

## Daddy's Electra

Her earliest memory of her father . . . his voice, smooth and deep, and his laugh. She didn't understand the words at the time, not until she was older, when she watched Daddy with her baby sister in the big upholstered rocker, the baby lost in his big arms, springs squeaking as he rocked, his voice quietly singing about stars and dreams and kisses and remembering, and she did—she remembered. She remembered when she had been the baby in his arms, remembered the comforting motion, the squeak squeak squeak counting off the moments of forever, the safety and calm, even the shape of his big square face filling the space above her, his scent, his love. That was her earliest memory, the memory of a memory.

And then older, and he held her not so gently, more playful than her mother's soft touch, and she understood it somehow. This big not-so-scary monster, radiating love like Mom but in a rougher way, tougher, more breathless and with more peril, but love just the same, love just as strong.

*Pony girl, pony girl . . .*

She held tight to his fingers as he sat and bounced her in the crook of his foot, as he sang about carrying her off somewhere, marrying her, words she didn't understand, not then, only the dizzy, shivery fear, the deathhold grip on his big fingers, *stop Daddy don't stop*.

Then she got older and he picked her up less, held her less, but sometimes he still did, sometimes on his shoulders, too high. He nearly dropped her once and she never knew if the danger was real. Why was he like that? Why did he try to frighten her? She hid from him, terrified, when she had the hiccups. "Stop that," he said. "I mean it. Now." He didn't smile. "He's trying to scare the hiccups out of you, baby," Mom told her. "He's not really mad." But he never said so.

She looked through Daddy's drawer once, his things. She didn't know what they were, but she felt funny, touching them. An oily smell. Something with a switch and a cord you plug in. Everything mysterious. Things like pens or pencils, but different. The little book with the wide blue pages you could tear out and no pictures. She took one and got scared and tore it up and flushed it down the toilet and later she heard him arguing with Mom about a missing check. She knew she was very bad.

And older still, and she wondered what he did for so many hours in the garage. So she sat on some dusty bricks and watched him, and her mom came out and said, "So there you are," and went back into the house, and she was with Daddy, and happy, but soon bored. He had the wheels off his big old Buick, or the hood up, handling strange things with dirty fingers—springs and wires and metal tools. Then once he said, "Hand me that . . ." and he said a word she didn't know, and she asked him, "What is it?" He pointed and she picked it up but it was heavy, and cold, and she almost dropped it but she didn't and he took it from her without smiling, and her hands were dirty. Like his.

Even as she got older, she stayed sometimes in the garage with him, watching him work, not talking much, and one night he slammed the hood and wiped his hands and said, "I've got to test it. Want to come?" They rode in the darkness and he slowed and stopped in the middle of the quiet street and listened to the motor and then drove a little farther. They stopped again she felt the motor running through the seat, though her legs, and he said, "Do you want to steer?" and she was scared but she nodded. She sat on his lap and the car crept forward and he took his hands off the steering wheel. The car moved toward the ditch, getting closer, and he said, his voice very near, "Turn it a little" and she pulled the wheel and the big car lurched away from the edge and he said "Good job. That's my girl." That was the perfect moment, the best, if she had to choose one.

And then she got older still, and so did he. The time came when she had a talk with Mom, a talk about growing up and all that it meant. Her daddy didn't hold her anymore the same way he held her little sister, and she knew things were different. She was afraid of it—growing up—but not too afraid. She watched Mom and Daddy together, how they talked, how they laughed and kissed sometimes, and she stunned herself with a sudden thought: That's me. That's me and a boy someday.

So, boys.

She didn't know what to think about boys. She liked them. She didn't like them. A boy kissed her when she wasn't ready and it was stupid.

Then she liked them a little more, and she got a little older, and sometimes they wanted to kiss her and sometimes she let them. But not very often.

And then she got older still, and her boyfriend took her out on dates in his little car with the loud muffler. He tried to kiss her in the front seat when they parked but it was awkward.

Then came the night of the dance when his car broke down, and her dad had to drive them in his Buick. Her boyfriend was embarrassed about it but she didn't mind at all. On the way home he kissed her in the backseat and kissed her again.

Her dad looked in the mirror and cleared his throat and she smiled and pushed her boyfriend away.

"No," she said. "Not in Daddy's Electra."