed my fear he would attack, like the dog I had read about in Ms. Matusak’s science class, fourth period, right after recess.....

“Listen to me, you little bitch...do you understand that everything you see around you is because of me? That it’s from my blood and sweat? I work my ass off for you and your mom and all you do is take, take, take. There’s never any giving. Why do I break my back? You and your mom don’t care how I feel. You are worthless to me. Just worthless.” He then looked right into my eyes. His eyes looked like black marbles submerged in a pale yellow jelly. His hand began the familiar shaking. He was hung over. His addiction had promised salvation and, once again, my father had believed it.

With a quick jerk of his wrist he threw me down to the floor. My face hit the floor first, my body following close behind. The ache that had been in my stomach and throat was now throbbing in my head. I could taste blood again, but this time it was from my head, not my throat. I heard muffled screams through yelling and I wanted to cry out “Mama, help me”. Her cries overlapping with mine—each of us wanting to comfort the other. Each of us unable to reach the other—frozen by fear, astonishment, and pain. We couldn’t help each other. Not here. We would have to escape together.

That was the morning we both saw the light—the way out. Ironically, the light appeared just after everything had gone black. And even though we escaped him, each night, the darkness still finds me straining to hear his footsteps.