

Introduction “Daisy, in the Sun”

During the London Blitz, Edward R. Murrow was startled to see a fire engine racing past. It was the middle of the day, the sirens had not gone, and he hadn't heard any bombers. He could not imagine where a fire engine would be going.

It came to him, after much thought, that it was going to an ordinary house fire, and that that seemed somehow impossible, as if all ordinary disasters should be suspended for the duration of this great Disaster that was facing London and commanding everybody's attention. But of course houses caught fire and burned down for reasons that had nothing to do with the Blitz, and even in the face of Armageddon, there are still private armageddons to be faced.

Daisy, in the Sun

Connie Willis

None of the others were any help. Daisy's brother, when she knelt beside him on the kitchen floor and said, “Do you remember when we lived at Grandma's house, just the three of us, nobody else?” looked at her blankly over the pages of his book, his face closed and uninterested. “What is your book about?” she asked kindly. “Is it about the sun? You always used to read your books out loud to me at Grandma's. All about the sun.”

He stood up and went to the windows of the kitchen and looked out at the snow, tracing patterns on the dry window. The book, when Daisy looked at it, was about something else altogether.

“It didn't always snow like this at home, did it?” Daisy would ask her grandmother. “It couldn't have snowed all the time, not even in Canada, could it?”

It was the train this time, not the kitchen, but her grandmother went on measuring for the curtains as if she didn't notice. “How can the trains run if it snows all the time?” Her grandmother didn't answer her. She went on measuring the wide curved train windows with her long yellow tape measure. She wrote the measurements on little slips of paper, and they drifted from her pockets like the snow outside, without sound.

Daisy waited until it was the kitchen again. The red cafe curtains hung streaked and limp across the bottom half of the square windows. “The sun faded the curtains, didn't it?” she asked slyly, but her grandmother would not be tricked. She measured and wrote and dropped the measurements like ash around her.

Daisy looked from her grandmother to the rest of them, shambling up and down the length of her grandmother's kitchen. She would not ask them. Talking to them would be like admitting they belonged here, muddling clumsily around the room, bumping into each other.

Daisy stood up. “It *was* the sun that faded them,” she said. “I remember,” and went into her room and shut the door.

The room was always her own room, no matter what happened outside. It stayed the same, yellow ruffled muslin on the bed, yellow priscillas at the window. She had refused to let her mother put blinds up in her room. She remembered that quite clearly. She had stayed in her room the whole day with her door barricaded. But she could not remember why her mother had wanted to put them up or what had happened afterward.

Daisy sat down cross-legged in the middle of the bed, hugging the yellow ruffled pillow from her bed

against her chest. Her mother constantly reminded her that a young lady sat with her legs together. “You’re fifteen, Daisy. You’re a young lady whether you like it or not.”

Why could she remember things like that and not how they had gotten here and where her mother was and why it snowed all the time yet was never cold? She hugged the pillow tightly against her and tried, tried to remember.

It was like pushing against something, something both yielding and unyielding. It was herself, trying to push her breasts flat against her chest after her mother had told her she was growing up, that she would need to wear a bra. She had tried to push through to the little girl she had been before, but even though she pressed them into herself with the flats of her hands, they were still there. A barrier, impossible to get through.

Daisy clutched at the yielding pillow, her eyes squeezed shut. “Grandma came in,” she said out loud, reaching for the one memory she could get to, “Grandma came in and said...”

She was looking at one of her brother’s books. She had been holding it, looking at it, one of her brother’s books about the sun, and as the door opened he reached out and took it away from her. He was angry—about the book? Her grandmother came in, looking hot and excited, and he took the book away from her. Her grandmother said, “They got the material in. I bought enough for all the windows.” She had a sack full of folded cloth, red-and-white gingham. “I bought almost the whole bolt,” her grandmother said. She was flushed. “Isn’t it pretty?” Daisy reached out to touch the thin pretty cloth. And... Daisy clutched at the pillow, wrinkling the ruffled edge. She had reached out to touch the thin pretty cloth and then...

It was no use. She could not get any further. She had never been able to get any further. Sometimes she sat on her bed for days. Sometimes she started at the end and worked back through the memory and it was still the same. She could not remember any more on either side. Only the book and her grandmother coming in and reaching out her hand.

Daisy opened her eyes. She put the pillow back on the bed and uncrossed her legs and took a deep breath. She was going to have to ask the others. There was nothing else to do.

She stood a minute by the door before she opened it, wondering which of the places it would be. It was her mother’s living room, the walls a cool blue and the windows covered with Venetian blinds. Her brother sat on the gray-blue carpet reading. Her grandmother had taken down one of the blinds. She was measuring the tall window. Outside the snow fell.

The strangers moved up and down on the blue carpet. Sometimes Daisy thought she recognized them, that they were friends of her parents or people she had seen at school, but she could not be sure. They did not speak to each other in their endless, patient wanderings. They did not even seem to see each other. Sometimes, passing down the long aisle of the train or circling her grandmother’s kitchen or pacing the blue living room, they bumped into each other. They did not stop and say excuse me. They bumped into each other as if they did not know they did it, and moved on. They collided without sound or feeling, and each time they did, they seemed less and less like people Daisy knew and more and more like strangers. She looked at them anxiously, trying to recognize them so she could ask them.

The young man had come in from outside. Daisy was sure of it, though there was no draft of cold air to convince her, no snow for the young man to shrug from his hair and shoulders. He moved with easy direction through the others, and they looked up at him as he passed. He sat down on the blue couch and smiled at Daisy’s brother. Her brother looked up from his book and smiled back. He has come in from outside, Daisy thought. He will know.

She sat down near him, on the end of the couch, her arms crossed in front of her. “Has something happened to the sun?” she asked him in a whisper.

He looked up. His face was as young as hers, tanned and smiling. Daisy felt, far down, a little quiver of fear, a faint alien feeling like that which had signaled the coming of her first period. She stood up and backed away from him, only a step, and nearly collided with one of the strangers.

“Well, hello,” the boy said. “If it isn’t little Daisy!”

Her hands knotted into fists. She did not see how she could not have recognized him before—the easy confidence, the casual smile. He would not help her. He knew, of course he knew, he had always known everything, but he wouldn’t tell her. He would laugh at her. She must not let him laugh at her.

“Hi, Ron,” she was going to say, but the last consonant drifted away into uncertainty. She had never been sure what his name was.

He laughed. “What makes you think something’s happened to the sun, Daisy-Daisy?” He had his arm over the back of the couch. “Sit down and tell me all about it.” If she sat down next to him he could easily put his arm around her.

“Has something happened to the sun?” she repeated more loudly from where she stood. “It never shines anymore.”

“Are you sure?” he said, and laughed again. He was looking at her breasts. She crossed her arms in front of her.

“Has it?” she said stubbornly, like a child.

“What do you think?”

“I think maybe everybody was wrong about the sun.” She stopped, surprised at what she had said, at what she was remembering now. Then she went on, forgetting to keep her arms in front of her, listening to what she said next. “They all thought it was going to blow up. They said it would swallow the whole earth up. But maybe it didn’t. Maybe it just burned out, like a match or something, and it doesn’t shine anymore and that’s why it snows all the time and—”

“Cold,” Ron said.

“What?”

“Cold,” he said. “Wouldn’t it be cold if that had happened?”

“What?” she said stupidly.

“Daisy,” he said, and smiled at her. She reeled a little. The tugging fear was further down and more definite.

“Oh,” she said, and ran, veering around the others milling up and down, up and down, into her own room. She slammed the door behind her and lay down on the bed, holding her stomach and remembering.

Her father had called them all together in the living room. Her mother perched on the edge of the blue couch, already looking frightened. Her brother had brought a book in with him, but he stared blindly at

the page.

It was cold in the living room. Daisy moved into the one patch of sunlight, and waited. She had already been frightened for a year. And in a minute, she thought, I'm going to hear something that will make me more afraid.

She felt a sudden stunning hatred of her parents, able to pull her in out of the sun and into darkness, able to make her frightened just by talking to her. She had been sitting on the porch today. That other day she had been lying in the sun in her old yellow bathing suit when her mother called her in.

"You're a big girl now," her mother had said once they were in her room. She was looking at the outgrown yellow suit that was tight across the chest and pulled up on the legs. "There are things you need to know."

Daisy's heart had begun to pound. "I wanted to tell you so you wouldn't hear a lot of rumors." She had had a booklet with her, pink and white and terrifying. "I want you to read this, Daisy. You're changing, even though you may not notice it. Your breasts are developing and soon you'll be starting your period. That means—"

Daisy knew what it meant. The girls at school had told her. Darkness and blood. Boys wanting to touch her breasts, wanting to penetrate her darkness. And then more blood.

"No," Daisy said. "No. I don't want to."

"I know it seems frightening to you now, but someday soon you'll meet a nice boy and then you'll understand..."

No, I won't. Never. I know what boys do to you.

"Five years from now you won't feel this way, Daisy. You'll see..."

Not in five years. Not in a hundred. No.

"I won't have breasts," Daisy shouted, and threw the pillow off her bed at her mother. "I won't have a period. I won't let it happen. No!"

Her mother had looked at her pityingly. "Why, Daisy, it's already started." She had put her arms around her. "There's nothing to be afraid of, honey."

Daisy had been afraid ever since. And now she would be more afraid, as soon as her father spoke.

"I wanted to tell you all together," her father said, "so you would not hear some other way. I wanted you to know what is really happening and not just rumors." He paused and took a ragged breath. They even started their speeches alike.

"I think you should hear it from me," her father said. "The sun is going to go nova."

Her mother gasped, a long, easy intake of breath like a sigh, the last easy breath her mother would take. Her brother closed his book. Is that all? Daisy thought, surprised.

"The sun has used up all the hydrogen in its core. It's starting to burn itself up, and when it does, it will expand and—" he stumbled over the word.

"It's going to swallow us up," her brother said. "I read it in a book. The sun will just explode, all the way out to Mars. It'll swallow up Mercury and Venus and Earth and Mars and we'll all be dead."

Her father nodded. “Yes,” he said, as if he was relieved that the worst was out.

“No,” her mother said. And Daisy thought, This is nothing. Nothing. Her mother’s talks were worse than this. Blood and darkness.

“There have been changes in the sun,” her father said. “There have been more solar storms, too many. And the sun is releasing unusual bursts of neutrinos. Those are signs that it will—”

“How long?” her mother asked.

“A year. Five years at the most. They don’t know.”

“We have to stop it!” Daisy’s mother shrieked, and Daisy looked up from her place in the sun, amazed at her mother’s fear.

“There’s nothing we can do,” her father said. “It’s already started.”

“I won’t let it,” her mother said. “Not to my children. I won’t let it happen. Not to my Daisy. She’s always loved the sun.”

At her mother’s words, Daisy remembered something. An old photograph her mother had written on, scrawling across the bottom of the picture in white ink. The picture was herself as a toddler in a yellow sunsuit, concave little girl’s chest and pooching toddler’s stomach. Bucket and shovel and toes dug into the hot sand, squinting up into the sunlight. And her mother’s writing across the bottom: “Daisy, in the sun.”

Her father had taken her mother’s hand and was holding it. He had put his arm around her brother’s shoulders. Their heads were ducked, prepared for a blow, as if they thought a bomb was going to fall on them.

Daisy thought, All of us, in a year or maybe five, surely five at the most, all of us children again, warm and happy, in the sun. She could not make herself be afraid.

It was the train again. The strangers moved up and down the long aisle of the dining car, knocking against each other randomly. Her grandmother measured the little window in the door at the end of the car. She did not look out the window at the ashen snow. Daisy could not see her brother.

Ron was sitting at one of the tables that were covered with the heavy worn white damask of dining cars. The vase and dull silver on the table were heavy so they would not fall off with the movement of the train. Ron leaned back in his chair and looked out the window at the snow.

Daisy sat down across the table from him. Her heart was beating painfully in her chest. “Hi,” she said. She was afraid to add his name for fear the word would trail away as it had before and he would know how frightened she was.

He turned and smiled at her. “Hello, Daisy-Daisy,” he said.

She hated him with the same sudden intensity she had felt for her parents, hated him for his ability to make her afraid.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

He turned slightly in the seat and grinned at her.

“You don’t belong here,” she said belligerently. “I went to Canada to live with my grandmother.” Her eyes widened. She had not known that before she said it. “I didn’t even know you. You worked in the grocery store when we lived in California.” She was suddenly overwhelmed by what she was saying. “You don’t belong here,” she murmured.

“Maybe it’s all a dream, Daisy.”

She looked at him, still angry, her chest heaving with the shock of remembering. “What?”

“I said, maybe you’re just dreaming all this.” He put his elbows on the table and leaned toward her. “You always had the most incredible dreams, Daisy-Daisy.”

She shook her head. “Not like this. They weren’t like this. I always had good dreams.” The memory was coming now, faster this time, a throbbing in her side where the pink and white book said her ovaries were. She was not sure she could make it to her room. She stood up, clutching at the white tablecloth. “They weren’t like this.” She stumbled through the milling people toward her room.

“Oh, and Daisy,” Ron said. She stopped, her hand on the door of her room, the memory almost there. “You’re still cold.”

“What?” she said blankly.

“Still cold. You’re getting warmer, though.”

She wanted to ask him what he meant, but the memory was upon her. She shut the door behind her, breathing heavily, and groped for the bed.

All her family had had nightmares. The three of them sat at breakfast with drawn, tired faces, their eyes looking bruised. The lead-backed curtains for the kitchen hadn’t come yet, so they had to eat breakfast in the living room where they could close the Venetian blinds. Her mother and father sat on the blue couch with their knees against the crowded coffee table. Daisy and her brother sat on the floor.

Her mother said, staring at the closed blinds, “I dreamed I was full of holes, tiny little holes, like dotted swiss.”

“Now, Evelyn,” her father said.

Her brother said, “I dreamed the house was on fire and the fire trucks came and put it out, but then the fire trucks caught on fire and the fire men and the trees and—”

“That’s enough,” her father said. “Eat your breakfast.” To his wife he said gently, “Neutrinos pass through all of us all the time. They pass right through the earth. They’re completely harmless. They don’t make holes at all. It’s nothing, Evelyn. Don’t worry about the neutrinos. They can’t hurt you.”

“Daisy, you had a dotted swiss dress once, didn’t you?” her mother said, still looking at the blinds. “It was yellow. All those little dots, like holes.”

“May I be excused?” her brother asked, holding a book with a photo of the sun on the cover.

Her father nodded and her brother went outside, already reading. “Wear your hat!” Daisy’s mother said, her voice rising perilously on the last word. She watched him until he was out of the room, then she turned and looked at Daisy with her bruised eyes. “You had a nightmare too, didn’t you, Daisy?”

Daisy shook her head, looking down at her bowl of cereal. She had been looking out between the Venetian blinds before breakfast, looking out at the forbidden sun. The stiff plastic blinds had caught open, and now there was a little triangle of sunlight on Daisy's bowl of cereal. She and her mother were both looking at it. Daisy put her hand over the light.

"Did you have a nice dream, then, Daisy, or don't you remember?" She sounded accusing.

"I remember," Daisy said, watching the sunlight on her hand. She had dreamed of a bear. A massive golden bear with shining fur. Daisy was playing ball with the bear. She had in her two hands a little blue-green ball. The bear reached out lazily with his wide golden arm and swatted the blue ball out of Daisy's hands and away. The wide, gentle sweep of his great paw was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Daisy smiled to herself at the memory of it.

"Tell me your dream, Daisy," her mother said.

"All right," Daisy said angrily. "It was about a big yellow bear and a little blue ball that he swatted." She swung her arm toward her mother.

Her mother winced.

"Swatted us all to kingdom come, Mother!" she shouted and flung herself out of the dark living room into the bright morning sun.

"Wear your hat," her mother called after her, and this time the last word rose almost to a scream.

Daisy stood against the door for a long time, watching him. He was talking to her grandmother. She had put down her yellow tape measure with the black coal numbers and was nodding and smiling at what he said. After a very long time he reached out his hand and covered hers, patting it kindly.

Her grandmother stood up slowly and went to the window, where the faded red curtains did not shut out the snow, but she did not look at the curtains. She stood and looked out at the snow, smiling faintly and without anxiety.

Daisy edged her way through the crowd in the kitchen, frowning, and sat down across from Ron. His hands still rested flat on the red linoleum-topped table. Daisy put her hands on the table, too, almost touching his. She turned them palm up, in a gesture of helplessness.

"It isn't a dream, is it?" she asked him.

His fingers were almost touching hers. "What makes you think I'd know? I don't belong here, remember? I work in a grocery store, remember?"

"You know everything," she said simply.

"Not everything."

The cramp hit her. Her hands, still palm up, shook a little and then groped for the metal edge of the red table as she tried to straighten up.

"Warmer all the time, Daisy-Daisy," he said.

She did not make it to her room. She leaned helplessly against the door and watched her grandmother, measuring and writing and dropping the little slips of paper around her. And remembered.

Her mother did not even know him. She had seen him at the grocery store. Her mother, who never went out, who wore sunglasses and long-sleeved shirts and a sun hat, even inside the darkened blue living room—her mother had met him at the grocery store and brought him home. She had taken off her hat and her ridiculous gardening gloves and gone to the grocery store to find him. It must have taken incredible courage.

“He said he’d seen you at school and wanted to ask you out himself, but he was afraid I’d say you were too young, isn’t that right, Ron?” Her mother spoke in a rapid, nervous voice. Daisy was not sure whether she had said Ron or Rob or Rod. “So I said why don’t you just come on home with me right now and meet her? There’s no time like the present, I say. Isn’t that right, Ron?”

He was not embarrassed by her at all. “Would you like to go get a Coke, Daisy? I’ve got my car here.”

“Of course she wants to go. Don’t you, Daisy?”

No. She wished the sun would reach out lazily, the great golden bear, and swat them all away. Right now.

“Daisy,” her mother said, hastily brushing at her hair with her fingers. “There’s so little time left. I wanted you to have...” Darkness and blood. You wanted me to be as frightened as you are. Well, I’m not, Mother. It’s too late. We’re almost there now.

But when she went outside with him, she saw his convertible parked at the curb, and she felt the first faint flutter of fear. It had the top down. She looked up at his tanned, smiling face, and thought, He isn’t afraid.

“Where do you want to go, Daisy?” he asked. He had his bare arm across the back of the seat. He could easily move it from there to around her shoulders. Daisy sat against the door, her arms wrapped around her chest.

“I’d like to go for a ride. With the top down. I love the sun,” she said to frighten him, to see the same expression she could see on her mother’s face when Daisy told her lies about the dreams.

“Me, too,” he said. “It sounds like you don’t believe all that garbage they feed us about the sun, either. It’s a lot of scare talk, that’s all. You don’t see me getting skin cancer, do you?” He moved his golden-tanned arm lazily around her shoulder to show her. “A lot of people getting hysterical for nothing. My physics teacher says the sun could emit neutrinos at the present rate for five thousand years before the sun would collapse. All this stuff about the aurora borealis. Geez, you’d think these people had never seen a solar flare before. There’s nothing to be afraid of, Daisy-Daisy.”

He moved his arm dangerously close to her breast.

“Do you have nightmares?” she asked him, desperate to frighten him.

“No. All my dreams are about you.” His fingers traced a pattern, casually, easily on her blouse. “What do you dream about?”

She thought she would frighten him like she frightened her mother. Her dreams always seemed so beautiful, but when she began to tell them to her mother, her mother’s eyes became wide and dark with fear. And then Daisy would change the dream, make it sound worse than it was, ruin its beauty to make it frighten her mother.

“I dreamed I was rolling a golden hoop. It was hot. It burned my hand whenever I touched it. I was

wearing earrings, little golden hoops in my ears that spun like the hoop when I ran. And a golden bracelet.” She watched his face as she told him, to see the fear. He traced the pattern aimlessly with his finger, closer and closer to the nipple of her breast.

“I rolled the hoop down a hill and it started rolling faster and faster. I couldn’t keep up with it. It rolled on by itself, like a wheel, a golden wheel, rolling over everything.”

She had forgotten her purpose. She had told the dream as she remembered it, with the little secret smile at the memory. His hand had closed over her breast and rested there, warm as the sun on her face.

He looked as if he didn’t know it was there. “Boy, my psych teacher would have a ball with that one! Who would think a kid like you could have a sexy dream like that? Wow! Talk about Freudian! My psych teacher says—”

“You think you know everything, don’t you?” Daisy said.

His fingers traced the nipple through her thin blouse, tracing a burning circle, a tiny burning hoop.

“Not quite,” he said, and bent close to her face. Darkness and blood. “I don’t know quite how to take you.”

She wrenched free of his face, free of his arm. “You won’t take me at all. Not ever. You’ll be dead. We’ll all be dead in the sun,” she said, and flung herself out of the convertible and back into the darkened house.

Daisy lay doubled up on the bed for a long time after the memory was gone. She would not talk to him anymore. She could not remember anything without him, but she did not care. It was all a dream anyway. What did it matter? She hugged her arms to her.

It was not a dream. It was worse than a dream. She sat very straight on the edge of the bed, her head up and her arms at her side, her feet together on the floor, the way a young lady was supposed to sit. When she stood up, there was no hesitation in her manner. She walked straight to the door and opened it. She did not stop to see what room it was. She did not even glance at the strangers milling up and down. She went straight to Ron and put her hand on his shoulder.

“This is hell, isn’t it?”

He turned, and there was something like hope on his face. “Why, Daisy!” he said, and took her hands and pulled her down to sit beside him. It was the train. Their folded hands rested on the white damask tablecloth. She looked at the hands. There was no use trying to pull away.

Her voice did not shake. “I was very unkind to my mother. I used to tell her my dreams just to make her frightened. I used to go out without a hat, just because it scared her so much. She couldn’t help it. She was so afraid the sun would explode.” She stopped and stared at her hands. “I think it did explode and everybody died, like my father said. I think... I should have lied to her about the dreams. I should have told her I dreamed about boys, about growing up, about things that didn’t frighten her. I could have made up nightmares like my brother did.”

“Daisy,” he said. “I’m afraid confessions aren’t quite in my line. I don’t—”

“She killed herself,” Daisy said. “She sent us to my grandmother’s in Canada and then she killed herself. And so I think that if we are all dead, then I went to hell. That’s what hell is, isn’t it? Coming face to face

with what you're most afraid of."

"Or what you love. Oh, Daisy," he said, holding her fingers tightly, "whatever made you think that this was hell?"

In her surprise, she looked straight into his eyes. "Because there isn't any sun," she said.

His eyes burned her, burned her. She felt blindly for the white-covered table, but the room had changed. She could not find it. He pulled her down beside him on the blue couch. With him still clinging to her hands, still holding onto her, she remembered.

They were being sent away, to protect them from the sun. Daisy was just as glad to go. Her mother was angry with her all the time. She forced Daisy to tell her her dreams every morning at breakfast in the dark living room. Her mother had put blackout curtains up over the blinds so that no light got in at all, and in the blue twilight not even the little summer slants of light from the blinds fell on her mother's frightened face.

There was nobody on the beaches. Her mother would not let her go out, even to the grocery store, without a hat and sunglasses. She would not let them fly to Canada. She was afraid of magnetic storms. They sometimes interrupted the radio signals from the towers. Her mother was afraid the plane would crash.

She sent them on the train, kissing them goodbye at the train station, for the moment oblivious to the long dusty streaks of light from the vaulted train-station windows. Her brother went ahead of them out to the platform, and her mother pulled Daisy suddenly into a dark shadowed corner. "What I told you before, about your period, that won't happen now. The radiation—I called the doctor and he said not to worry. It's happening to everyone."

Again Daisy felt the faint pull of fear. Her period had started months ago, dark and bloody as she had imagined. She had not told anyone. "I won't worry," she said.

"Oh, my Daisy," her mother said suddenly. "My Daisy in the sun," and seemed to shrink back into the darkness. But as they pulled out of the station, she came out into the direct sun and waved goodbye to them.

It was wonderful on the train. The few passengers stayed in their cabins with the shades drawn. There were no shades in the dining car, no people to tell Daisy to get out of the sunlight. She sat in the deserted dining car and looked out the wide windows. The train flew through forests, thin branchy forests of spindly pines and aspens. The sun flickered in on Daisy—sun and then shadows and then sun, running across her face. She and her brother ordered an orgy of milkshakes and desserts and nobody said anything to them.

Her brother read his books about the sun out loud to her. "Do you know what it's like in the middle of the sun?" he asked her. Yes. You stand with a bucket and a shovel and your bare toes digging into the sand, a child again, not afraid, squinting up into the yellow light.

"No," she said.

"Atoms can't even hold together in the middle of the sun. It's so crowded they bump into each other all the time, bump bump bump, like that, and their electrons fly off and run around free. Sometimes when there's a collision, it lets off an X-ray that goes whoosh, all the way out at the speed of light, like a ball in

a pinball machine. Bing-bang-bing, all the way to the surface.”

“Why do you read those books anyway? To scare yourself?”

“No. To scare Mom.” That was a daring piece of honesty, suitable not even for the freedom of Grandma’s, suitable only for the train. She smiled at him.

“You’re not even scared, are you?”

She felt obliged to answer him with equal honesty. “No,” she said, “not at all.”

“Why not?”

Because it won’t hurt. Because I won’t remember afterwards.

Because I’ll stand in the sun with my bucket and shovel and look up and not be frightened. “I don’t know,” Daisy said. “I’m just not.”

“I am. I dream about burning all the time. I think about how much it hurts when I burn my finger and then I dream about it hurting like that all over forever.” He had been lying to their mother about his dreams, too.

“It won’t be like that,” Daisy said. “We won’t even know it’s happened. We won’t remember a thing.”

“When the sun goes nova, it’ll start using itself up. The core will start filling up with atomic ash, and that’ll make the sun start using up all its own fuel. Do you know it’s pitch-dark in the middle of the sun? See, the radiations are X-rays, and they’re too short to see. They’re invisible. Pitch-dark and ashes falling around you. Can you imagine that?”

“It doesn’t matter.” They were passing a meadow and Daisy’s face was full in the sun. “We won’t be there. We’ll be dead. We won’t remember anything.”

Daisy had not realized how relieved she would be to see her grandmother, narrow face sunburned, arms bare. She was not even wearing a hat. “Daisy, dear, you’re growing up,” she said. She did not make it sound like a death sentence. “And David, you still have your nose in a book, I see.”

It was nearly dark when they got to her little house. “What’s that?” David asked, standing on the porch.

Her grandmother’s voice did not rise dangerously at all. “The aurora borealis. I tell you, we’ve had some shows up here lately. It’s like the Fourth of July.”

Daisy had not realized how hungry she had been to hear someone who was not afraid. She looked up. Great red curtains of light billowed almost to the zenith, fluttering in some solar wind. “It’s beautiful,” Daisy whispered, but her grandmother was holding the door open for her to go in, and so happy was she to see the clear light in her grandmother’s eyes, she followed her into the little kitchen with its red linoleum table and the red curtains hanging at the windows.

“It is so nice to have company,” her grandmother said, climbing onto a chair. “Daisy, hold this end, will you?” She dangled the long end of a yellow plastic ribbon down to Daisy. Daisy took it, looking anxiously at her grandmother. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Measuring for new curtains, dear,” she said, reaching into her pocket for a slip of paper and a pencil. “What’s the length, Daisy?”

“Why do you need new curtains?” Daisy asked. “These look fine to me.”

“They don’t keep the sun out,” her grandmother said. Her eyes had gone coal-black with fear. Her voice was rising with every word. “We have to have new curtains, Daisy, and there’s no cloth. Not in the whole town, Daisy. Can you imagine that? We had to send to Ottawa. They bought up all the cloth in town. Can you imagine that, Daisy?”

“Yes,” Daisy said, and wished she could be afraid.

Ron still held her hands tightly. She looked steadily at him. “Warmer, Daisy,” he said. “Almost here.”

“Yes,” she said.

He untwined their fingers and rose from the couch. He walked through the crowd in the blue living room and went out the door into the snow. She did not try to go to her room. She watched them all, the strangers in their endless, random movement, her brother walking while he read, her grandmother standing on a chair, and the memory came quite easily and without pain.

“You wanta see something?” her brother asked.

Daisy was looking out the window. All day long the lights had been flickering, even though it was calm and silent outside. Their grandmother had gone to town to see if the fabric for the curtains had come in. Daisy did not answer him.

He shoved the book in front of her face. “That’s a prominence,” he said. The pictures were in black and white, like old-fashioned snapshots, only under them instead of her mother’s scrawled white ink, it said, “High Altitude Observatory, Boulder, Colorado.”

“That’s an eruption of hot gas hundreds of thousands of feet high.”

“No,” Daisy said, taking the book into her own lap. “That’s my golden hoop. I saw it in my dream.”

She turned the page.

David leaned over her shoulder and pointed. “That was the big eruption in 1946 when it first started to go wrong only they didn’t know it yet. It weighed a billion tons. The gas went out a million miles.”

Daisy held the book like a snapshot of a loved one.

“It just went bash, and knocked all this gas out into space. There were all kinds of—”

“It’s my golden bear,” she said. The great paw of flame reached lazily out from the sun’s black surface in the picture, the wild silky paw of flaming gas.

“This is the stuff you’ve been dreaming?” her brother asked. “This is the stuff you’ve been telling me about?” His voice went higher and higher. “I thought you said the dreams were nice.”

“They were,” Daisy said.

He pulled the book away from her and flipped angrily through the pages to a colored diagram on a black ground. It showed a glowing red ball with concentric circles drawn inside it. “There,” he said, shoving it at Daisy. “That’s what’s going to happen to us.” He jabbed angrily at one of the circles inside the red ball. “That’s us. That’s us! Inside the sun! Dream about that, why don’t you?”

He slammed the book shut.

“But we’ll all be dead, so it won’t matter,” Daisy said. “It won’t hurt. We won’t remember anything.”

“That’s what you think! You think you know everything. Well, you don’t know what anything is. I read a book about it, and you know what it said? They don’t even know what memory is. They think maybe it isn’t even in the brain cells. That it’s in the atoms somewhere, and even if we’re blown apart, that memory stays. What if we do get burned by the sun and we still remember? What if we go on burning and burning and remembering and remembering forever?”

Daisy said quietly, “He wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t hurt us.” There had been no fear as she stood digging her toes into the sand and looking up at him, only wonder. “He—”

“You’re crazy!” her brother shouted. “You know that? You’re crazy. You talk about him like he’s your boyfriend or something! It’s the sun, the wonderful sun that’s going to kill us all!” He yanked the book away from her. He was crying.

“I’m sorry,” Daisy was about to say, but their grandmother came in just then, hatless, with her hair blowing around her thin, sunburned face.

“They got the material in,” she said jubilantly. “I bought enough for all the windows.” She spilled out two sacks of red gingham. It billowed out across the table like the northern lights, red over red. “I thought it would never get here.”

Daisy reached out to touch it.

She waited for him, sitting at the white-damask table of the dining car. He hesitated at the door, standing framed by the snow of ash behind him, and then came gaily in, singing.

“Daisy, Daisy, give me your theory do,” he sang. He carried in his arms a bolt of red cloth. It billowed out from the bolt as he handed it to her grandmother—she standing on the chair, transfixed by joy, the pieces of paper, the yellow tape measure fallen from her forever.

Daisy came and stood in front of him.

“Daisy, Daisy,” he said gaily. “Tell me—”

She put her hand on his chest. “No theory,” she said. “I know.”

“Everything, Daisy?” He smiled the easy, lopsided smile, and she thought sadly that even knowing, she would not be able to see him as he was, but only as the boy who had worked at the grocery store, the boy who had known everything.

“No, but I think I know.” She held her hand firmly against his chest, over the flaming hoop of his breast. “I don’t think we are people anymore. I don’t know what we are—atoms stripped of our electrons maybe, colliding endlessly against each other in the center of the sun while it burns itself to ash in the endless snowstorm at its heart.”

He gave her no clue. His smile was still confident, easy. “What about me, Daisy?” he asked.

“I think you are my golden bear, my flaming hoop, I think you are Ra, with no end to your name at all, Ra who knows everything.”

“And who are you?”

“I am Daisy, who loved the sun.”

He did not smile, did not change his mocking expression. But his tanned hand closed over hers, still pushing against his chest.

“What will I be now, an X-ray zigzagging all the way to the surface till I turn into light? Where will you take me after you have taken me? To Saturn, where the sun shines on the cold rings till they melt into happiness? Is that where you shine now, on Saturn? Will you take me there? Or will we stand forever like this, me with my bucket and shovel, squinting up at you?”

Slowly he gave her hand back to her. “Where do you want to go, Daisy?”

Her grandmother still stood on the chair, holding the cloth as if it were a benediction. Daisy reached out and touched the cloth, as she had in the moment when the sun went nova. She smiled up at her grandmother. “It’s beautiful,” she said. “I’m so glad it’s come.”

She bent suddenly to the window and pulled the faded curtains aside as if she thought because she knew she might be granted some sort of vision, might see for some small moment the little girl that was herself, with her little girl’s chest and toddler’s stomach; . . . might see herself as she really was: Daisy, in the sun. But all she could see was the endless snow.

Her brother was reading on the blue couch in her mother’s living room. She stood over him, watching him read. “I’m afraid now,” Daisy said, but it wasn’t her brother’s face that looked back at her.

All right, then, Daisy thought. None of them are any help. It doesn’t matter. I have come face to face with what I fear and what I love and they are the same thing.

“All right, then,” Daisy said, and turned back to Ron. “I’d like to go for a ride. With the top down.” She stopped and squinted up at him. “I love the sun,” she said.

When he put his arm around her shoulder, she did not move away. His hand closed on her breast and he bent down to kiss her.