

I

It's strange how poorly I remember my dad. If I hadn't dug up those couple photographs from my mom's secret box buried deep down in the drawer, I might not even remember his face. I was my mother's daughter, and Edgars was his father's son, that's what everyone said. It's as if we weren't even brother and sister.

Actually I hadn't had anything in common with Edgars for a long time already. I don't remember us having any sort of small joint conspiratorial plans, or any sort of friendly mischief until that secret box of ours. Occasionally Edgars had tried, in a rather brutal way, to get me involved in his games, especially before he had started going to school and gotten to know the boys from the neighboring apartment blocks. However I was afraid of climbing trees, balls, throwing and catching things, water, fire, bugs, blood, dirty hands, even swings and bikes – and I could go on and on with this list. During the first years of my life all of Edgars' endeavors to create some sort of reasonable playmate for himself normally ended the same way – I was sitting on the ground, crying and screaming. I felt the best on my mother's lap, and if I would have had the choice, I probably never would have left it. If her lap wasn't available, I chose to play by myself. I liked soft toy animals, especially Littlebit, a little toy dog my mother had sewn. Edgars liked war and monsters. Once he decided to line up my toys and took Littlebit prisoner. Edgars wanted me to play war with him using all the other remaining stuffed animals, but I began to bawl hysterically. Then my father came and told my brother that a boy's task was to protect girls, not attack them, which is why he was supposed to stop tormenting his little sister and leave me alone. Edgars obeyed. I don't remember any big affinity between them, perhaps it was just some resemblance in their facial characteristics, but every once in a while Edgars was looked at like his father's son – as if that meant anything. They were a team.

I and my father also remained foreign bodies to one another. And now it seems to me perhaps it was not only me that secretly looked at him with incomprehension and on some level fear, but also he who looked at me the same way; he was a strong man with vitality, the life of the party, while I was the quiet, boney child with gray hair, a miniature version of his wife, my mom, whom he most probably also never got close to.

The most vivid memory I have is of one evening when he, having settled down on the couch, watched the news, and I had snuggled up beside him. Generally my dad wasn't crazy about

The Secret Box by Daina Tabūna  
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physical affirmations of affection, our touches, or hugging – if you don't count one of those rare occasions when there was a stubbly kiss or a piggy-back ride if I started to complain from tiredness while out on a walk with him. However that evening as we both were loafing around on the couch, he hugged me with one arm, and from time to time stroked my head, or my arm, or my side. I didn't think that for him it was anything special – it was like petting an animal that had sneaked onto your lap, and before you knew it you were petting it. As for me, I held my breath the entire time of that broadcast, frozen, scared that the slightest movement would make him come to his senses, and remember that closeness did not reign between us, something that seemed indispensable for such acts. It seemed to me, I thought – perhaps this was the moment from which everything would change, the beginning of something totally new, the first chapter of a story about the fascinating adventures of me and my dad: we would do things together, now *we* were a team and in the evening we would always watch the news; with time it would be natural for me to receive his hugs, and I would stop flinching.

I didn't really believe that. But it still seemed possible.