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## DAUGHTER

**I**T WAS HOT AND WET THAT NIGHT. The open windows seemed to make the air thicker. Eve's parents wouldn't switch on the AC until June, otherwise they'd be paying more in bills than they did on the mortgage, Mom said. Eve had trouble sleeping when it was this hot, even when her mother sprinkled the sheets with baby powder and aimed the fan right at the bed. Outside a cat was yowling like a hurt baby.

Eve's sister Esther came in through the window. Eve hadn't seen her since last spring.

"Hey there Alice," Esther said. She was always calling Eve different names. She said them as if they were a joke Eve would understand.

"Long time no see."

"Are you back?" Eve asked.

Esther sat on the edge of the bed. She looked thin and glamorous. She pulled out a cigarette and handed her lighter to Eve. It was the same lighter she had carried last time, with a picture of a round Chinese face Esther said was Mao's. Eve lit up her sister's cigarette. The lighter played a Revolutionary song when the flame struck.

"Did you say your prayers?" Esther asked. She was being sarcastic. She said Mom used religion as an excuse to crap all over her own daughter. Esther, not Eve. Mom and Esther never really got along.

"What? You're collecting those hideous things?" Esther said, pointing to the Cabbage Patch dolls on Eve's bookcase.

"They're cute," Eve said. "They come with adoption papers. But they aren't like the original ones. Those were handmade."

"Aren't you getting old for dolls?"

"I'm nine," Eve said. "That is not too old for dolls."

Esther laughed. It was the best laugh of anyone Eve knew. You'd think, by the way Esther looked, so blonde and thin, that her voice would be silvery. But it was like hot caramel and seemed to come from somewhere deep inside her. When she laughed, it was with her whole skinny body. "You want to go somewhere?" she asked.

"Right now?"

"Yes now." Esther settled more on the bed, crossed her legs and leaned back. She was wearing a short pink dress that made her skin even paler. In the dark, she seemed poured out of moonlight.

"I have school tomorrow," Eve said.

"Yes or no," Esther said.

"Yes."

"Get your clothes on then." Esther stubbed out her cigarette on the floor. She jumped up and started pacing around the room. Rows of thin brass bracelets jangled against her wrists.

When Eve went to switch on the lamp Esther grabbed her wrist.

"Don't," she said. "Ma might get up and see."

When she was ready, Esther scowled. "She's making you wear that? You know how old that shit is?"

Eve was wearing her brown owl dress and striped Raggedy-Ann socks.

"Well I like it," Eve said.

They climbed out the window and ran across the lawns. They ran across the wet streets.

"Why are we running?" Eve asked, but Esther didn't answer. They finally stopped at a beat-up orange Bug.

"Is this your car?"

"Get in, Pokey Puppy," Esther said. Esther sped, but she was driving a stick shift, which made Eve think she probably knew what she was doing when it came to driving.

They drove and drove. After a long time Esther turned on the radio. "Killing Me Softly" came on and she turned it up and sang. It was the right song for Esther, it sounded sadder in her throaty voice than it did in Roberta Flack's. It was one of Esther's favorite songs, Eve remembered.

They drove out of town, through red lights and stop signs. They drove out into the country.

"Isn't this perfect?" Esther said. "This is maybe the best thing we've ever done." They stopped at an Exxon. Eve pumped the gas while Esther paid. She came back with two big cups of steaming black coffee.

"Drink this," she said, "and then you can have your dessert."

The coffee was strong and so hot it scalded Eve's tongue. It made her head snap back and her heart thump. Esther smoked another cigarette, and Eve ate a Twinkie.

"Mom never lets you have Twinkies, does she?" Esther said.

"You're right," Eve said. "This is the best thing we've done, ever."

"We'll drive all night," Esther said, "and when sunrise comes we'll stop in a diner and have pie. We'll have pecan pie. And hot chocolate."

They drove for another hour. Then Esther pulled over and into a park. She switched on the high beams and opened the doors. The light

shone over still black water. Esther told Eve it was a man-made lake. When she was little, Mom and Dad used to take her here, and they'd camp where the water was now.

Esther sipped from her flask then popped in a Willie Nelson tape. They danced to "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain" in the beam of the headlights.

"I wish I had blue eyes like yours," Esther said. Esther had the prettiest green eyes ever. They reminded Eve of a dragonfly's wings, they were so shimmery.

"You have nice eyes," Eve said. Esther grabbed Eve's hand and pulled her over to a giant rock. They sat beside each other for a long time, looking out at the water.

"I'm a little drunk," Esther told her. "I should wait to drive."

"Okay," Eve said, "do you think we'll be home before Mom gets up?"

"Do you remember that last time I was home? We stayed up all night and I made spaghetti with butter. And we watched *A Star is Born*? And you said your favorite part was when Norman Maine writes his name with Esther Blodgett's on the wall with her lipstick? Remember?"

Eve remembered the spaghetti but not much else.

"Yeah," Eve said.

Esther lifted Eve's hand and placed it in her palm. Eve looked into her hands. The nails were chipped lavender, bitten down to the quick.

"I drank because I have to tell you something," Esther said. "I brought you here to tell you some very important things, Evie." She kissed Eve's hand. Then she leaned forward and brushed Eve's hair with her fingers. She smelled of sweat and booze and woody perfume.

"You're mine, you know."

Eve was quiet.

"You know what I mean. I'm not your sister."

"Yes you are."

"I'm not your sister," Esther said, "And you're my girl."

"You are drunk," Eve said. She felt something constrict inside her. It felt as if her lungs were squeezing her heart.

"You know it's true," Esther said. Eve thought. It wasn't true. But then she thought it was. She felt the coffee come up from the back of her throat and she swallowed it again.

Esther cracked her knuckles. She handed Eve the flask.

"I don't want it," Eve said.

"I can teach you lots of things," Esther said. "I know a lot more than you do. We can drive away and go somewhere."

"I think we should get something to eat," Eve said, "and then call Mom and Dad."

Esther pulled Eve against her. She wrapped her arms around her as tight as she could. When Eve wriggled, she held on tighter. And then

Eve let her. She felt Esther's chest, soft against her, and then Esther was giving her tiny kisses all over her face. They felt like butterflies landing everywhere. And then her mouth was on Eve's. They pushed against Eve's lips until her mouth opened. She felt Esther's tongue, and it tasted bitter. When Eve clamped her lips shut, Esther pushed her head in harder. She started to cry. Her body shook against Eve. When she finally pulled back, she kept on crying. Her nose ran and the veins against her throat throbbed.

Eve leaned over the rock and vomited.

They stayed there all night, on that rock. Esther turned off the headlights so the battery wouldn't die. When the night grew brighter and pink light broke over the water, Esther finally spoke.

"You can't tell them what I did," she said.

"You're nuts," Eve said.

"I mean it Eve. You can't tell them what I did. And you can't tell them what I told you. Or they won't want me to see you ever, ever again."

"You can't tell me what to do," Eve said. She could still taste the chunks of vomit.

"If you tell them," Esther said, "I will take you away. I will take you away so that they can't see you. I'll take you far away and you'll have to live with me. Only me."

Eve didn't answer. She walked back to the car and Esther followed her. They stopped by McDonald's for more coffee and Egg McMuffins. They pulled into another gas station and parked in front of the pay phone.

"Do you want me to call them?" Eve asked.

"No."

Esther looked so tired. There were dark circles under her eyes. It looked like she'd been crying and let her mascara run. But she never wore mascara, only dark lipstick and some blush, now and then.

"Tell me something," Eve said, "If you're my mother, who is my father?"

Esther tried to sip from her flask, but it was empty.

"You're God's daughter," she said. She didn't say it as if it were a joke.

"Everything you say is a lie," Eve told her. She watched as Esther got out of the car to call her parents. Her hands shook as she dialed the number. Eve picked up the Mao lighter, and lit and lit and lit.