

## Daddy's Girl

by Ria Parody Erlich

Before I was my mother's daughter, I was Daddy's girl.

For much of the first six years of my life, my father was my best pal, my playmate, my everything. In fact, I was so afraid of losing him that when I sang *My Country 'Tis of Thee* at school and came to the line "land where my fathers died," I stopped singing in order not to cry because I took it literally.

My father was more available than my mother, who was the family breadwinner and devoted to her job as office manager at an exclusive women's clothing store on downtown Canal Street, the premier destination for shopping in 1950's New Orleans. Mama worked six days a week and often came home late, too tired to give me the attention I craved.

But Daddy set his own hours. He owned a cramped, dark, second-hand store, which some family members sarcastically called a junk shop and "Herbie's hobby." In my eyes, however, on the rare occasions I was allowed to visit, it was an irresistible wonderland of used books, clothes, dishes, furniture, even some real antiques, all of which I imagined held exotic, fascinating secrets about the lives of their original owners.

Most days, my father opened the store at 7:30 a.m. and closed no later than 5:00 p.m. Occasionally he closed earlier, either complaining that business was lousy or, in winter, that he didn't feel safe after dark on that rundown, seedy block of Dryades Street, which numbered several noisy, twenty-four-hour bars among its retail establishments. But no matter what his mood when he came home, he always found the energy and time to play before and after dinner with his little girl.

My mother sometimes watched, but she did not join in our games. She seemed content, perhaps relieved, to leave us to our play, except to remind Daddy to be careful

and not to let things get rough. He would promise, then wink at me to signal that we weren't going to let Mama spoil our fun.

My earliest memory of Daddy—of anything, really—is when I was three years old. He would walk beside me as I happily pedaled my toy car from our faded yellow apartment building on Milan Street to the massive live oak tree half a block away at the corner of St. Charles Avenue. The sturdy, Spanish moss-draped sentry stood silent watch over the neutral ground, the uniquely New Orleans term for the wide, avenue-dividing median, where cherrywood and olive drab-painted streetcars regularly rumbled past on their tracks, bells clanging, brakes squeaking—the soundtrack for our unfolding scene.

"Fill 'er up, ma'am?" Daddy said.

"Yes, Herbie," I said. I didn't call him Daddy then.

With a magician's flair, Daddy pulled a pretend hose from the tree trunk and pumped pretend gas into the car's pretend tank. With a flourish, he extracted a pretend rag from his pocket and cleaned the pretend windshield.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said with a snappy salute.

To me, he was much handsomer than any of the crisply uniformed chorus of Texaco gas station attendants on the Milton Berle Show—one of several television programs Daddy and I watched together that inspired the games we played. Sometimes we pretended we were ballroom dancers like Arthur and Kathryn Murray, who suggested that viewers should put a little fun in their lives and try dancing. I would stand on Daddy's feet and expectantly hold up my arms as high as I could in the proper female dance partner position.

"Not too fast, Herbie," Mama said. "She'll get dizzy."

"She'll be okay, Sonia," Daddy said.

He would grab my hands tightly, softly sing "Casey would waltz with the strawberry blonde," and gently, sweetly, slowly waltz me 'round and 'round the living room. I don't remember feeling dizzy—just giddy with the romance of it all.

The game I loved to play most with Daddy was cowboys. We straddled horses made from chairs turned backward, clicked our tongues to urge our trusty steeds forward. We puffed our cheeks and blew out air through our teeth to mimic the sound of

guns—*puh-CHEW puh-CHEW*—when we shot our silent toy pistols (no cap guns allowed). And we defied my mother's no-rough-play order by pantomiming fistfights with phantom bad guys, trading blows and knockdowns until we ultimately prevailed.

I imagined myself Roy Rogers or Wild Bill Hickock, the brave, clever heroes. Daddy was Pat Brady or Jingles, the dimwitted, jovial sidekicks—parts he played with gusto, his often hidden sense of humor on full display. And though I relegated him to supporting roles, Daddy was unquestionably my hero, my shining star.

I never thought it unusual that I was closer to Daddy than to Mama in my early childhood until a friend who knew my history recently said, "You know, children are supposed to bond with their mothers first, not their fathers."

Her comment jogged the memory of my late, great shrink's reaction to my mother's version of the day I was born.

"The nurse held you up and told me I had a beautiful baby girl," Mama said. "'That's nice,' I said, and promptly fell asleep."

My shrink peered at me owlishly over his tortoise-shell frame glasses.

"So, your mother fell asleep before she held you for the first time," he said.

I briefly considered how Mama's failure to perform such a crucial act of infant-mother bonding might have affected me and influenced my initial parental loyalty, but quickly banished the thought from my consciousness. After all, I had told my shrink in our very first session that I now had an extremely close relationship with my mother, and that I was in therapy to talk about why my relationship with my father had collapsed.

It was the night of the haircutting incident when things seemed to change forever. My father, mother, and I were in their bedroom in the upper duplex on Octavia Street they rented the previous year, further from the noise of the streetcar tracks, but closer to my elementary school.

Daddy and I were preparing to play barbershop—another of my favorite games. Mama was in bed reading *Harper's Bazaar* magazine. Daddy was sitting in his mahogany rocking chair, towel draped around his shoulders. On the spur of the moment, I begged him to let me use his professional barber shears with the "pinky hook" instead of pantomiming cutting his hair with two fingers.

"I'm six years old, and I learned how to use scissors last year in kindergarten," I said, accidentally on purpose forgetting to mention they were the blunt kind.

"She's going to put someone's eye out," Mama said to Daddy with one of her searing I-don't-think-that's-a-good-idea looks.

"She'll be okay, Sonia," Daddy said assuredly to Mama. Then sternly, but with a confident gleam in his eye, he said to me, "You be careful, you hear me, little girl?"

I did not put anyone's eye out. However, reckless with the thrill of victory over my mother, whom I saw as the enemy of fun, I impetuously snipped off a lock of my father's hair. It drifted to the floor while the three of us watched in stunned silence.

"R-i-i-i-a," Daddy said, extending my name to five angry staccato syllables overlaid with nervous laughter as he leaned over to pick up the black and silver evidence of the crime.

Mama slammed down the *Harper's Bazaar* and said, "Give me those scissors right now, Ria Charlotte Parody," using all my names, which meant I had committed a serious offense. "You may never play with them again."

I looked to my steadfast partner in crime, my champion, my Daddy, for solace and support, but got none. Feeling unmoored, awash in a tidal wave of embarrassment, guilt, and humiliation, I solemnly handed Mama the offending instrument—finger holes first, cutting end closed and resting in my folded palm, like my kindergarten teacher taught me.

After that, things were different between Daddy and me. The changes in his attitude and demeanor came swiftly, like massive storm clouds fueled by fierce winds signaling the arrival of a catastrophic hurricane. We never played barbershop—or anything else—again.

Child's misunderstanding or not, I truly believed our games ended abruptly because I had betrayed Daddy's trust by cutting his hair, as evidenced by his silence, and because I had betrayed Mama's trust, as well. Their disapproval was terrifying since I had not yet felt anything but the glow of being their perfect daughter, the daughter I thought they wanted. I imagined all sorts of cataclysmic consequences.

No longer could I be, would I be, Daddy's little pinup girl, posing in my bathing suit on a Biloxi beach for a vacation photo Mama gave him captioned, "I thought you

might enjoy seeing what a future Miss America looks like." No more Daddy being my hero and preferred protector, like the day I ferociously screamed, "I'm going to tell Herbie on you," when Mama and I were holding hands on the concrete seawall steps and she fell, grabbing me more tightly instead of letting go, pulling me down with her, which resulted in painful injuries for both of us. No more Daddy as my gas pump jockey, ballroom dance partner, or TV western co-star.

Grown-up reality had overtaken childhood fantasy. Overwhelmed with sadness, I made a momentous decision.

"I'm going to call you Daddy instead of Herbie from now on," I said.

Vanquishing my most cherished expression of our intimacy was an abject admission to myself that I was hopelessly resigned to the new relationship. We were no longer Herbie and Ria, best pals and playmates. We were now merely father and daughter. I didn't know it at the time, but I had learned the most important rule for survival in our family—Mama always wins.

The likely origin of that rule came into sharper focus years later. A few days after my mother died, I was sorting through some of her legal papers and unearthed a family secret like the kind that intrigued me about objects in my father's store when I was a child. The deed to Joseph Street revealed our house was owned by Sonia Sherman Parody, a once-married woman, and Herbert Louis Parody, a twice-married man. I was not only shocked, but angry and frustrated because I couldn't confront my parents with this newly discovered, somewhat unsettling information that my father once had a wife who was not my mother.

I soon learned the whole family knew about Daddy's first marriage and that I had been kept in the dark for forty-six years—since birth—due to a promise exacted by my mother. No one was to tell me for fear of adversely impacting the image I would have of my father. But now that both my parents were dead, several relatives were willing, albeit reluctantly, to break that promise, though I've never been quite certain I got the whole story from any of them.

I was told that after my parents became engaged, my father began a secret affair with a woman he met at a bar, who he somehow got the impression was wealthy. She

somehow got the same impression about him, and because each was impatient to share the other's imaginary fortune, they hastily eloped. However, they soon found out the financial truth about each other, and the union was swiftly annulled. Daddy, according to family lore, "came crawling back" to Mama and vowed never to disappoint her again. It didn't seem too far from that promise to abdicating all power, including when it came to raising me.

Once my father and I stopped playing together, our few interactions were reduced to brusque, clipped exchanges. He left for his store before I got up in the morning, and we rarely even said hello when he got home. After his shower, he would put on a fresh white t-shirt and clean blue work pants—the only color and kind he wore—then wordlessly sit on the living room sofa and fall asleep.

My energetic, playful Daddy, who I thought would be my constant companion forever, had abandoned me in plain sight. I felt devastated—that it was hopeless to wake him up to play with me—to pay any attention at all. I wonder if he felt devastated and hopeless too, choosing sleep as his means of escape.

During the rest of my elementary school years, I retreated to my room as soon as Daddy got home to avoid the sadness and tension I felt. I escaped as I usually did from the real world by immersing myself in books, mostly biographies of headstrong girls who became successful women, like Louisa May Alcott and Clara Barton. And I discovered how much I enjoyed playing solo, because I got to act all the parts.

I was able to put more physical distance between my father and me in the house my parents bought on Joseph Street, further still from the streetcar tracks, but across from the junior high I'd be attending in a few months. My new hiding place, which was called "Ria's bathroom" because it was attached to my bedroom, was at the very back of the house. And though the warped bathroom door didn't shut tightly and had no lock, I felt private and safe in my black and white-tiled sanctuary, and spent hours of blissful solitude perusing teen fashion magazines and reading coming-of-age novels with strong women protagonists.

My father woke up when Mama got home, though he would forego his after-work snooze if we were having his favorite sirloin steak for dinner, confident he was being helpful by cooking it himself "so your mother doesn't have to do it when she gets home."

Daddy would fry the steak to death on high heat in its own rendered fat, then turn off the flame under the ancient club aluminum pan, where he left the now gray meat to get hard and stone cold by the time Mama arrived an hour or so later.

"Why didn't you fix anything else?" my mother would say, dumping a frozen brick of broccoli or cauliflower into a pot of boiling water and reheating the hapless, almost inedible sirloin.

"I didn't know what else to fix," my father would say, one of myriad aggravating, maddening refrains that Mama and I used like cement to build and strengthen our growing alliance.

I also emerged when Mama got home and followed her into her bedroom, settling comfortably on whichever color chenille bedspread, blue or pink, she favored that week. While I breathlessly told her about my day, Mama changed from her professional clothes—a black knit tailored dress or suit with a skirt, never pants—into blue Bermuda shorts and a colorful print sleeveless shirt to be cool and comfortable fixing all or part of dinner.

I trailed after her into the kitchen, which, no matter the home, was always relentlessly hot and humid. I eagerly accepted jobs she assigned me—making cocktail sauce from ketchup and mayonnaise for oyster or shrimp cocktails, mixing oil and vinegar dressing for lettuce and tomato salads. And by studying the black and white photos in Mama's *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook*, I learned how to properly set our dining room table, which was always covered with a white linen tablecloth. If I couldn't be Daddy's little girl, I would be Mama's little helper.

During dinner, Mama and Daddy talked mostly to each other, while I ate quietly and, if I were allowed, read a book, sometimes a comic book, which was easier to handle at the table because I could fold back the pages. After dinner, my father would fall asleep again on the sofa, then wake up a few hours later and go to bed.

Mama and I became best pals and playmates. She taught me to play Monopoly and Scrabble, which occupied many of our evenings while my father slept. We attended concerts, movies, and theatre, none of which interested my father. And she took me to some of the city's finest restaurants, including Galatoire's in the French Quarter, where I dined like a grownup on oysters Rockefeller, trout almandine, and burnt caramel custard

for dessert. Dining out together was one of the activities Mama and I most enjoyed, because my father hated eating anywhere other than home.

"You never know what's going on in somebody else's kitchen," he said, "or where their hands have been."

Mama and I also vacationed without my father, because he didn't want to close his store for even a week for fear of losing money, and he did not trust anyone else to take care of it. Every summer for seven years starting when I was five, we spent a week at the same ante-bellum style hotel in Biloxi, where we lounged on the beach or at the pool, played endless games of "Go Fish," and wrote letters and postcards, mostly to Daddy, in the comfort of the ornate, luxuriously air-conditioned lobby.

But our best vacations together began when I was twelve, and my mother became the manager of her company's newest store in the up-and-coming New Orleans suburb of Metairie. "I've got to go on a two-week buying trip to New York this summer," my mother said. "Do you think you'd like to go with me?" She had been promising to take me to New York for years, as soon as she felt I was "old enough" to appreciate it, and I was beside myself with joy that the time had arrived.

We made four trips to New York over the next eight years. In the mornings, we went to her company's headquarters on Seventh Avenue in the bustling Garment District, where she was treated like a queen and I like a princess because I was Sonia Parody's daughter. She usually was finished with business by lunchtime, and our afternoons and evening were whirlwinds of landmarks, museums, restaurants, and theatres, where in the darkness of magical places with names like the Imperial and the Majestic, my ambition shifted from becoming a pediatrician to becoming not only an actress, but a Broadway musical comedy star.

And though I'm not sure exactly when it happened, I shifted full loyalty to my mother, who took me firmly by the hand and—not falling this time—led me to the promised land, a brave new world of seemingly limitless opportunities, where it felt like we were not just parent and child, but equals. Not just best pals and playmates, but best girlfriends, perfect companions, intimate confidantes in a world she seemed to navigate comfortably and with ease. A world where she seemed to belong and was happy. A world where, when I was with her, I felt I belonged and was happy, too.

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As Mama and I grew closer, my father and I grew further apart. I began to see him as a collection of contradictions, some of which were benign, not too hard to reconcile. He might have ruined many sirloin steaks, but he also concocted an evocatively memorable seafood gumbo—a thick, viscous stew teeming with blue crabs and shrimp fresh from the Gulf of Mexico, and fragrantly seasoned with gumbo filé (pronounced *FEE-lay* in Cajun dialect), a mandatory ingredient made from crushed dried sassafras leaves. And starting the summer I was thirteen, Daddy agreed to close his store for a week's vacation in Biloxi, but instead of a room in our usual hotel, we rented one of the tiny, tumbledown bungalows with a kitchenette where Mama fixed all our meals so my father didn't have to eat at a restaurant.

Daddy's literary taste leaned mostly toward lurid detective magazines with salacious covers, which he stashed in the trashcan next to the toilet, perhaps thinking it was an effective place to hide them from me, which, of course, it was not. But he also religiously read the morning and two afternoon newspapers so that he could vigorously argue with Mama about current events, hoping to wear her down until she converted to his point of view.

He loved the banjo strumming and clarinet licks of Dixieland jazz, but he hated classical music, which Mama swore she taught me to love by taking me to so many concerts when I was *in utero*. Daddy thought the prevalence of strings, especially violins, sounded mournful, no matter what the composer intended the spirit of the piece to be. And he abhorred opera, which he characterized as "a bunch of screeching," gleefully teasing Mama and me by imitating the singers while she and I watched the *Voice of Firestone* opera series on television.

He also insisted all the best popular songs were written before 1940 and despaired at my insatiable appetite for the Broadway musical albums Mama gave me, which I spent hours listening to in my room, memorizing, and singing in their entirety. Yet he was a gentle-voiced crooner and deft ukulele player who performed when he was younger with a local musical group. And I clearly inherited my ear and gift for music from him, certainly not from Mama, who admitted she "couldn't carry a tune in a bucket."

Some of my father's contradictory behavior, however, was not so easy for me to reconcile. He relished his prowess as a body builder and wrestler in his younger days, blaming marriage to Mama for his now nearly sedentary existence and portly shape.

"Your mother swore she'd never marry an athlete," he said.

But he still thought of himself as a tough guy and bragged about the fistfights he won when he was serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II. He also enjoyed recounting the tale of how he kicked out a window in the stifling hot barracks to let in the frigid fresh air the winter he was stationed in Idaho.

And likely because he felt it was what a tough guy would do to protect his family from bad guys, he kept a revolver and bullets in his nightstand, a terrifying discovery I made on one of my snooping expeditions when he and Mama weren't home. I never told anyone I found it, but I lived in fear that if my father were awakened from a sound sleep by the slightest suspicious noise, he would leap out of bed, adrenaline pumping, grab the gun, and accidentally shoot my mother or himself.

In contrast, one of my most treasured images of Daddy is part of a home movie I shot with my 8mm Kodak Brownie. He is admiring a fragile, hand-painted, porcelain bowl while balancing it delicately on his fingertips. This Jimmy Cagney wannabe so loved the antique glassware and pottery he bought at estate sales to sell at his store, he often couldn't bear to part with them. So he added them to his overflowing collection on the dusty shelves and red steel dinette table in our breakfast room, which Mama often grumbled was no use having since we couldn't eat in it.

"Well, that's just how Daddy is," Mama said when I complained about the less tolerable aspects of my father's behavior. "I wish you were more like me and just let those things roll off you. I wish you'd at least try to get along with him better."

To please my mother, I tried to be more like her, but some things were impossible to let roll off me, especially my father's virulent racism, which increasingly widened the gulf between us until it became unnavigable. It was not only a completely intolerable, irreconcilable difference, but a point of no return.

Daddy was a racist of Archie Bunker proportions long before Norman Lear even thought of creating Archie Bunker. My father's catalogue of intolerance contained an infinite list of offensive labels for almost every nationality, including Chinese, German,

Irish, and Italian. He also despised all religions, but particularly Catholicism, which he complained was ruining the city because "they're building a Catholic church on every corner."

And though we were Jewish, Daddy was not shy about vehemently criticizing the religion he hadn't practiced in years, while vigorously defending it from aspersions cast by others. When I asked him to justify this obvious contradiction, he said, "It's okay for Jews to say bad things about Jews, but it's not okay for anybody else."

Daddy reserved his most venomous wrath for those whom he called the "n" word. I was five when I remember first encountering it. We were stopped for a red light during one of our "just the two of us" drives in the old blue pickup truck he used for his business when I heard him mutter disgustedly, "Look at the roaches crossing the street," as a group of black people walked in front of us.

Even then I knew he was wrong and was able to muster up the gumption to protest.

"But Daddy, they're people, too," I said.

He seethed in stunned silence for a moment, then with his eyes straight ahead, unable or unwilling to look at me, he said, "Someday, little girl, you're going to see."

That I had not seen what he was sure I would by the time I became a teenager must have been on his mind the night he roared into our living room clutching my copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which he found on his own snooping expedition into my nightstand drawer.

"Sonia, did you know your daughter was reading this trash?" he said. "It glorifies a n\*\*\*\*r."

One night during a freak New Orleans snowstorm, he surprised me by offering a ride home to Mamie, the Black woman who took care of me and our household from when I was seven weeks old and Mama went back to work until I graduated from college, even though she lived in a neighborhood where he would never have gone otherwise, even in broad daylight. But that turned out to be a one-time gesture of situational kindness, not a beacon of hope for change.

I barreled headlong into my teens just as the world was plunging into the turbulent 1960's. By that time, any conversations Daddy and I attempted turned into

fierce arguments about everything from my pro- vs. his anti-integration stance, to my liberal vs. his reactionary politics, to my moral objection to the Vietnam war vs. his hawkish agreement.

The most perilous topic for us was one we avoided for as long as we could. Daddy never seemed ready for me to "become a woman," euphemistically or otherwise. On the same night as his *Mockingbird* rant, he displayed outrage about *Joy in the Morning*, another of my hidden novels he'd found and at least partly read, declaring it "filthy" because it contained some mildly graphic sex scenes and one messy passage in which the heroine discovers she has her period.

One afternoon when he came home from work, I was watching the film *Blue Denim* on television.

"Why the hell is she crying so much?" he said, referring to Carol Lynley's character.

"Because Brandon DeWilde wants to have sex and she doesn't," I said, which resulted in a deafening silence from him that spoke volumes.

But when I began dating, Daddy apparently felt obligated to discharge what he thought was his fatherly duty. He sent me on each date with an ominous warning, delivered, thank goodness, before the boy arrived.

"Remember, little girl, I was a boy myself once," he said, "and I know what boys want."

Perhaps feeling nostalgic the night before I left for my freshman year at the University of Florida, Daddy and I revived our long-abandoned tradition of a just-the-two-of-us drive. We cruised the neighborhood and stopped at a popular local stand for our favorite grape snowballs. But our conversation, while mercifully civil, remained lukewarm and strained.

I returned home summers and holidays during my years at Florida, less so when I was in grad school in Ohio. When I moved to Los Angeles in 1978 to seek my fortune as a screenwriter, I stopped visiting entirely, blaming it on fear of flying, from which Daddy also suffered, and on not wanting to negotiate long drives and train trips.

Mama, who was not afraid to fly, visited me occasionally on the West Coast, but when Daddy died in 1981, I hadn't seen him for three years. I last spoke to him on the call he and Mama made after my adult bat mitzvah in December. Knowing how he felt about religion, Judaism in particular, I was apprehensive about what he would say not only about the ceremony, but also about my choice to become a more culturally active and religiously observant Jew.

After a quick hello, Mama promised she'd return for a longer chat and handed the phone to Daddy.

"Congratulations, little girl," he said. "Your Daddy's proud of you."

He had a heart attack and died six days later.

Before I took her to the airport at the end of her first visit after Daddy had died, Mama and I had breakfast together in the coffee shop of the Holiday Inn near the Santa Monica Pier, where she'd stayed for years, not only because it was convenient to Pacific Palisades, where I lived at the time, but also because it was across the street from a McDonald's. It was one of the easiest, most pleasant visits we'd had in years, which I attributed to the work I had done in therapy to disentangle myself and separate from her. To no longer be co-dependent. To finally reclaim my autonomy.

I don't remember why it came up. Maybe Mama was bemoaning, as she often did, how disappointed and sad she was that Daddy and I did not get along better. For some reason, I mentioned the ill-fated haircut and how Daddy's and my relationship seemed to have dramatically changed after that.

Mama looked up from replenishing her longtime favorite lipstick, Revlon "Fire and Ice," closed her compact, and returned it to her purse.

"Oh, that was when I decided it was time to maneuver you away from him. I was afraid he had too much influence on you," she said matter-of-factly, then picked up a clean napkin from the unused place setting on our table for four to blot her lips.

Like the six-year-old who shouldered the blame for an innocent mishap during a childhood game, I remained silent. I had unearthed the shadowy secret in therapy that Mama was jealous of that early, seemingly unbreakable, bond between Daddy and me, but I did not understand until that moment the lengths to which she had gone to pry him

and me apart and have me to herself. That she had staged a successful coup—a covert battle of Armageddon with Daddy for my heart and soul—at the expense of the relationship she constantly claimed she wished were closer, even, to that end, carefully concealing my father's betrayal of her with another woman so as not to tarnish his reputation in my eyes.

At that point, when I realized that Mama had stolen from me the sweetest part of my childhood, I was too stunned to react at all, let alone cry. Mama always wins.

I didn't cry about my father's death until a year later, when I saw the film "On Golden Pond," in which father and daughter actors Henry and Jane Fonda, who had a stormy relationship, play a father and daughter who have a stormy relationship. Late in the film, when Jane Fonda's character successfully completes a backflip into the lake, a metaphor demonstrating the courage and strength her father thinks she lacks, she is finally rewarded with his elusive approval.

As the characters enjoyed a warm, demon-exorcising hug, I began to cry, imagining the longstanding rift between real-life father and daughter also had been mended. And suddenly I realized my tears were for Daddy and me, as well.

Maybe it was because that scene reminded me of the stinging comment my lapsed athlete father made when I proudly showed him my first set of junior high report cards with all A's but one: "How the hell come you got a C in gym?" Or because it reminded me of another of his particularly hurtful criticisms: "You're book smart, but you've got no common sense."

Maybe it was because I regretted not knowing sooner my mother's role in the split between my father and me. Or because I understood that while my father wasn't wholly a hero, he wasn't wholly a bad guy either.

Maybe it was because I remembered how often I resisted Daddy's embraces, pushed him away. Or because I ached for, longed for, one last demon-exorcising hug.

Maybe it was because I wondered if a reconciliation might have been possible, but now it was too late. Or maybe it was because I was mourning the loss not only of Daddy, but of Daddy's little girl.



**Ria Parody Erlich** is a retired educator and public relations professional who is delighted to now be able to devote herself full time to her longtime passion for creative writing. Ria's writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *The Circle Magazine* (r.i.p.), *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Litbreak Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Paddle Wheeler*, her high school alumni literary magazine. Ria's short story, "The Goodman Girls" was included in *Halfway Down the Stairs* "Best of 2021" list and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In October, 2022, her short play, "Toast" was presented as a staged reading at the Alliance for Los Angeles Playwrights fall conference. A proud New Orleans native, Ria currently lives in Santa Monica, California, with her husband Shel.