

THE TALES CARS TELL

The sisters had moved to a new town once more. Too many people had disliked Dave at his most recent office, and by autumn, the family was moved to Fredericksburg, further towards Washington DC where their father could work for the same company but in an office where no one knew him. In the new town, they had a new but shabbily built house, a new church, and were trying to make new friends. It was mid-October, and Elizabeth had one good friend at school and a boyfriend. Melissa had made a few friends in the neighborhood. No one spoke of anything that had happened while they lived in the roach house in Winchester.

This new house was on a hill, it was brown with vinyl siding, cheap carpeting, and maple cabinets—just like all the other houses in the subdivision of 5 floor plans. They'd sold all the silver, all the antiques, crystal, and china that remained after the fiasco of the roach house and as Elizabeth felt like a meaningless space-filler as she sat in her Ikea chair looking out the window at the night sky.

Melissa was in her bed with the light out, but Elizabeth knew she wasn't sleeping. They couldn't possibly sleep after what had happened tonight. Elizabeth put on her pajamas and returned to her windowsill. They hadn't even been allowed out of their room to brush their teeth. She and Melissa had been sent to their room for laughing at their father. But she didn't regret it. She hoped Melissa didn't either. It was funny, after all.

Stupid cars. That's how it all started—her father and his stupid cars. He knew nothing about cars, and he never managed to do anything good to any car. It was as if everything their father touched was immediately worn or broken somehow. He was like King Midas except instead of turning to gold everything malfunctioned beneath his touch. Even worse, her father had insisted on fixing each and every little thing that went wrong with their cars himself. He couldn't even figure out the manual, and most of the time, it was their mother who figured out the manual, explained it coldly, and then rolled her eyes. This infuriated him, unleashing a tirade of cursing, screaming, and tool throwing while he ranted about how he was unappreciated, how he was only trying to save money, and no one was ever satisfied with him.

He failed to address the fact that his 'fixing' the car generally cost them more money as the mechanic had to undo their father's handiwork before he could fix the original problem.

Elizabeth laughed as she thought of the old family Buick. The family had had this horrible 1979 Buick LeSabre from 1981 until three months ago. The damn Buick was hideous—a real pimp-mobile—with a completely white vinyl interior, molded plastic dashboard painted to look like burlled walnut and a deep, dark, unmistakably emerald-green exterior. There was no missing that thing tooling down the street with a blazing white interior showing every speck of dust. Even after it was cleaned, all the seams in the seats were permanently black and gross looking. Elizabeth had always been so humiliated when she had to go anywhere in that damn Buick.

He'd lie out on the driveway late into the night and try to fix the car in the rain, then expect sympathy for doing his duty for the family. He didn't seem to notice that the only reason he couldn't work *in* the garage was because it brimmed with his junk—it was literally packed floor to ceiling with nothing but junk.

The garage, the shed, and basement were packed with broken and misused tools, old carpentry projects, expensive and rusting saws, drills and presses, old electronics projects, old pottery projects, uncared-for things that had decayed over time so that one could only weave a precarious path between them. Each house they lived in had these rooms, her father's rooms.

Their mother would pathologically scrub, polish, and order the remainder of the house so that only sparkling things showed. Elizabeth's father's rooms were locked, barred, and closed off to the public eye. No one ever saw all his mess. The car was the only thing that showed it. It's grubby interior and bald tires a rolling public example of her father's rooms.

But now they had the new car. Their mother had finally thrown a big enough fit that they traded in the Buick for one of those over-the-top conversion vans. It had plush, blue captain's chairs and track lighting. Every last inch of the vehicle was carpeted, and there was real wood trim. Everything was electric—power windows and locks, a tape deck – the whole bit. It had odd, useless decorative lights flashing upon the dashboard and ceiling above the front console.

Their father loved it.

He acted like he was Will Robinson, lost in space, the commander of a great starship, and he took visible pleasure in messing with each knob and button, adjusting each light and lever whenever he got into the vehicle. It took a full five minutes for them to get out of the 25-foot driveway. Elizabeth half expected him to say, "All systems go." She feared one day, he might say it and then expect them to start calling him 'captain' or something.

It was this over-done electrical bit that caused the trouble tonight, or as Elizabeth and Melissa saw it, the comedy.

It was a Wednesday night, and they'd been returning from church. The church had a Sunday morning service, a Sunday evening service, a Wednesday night service and a bible study program on Fridays. Luckily, they didn't have to go on Fridays. Elizabeth once asked why they had to attend so many services and her mother said it was because they were tempted so often, being with other Christians would keep you good.

Elizabeth didn't like the fact that she had to try to be someone other than herself—that she had to report to strangers because she might have been bad. Why couldn't you just be yourself and do what you enjoyed without hurting anyone? She and Melissa had tried various scams to get out of Wednesday night service, but none of them had worked.

They were each minding their own business, looking out their windows from their captain's chairs when the doors locked and unlocked. Elizabeth thought maybe their father or mother had bumped a button, so she just ignored it.

Then it happened again.

And again.

"Did you do that?" Their father asked their mother.

"No. I thought you did." She replied, indignantly.

"It wasn't me. Girls, quit playing with the locks." He said.

"I don't even have a lock button by my seat. I'm not by the door." Came Melissa's reply.

"It's not us Dad, we can't control all the locks from back here." Elizabeth responded.

The locks did it again.

Now they were locking and unlocking regularly.

"I'm not kidding girls! Cut it OUT!!!" He yelled.

"Dad, we don't have any way to do it, it isn't us." Elizabeth responded as flatly as possible.

Now the windows began going up and down. First their mother's window went halfway down and up again, then their fathers. Lock. Unlock. Lock. Right window down. Unlock. Left window down. Lock. Right window up. Unlock. Then all the track lighting began coming on, it started at the front of the van and lit up all the way to the back. It wasn't just blinking, either. Each set of lights, from the recessed reading lights above each chair to the track lighting along the roof and floor of the car had its own blinking schedule. It was like a rolling 1970's nightclub. The girls began to giggle.

"Shut up! This isn't funny! There's a short in the van!" Their father was yelling now.

"Dave, it is kind of funny. I mean, this is very unusual." Anna said.

Now the radio came on, and the tape deck ejected the tape. The digital radio began flipping stations rapidly and the tape was sucked back into the deck.

In tape.

"Breathe deep in the gathering gloom..."

Lock.

Out tape.

"Hola, en Mexico hoy...:"

"...NPR radio..."

Unlock.

In tape.

Lock.

Out tape.

"Today, President Bush stated in a report..."

Left window up.

"Dr. James Dobson and Focus on the Family..."

In tape.

Unlock.

Right window down.

All to the wildly blinking lights.

Their father was continually swearing and his screaming blended with the noise. The lights imparted a ghoulish carnival feeling like that old movie, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Elizabeth had a strange sensation of floating. The broken words from the radio and the Moody Blues tape formed a collage of strange sentences that meant nothing, yet were full of a strange, mystical message. The locks constantly clicked and the windows let in air then shut it out. Their hair blew in the breeze then laid still.

It had made Elizabeth feel as if she were a still point in all the rolling turmoil and she could do nothing but laugh. Melissa had been laughing too. The laugh they shared was high-pitched and hysterical, never reaching their eyes. Anna was laughing and crying with panic in her eyes too, and some sort of fastener in their father seemed to have snapped. He swiveled wildly like a door on only one hinge, barely keeping his eyes on the road.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! It's broken, broken, broken! Can't you see it's broken! It's all falling apart and it will take hundreds of dollars to fix! Hundreds of dollars we don't have! Hundreds! Broken! You think this is funny?!"

The girls laughed even harder.

His voice reached a crescendo as a high-pitched yowl, like a siren or a child, completely alien and loose, from someplace far away, though it pierced all the air of the van. He'd run his fingers through his greasy hair so that it stood on end. Half his collar was standing up and his glasses were askew. He looked like a vortex was trying to suck him off the earth but couldn't quite lift his dirty, clunky cowboy boots, so only his hair was standing up. He'd been flailing his arms, trying to push all the buttons while he drove, as if that would somehow fix a short like it did on Star Trek.

Melissa began to choke she was laughing so hard, and the van pulled into their driveway. Their father shut off the vehicle, and the lights went out, the schizophrenic radio stopped and the windows halted midway in their frames. Only the locks continued—just once.

Lock. Unlock.

That last lock was just too much.

The sisters broke into fresh howls of laughter and their mother was now crying and laughing so hard, it was difficult to tell whether she was happy or sad. Her head rested on the dashboard and her shoulders shook. Their father let out a growly howl, like a trapped animal. He leapt from the car, slammed his door and ran to the other side.

He flung open the side door to the van, unbuckled Elizabeth, grabbed her legs and dragged her from the van. Her back scraped the running board as her butt hit the ground. Melissa gasped and unbuckled, jumped from the van and helped her sister up.

All laughing ceased.

The girls clung to each other and looked at their father. He looked alien and crazed. His voice shook with the threat of uncontrolled release.

“Dad, it was funny. It’s just a short. Maybe it’s just a wire. Why are you so mad?” Melissa asked.

“Do you think you know more about cars than me?” Came the shaky growl.

“Do you?” It rose to a yell.

“What?” Was all Melissa could say.

“I know about cars and this is no small matter! You don’t know anything compared to me! You don’t know! Do you hear me? YOU DON’T KNOW!”

There was a string of spit that ran from his upper lip to his lower lip and never broke. He was shrieking so loud and high, his voice seemed to wear out at the end of each sentence, and the last syllable was only a shrieked whisper. The neighbor’s lights began coming on and a few dogs were barking in the neighborhood now.

“Jesus! Shut up Dave! You’ve woken the whole neighborhood. Shut up and get in the house, before anyone sees us.” Their mother’s voice came in a harsh whisper, as if there were some sort of crime being committed that must be hidden.

The girls headed into the house with their father right behind. He came upon them in the entryway and grabbed each of their arms. He dragged them down the hallway, up the stairs, and flung them into their room, shutting their door behind them.

So, here Elizabeth sat, looking at the moon. She had felt power in that hysterical laugh. Elizabeth couldn't explain it, it just *was*. It was something...*other*. She and her sister shared something in that laughter—fear. The knowledge that they were running toward a cliff and couldn't slow down and none of them knew if they could fly.

Elizabeth wrapped her arms around her knees and watched the moon reach its zenith.