

# The Wooden Girl

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Dinner is quiet.

A different kind of quiet than during harvest when Papa works long days in the fields. Instead of his eyes drooping and his chin resting on his hand just so he could stay awake long enough to eat, his eyes shift from Mama to his food. Mama clears her throat and scrapes her peas into a pile. The pile of peas has moved to three of the four corners of her plate while the pork chop sits in the middle, forgotten.

The wind blows the back door shut, and the loud slam makes the three of us jump. I look out the window, not realizing it was so windy. The cornfields that surround the back of our house are too low to be disturbed by the wind. The real indicator of wind I use is the forest in the front of our house that swallows the driveway and protects my favorite place on earth.

My treehouse.

Papa's eyes move to Mama, but she is too busy rolling the peas across her plate to the last corner.

"Did you get a lot of wood moved today, Papa?" I ask, trying to bring this awkward silence to a close. Maybe they had fought while I was in the treehouse. Papa had decided to demolish the old barn behind our house before the grass turned into corn. Mama wasn't happy about it, especially since that was where we kept the tractors. Papa promised to build a better barn, but that only seemed to make Mama angrier.

"Yes, I did." He smiles, finally, before taking a sip of milk.

"Can I use some of the wood?"

"Why would you want to do that?" Mama asks. Her fork rises to her mouth with a few peas balancing in the grooves.

"I was going to add on to my treehouse." The peas stop just before her lips. She looks at Papa, and he stands up quickly.

"Does anyone want another pork chop?" He walks around the

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table with his plate. Mama spills the peas back into the pile. She looks at her plate, her fork dangling over the pile like it wants to scoop up the peas, but something is holding it back. Papa makes noise at the stove as he gets himself another pork chop.

“I was going to make a desk inside my treehouse.” Talking seemed to be the only thing keeping my parents alive at the moment, so I describe the plans I created this afternoon. “I thought I would attach it to the board I cut too thin when making the walls. It looks like a small cubby hole, so I was going to nail a piece of wood underneath it, and make a desk. I could put pens and maybe some paper in the cubby hole, and then I can-.”

“Sweetheart,” Mama says gently, putting her hand on mine to stop me. “We need to tell you something.”

Papa sits down at the table. His eyes are big, and he looks at Mama like she is crazy.

“Tell me what?”

“Why don’t we finish eating, and then-.”

“No, I want to know,” I say cutting Papa off and setting my fork down with too much force so the sound of metal against glass rings in the air.

“Elora Marie,” Mama scolds.

“I’m sorry, Papa.”

He looks up at Mama, and she nods her head. He lets out a sigh.

“Elora,” he pauses, looking at Mama for some support, but she just looks back at him with her lips in a tight line, “the reason I’m re-doing the barn is because we are going to sell the property.”

Now I understood why Mama was so mad. We can’t have a farm if there are no tractors, and we can’t leave the tractors out in the open. Of all people, Papa should know that. He lived on a farm his whole life. Grandma and Grandpa bought this land for us when he met my Mama, and our family has lived here ever since. Besides, why would Papa want to sell a small plot in the middle of our land?

“Where are we going to put the tractors?” I ask. Mama gives a sorrowful laugh, and sets her fork on the plate.

“Well, we are going to have a new barn,” Papa says. “But it’s not

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going to be here.”

“Are we giving them to Grandpa?”

“Well, yes,” he says, the corner of his mouth turning up like it does when he concentrates, “and we are going to go with them.”

“Well, of course, how else are they supposed to get all the way to Nebraska?” I giggle.

Mama squeezes my hand. It makes me jump a little, as I forgot she was holding it.

“Elora, sweetheart, what Papa is trying to say is that,” Mama stops and takes a deep breath, “we are going to move in with Grandma and Grandpa and help them on their farm.”

“Wait.” Papa isn’t selling the small plot of land where the barn rests. He’s selling it all. I pull my hand from Mama’s as my treehouse stands tall in my mind. If we were moving, then we were leaving my treehouse behind.

“We can build another treehouse,” Papa says turning so his shoulders face me. “Grandma and Grandpa have a lot of trees.”

“No,” I yell standing up from my chair. It scrapes along the floor like knives against Mama’s china. I look at Mama for her to scold me for yelling at Papa, but she sits in her chair with her arm still reached towards me.

“You had so much fun building the treehouse,” Mama says, “wouldn’t it be fun to do it again?”

“It’s not the same,” I scream trying to back away from the table, but falling into my chair. They want me to leave the treehouse. They want me to leave my *home*.

“Sweetheart, we already sold the property.”

“Then take it back!” Tears spill over my eyes, and my chin quivers. Mama jumps out of her seat, and runs towards me with her arms opened. I duck under them, and run for the front door.

“Elora, wait,” Papa calls as the door slams shut.

I bolt down the front steps, and head for the forest. The wind pushes me along, encouraging me to run faster and faster, away from the awful news, but I have to focus as it tries to push me off course. I look behind me, but no one appears in the doorway. I sink into the

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shade of the trees, and keep going.

It was calmer in the trees, no more wind. I hear it whipping over the leaves. Branches snap under my feet, and squirrels and rabbits take cover. I hurtle down the path Papa made for me when we finished the treehouse. He took his tractor and moved back and forth, pushing the dirt together so the ground was hard and secure and the branches lined the sides. I rode on his lap, and pointed out the rabbits and the squirrels that grew too curious, and he stopped and let them investigate before they scurry off into the trees.

I ran faster and faster, the trees blurring into a green barrier like I was running a marathon. But I had run, and walked, and skipped this path before. Barely slowing down, I reach out and wrap my arms around the pine tree Papa saved. On one side, half of the branches were sawed off. When Papa and I were building the treehouse, a terrible storm came through, and lightening damaged the tree. It only hurt the one side, so Papa cut away the damage, and the tree grew taller and stronger.

“There’s your landmark, Elora,” he said. “Now you know when you get to this tree, the treehouse is just behind it.”

“What kind of tree is it?” I asked looking up at the towering tree that seemed to go on forever in my eight-year-old eyes.

“It’s an Austin Pine tree.” I touched the smooth surface Papa had just sanded.

“I’m going to call him Austie.”

I press my cheek to the same place I had touched so long ago. Tears slide across my eyelids and splash into the wood.

“I don’t want to go, Austie,” I mumble. I grip him tighter, my arms not long enough to wrap around him completely. I am too afraid to turn around.

I knew what the treehouse looked like. The large house in the middle of the tree with its shiny doorknob and spiral staircase that wrapped around the thick trunk. There was a rope bridge connecting the house to a smaller platform with a railing. Papa had put a chair up there for me. He joked I would have a better view on my porch in the tree than the one connected to our house.

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I didn't need to turn around and see it to know the third step wasn't as straight as the others because Papa had let me put it in, and I wasn't strong enough to tighten it correctly. I knew there was a small branch of leaves sticking out of the point at the top of the roof because I stuck them there last week even though I promised Papa I wouldn't go on the roof. I knew the swing was a little too high, and, my breath caught in my throat as I remembered, as of three weeks ago, I am finally tall enough to sit on the seat and let the tips of my toes touch the ground.

"Maybe I should lower the swing," Papa muses after he secured it to the tree. "You won't be able to touch the ground."

"No, Papa, I like this," I said running towards the swing and jumping so my stomach landed on the seat. I curled my body around it, and felt the breeze push me back and forth.

But even now, in this small clearing in the middle of the forest, the wind doesn't reach low enough to move the swing. I listen closely, trying to hear the scratching of the rope as it moves back and forth, but I can't. I knew I had to turn around and face the treehouse sometime, but I was too afraid to tell it I was leaving.

And then I do it.

I spin around so fast, before I can take it back, and I am face to face with my treehouse. It is exactly how I left it an hour ago. It looks pretty good for being five years old. The porch railing is leaning slightly, but Papa said he would come fix it. The tree stands tall and strong, opening its branches to give my house a place to sit high within the leaves.

On July 2, 1996, Papa and I went searching for wood for a bonfire. We came across a tree with branches pointed outward so it looked like an open palm, and he promised me a treehouse. On July 3, 1996, I woke Papa up at four in the morning, and begged him to start right then. And we did. Mama had to come find us the next day before our family came for a bonfire and fireworks.

Papa said the treehouse was the fastest thing he ever built. We had to finish it before harvest, so we worked all day. Mama said she liked how it tired me out, and I went straight to bed without a fuss,

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but Papa always made sure we rested, especially when it was too hot.

There was a tree stump, across the clearing from the treehouse. It's a wide, flat stump, with the remains of bark on one side. Papa labeled it my throne. I would sit there while he sat on his toolbox to eat lunch while we admired what we had done that day, and planned what we would do after lunch.

The day Papa and I hung the bridge, I insisted on sitting on the bridge to eat lunch. We dangled our feet over the edge, and Papa messed with the boards all of lunch just to make sure they were safe for me to cross. I laid down, and pretend to be floating on the clouds. I rolled over and looked down below to see how high up I was. I screamed, nearly falling off the edge. Papa caught my arm before I tumbled over the side.

“Be careful, honey.”

“Papa, there's a snake under the bridge,” I cried. Papa looked down, squinted his eyes, but still wasn't convinced. I looked back again, and it was still there.

“I'll go down and check,” he said. I laid on the bridge, hugging it close to me so I wouldn't fall again. I watched as Papa descended the steps, and examined the ground for the snake.

“Right there,” I pointed. It was directly beneath me. I had never seen a snake that still before. It made a thin, red line in the dirt.

“Elora,” Papa chuckled, “it's just your necklace.” He bent over, and held up the red hearts all strung together on a silver string. I looked down at my chest, and it was gone.

“It looked like a snake from up here,” I said relaxing into the wood, knowing I was still safe here in the trees.

I never saw any real snakes in the clearing. Squirrels chase each other up and down the stairs, and birds nest in the windows. I couldn't promise the same thing if I built another treehouse in Nebraska.

No. I will never build another treehouse.

I walk all the way up the steps swirling around the tree, and bend just right so I don't hit my head on the low branch in the back. I lay on the top step, and place my head on the small lip of wood in front of

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the door. A tiny dust ball hangs from the piece of wood, and I free it with my fingers and watch it float down to the dirt.

I would never forget this treehouse. Not even if I grew old enough to lose my memory. Papa always said I spent so much time in the treehouse, I would turn into a wooden girl.

I just didn't want the treehouse to forget me.

I spring up from the stair as an idea comes to me. I open the door and look down to the right where Papa left some tools for me. There was a hammer and some nails, but nothing I could cut with. I dig deeper and find a pocket knife. Papa had been looking for it for a few weeks, but I didn't know it was in here. I go back out the door, and down the steps until I am in the front of the tree.

I start carving.

I dig out pieces of wood, and I form the letters as best as I can. It's hard to make rounded letters like a and e, but I manage. The pieces fall on my feet and bounce down the stairs. I dig deep, knowing in a few years the tree might regrow enough to cover it if it is too shallow. It's almost dark when I finish. I take a step back towards the edge of the step and look at what I have done.

I hear footsteps behind me. I think maybe it is a deer, but when I turn, Papa is walking away from Austie. He stands behind me with his hand on my shoulder.

"It looks good," he says squeezing my shoulder.

We both stand in silence, but this time it's a comfortable silence. It's not a tired silence or a nervous silence. It's the silence that came all those years ago during lunch when we would reflect on the amazing object transforming in front of us. Maybe years from now, someone else will stand transfixed by this huge house in the middle of the forest. They could polish it, sand it, paint it, but the tree would always remind them of one thing.

Elora Marie Ripley

1996