**Swing**

Linda Petrucelli

Pretend you are on a playground. You are six going on seven. The swing is where you will run to, its rusted chains and fraying canvas seat, a refuge. There, leaning back and pumping your legs, you can kick the sky without anyone seeing your tears.

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I once was awakened by sorrowful moans coming from the field out back my house. The lowing sounded almost human though I knew it must be the black and white dairy cattle that foraged on the other side of my fence. Staring through the darkness, I made out a football huddle of cattle, their noses low to the ground. Then a heifer threw back her head and a guttural cry streaked the night with sadness. Before noon the next day, from my lanai, I spotted a rumbling ATV spewing smoke where the Holsteins had gathered. A cowboy jumped off and waved. His spade glinted as he shoveled lime over a lifeless calf, its inky hide shining in the heat.

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Today I went in search of my grandpa, Vincenzo. Like an out of reach itch, I scratched through a box of old family photos, hunting. A vague recollection led me to believe that a certain photograph existed. Perhaps the sole surviving image of me with my paternal grandfather. I desperately wanted to find it, like Orpheus retrieving the dead.

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The silvertone image had dimmed, its puckered edges, faded. I had to use a magnifying glass to discern his face.

I did not recognize the picket fence behind us. But the three-year-old in bib overalls, with papoose cheeks and rowdy hair—that’s me. With Vincenzo. Balancing my wobbly frame between his knees. He presides, seated on a wicker chair, dressed in a t-shirt stained from the shoe repair store or my grandmother’s gravy.

A shaming thought edged into my head. *It was almost as if he never existed*. At least to me. He hadn’t disappeared from my life as much as I had stopped remembering him. Bereft, I frantically began writing down the snippets of his memory that still survived.

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Me: All I remember is that his whiskers smelled like cheese.

My sister: You were only six or seven. He died of a stroke.

I had thought it was a heart attack. But fallacy-dispelling facts about him fail to comfort completely. What I remember was the suddenness of his disappearance and the way my parents told me that grandpa was gone and wasn’t coming back.

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On a swing, the dependable pleasure of rocking back and forth occupies a worried mind. Eases a wrinkled forehead. Calms a bruised heart. Seven hundred years before Christ, the ancient Chinese had already learned what you discovered while vaulting through the air and holding on tight. Qingming, a day of sweeping the tombs clean, became a day reserved for swinging.

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Me: Can anybody tell me why he called her Malo?

My sister: I thought you knew.

My grandfather’s voice, impatient and loud, could be heard before he opened the door to the second-floor apartment where he and my grandmother lived: *Malo! Malo!*

I scan the internet for an Italian translation. Nothing makes sense. Why would he call her Bad One?

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My father: That’s why I never laid a hand on any of you kids.

The rationalization of Italian patriarchy only makes me feel worse.

My father: He used a strap.

Still—every New Year’s as long as he lived, my father set out a glass of Chianti for Vincenzo and on his bedside table, he’d set aflame a votive candle placed before a photograph of his father.

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I remember that we were in the rec room, down in the basement, and I was not supposed to cry. My parents wouldn’t let me go to the funeral. They wanted to shield me from his death. From the grief of death. I stayed home and played with my paper dolls.

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Bad things can happen on a swing. Dangers lurk in twisted ropes that can pinch or strangle. Your misaimed feet can slam you into a wall. Or you fall. That child you imagine on the playground, swings so fast she doesn’t dare release her grip, not even to rub away her tears.

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I felt exhausted by a feeling of wasted effort. Dissatisfied that all I had retrieved was the one photo, I capitulated to Sheol and set aside the crumbly box that contained the disparate parts of my disassembled family album.

Later, my husband whistled through his teeth and said, “Look at this.”

I looked at the photo and remembered the exact day.

A cruel remark by my older brother, namesake of Vincenzo, wounded my tender heart. “You are a fat cry baby!” he shouted and then punched me so hard on the arm that it left a lilac bruise.

I couldn’t control my emotions. Tears sputtered from my eyes in a crying jag that irritated my parents so much that they ignored the injustice of my brother’s barb. “Just ignore him,” my father said. But I couldn’t.

Suddenly I was sitting next to Grandpa in the front seat of his big Buick. He drove me downtown to a department store with a toy section as big as Disneyland. He told me, “Pick out whatever you want.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Whatever you want.”

I had never thought that big before. At first, I was confused—overwhelmed with the responsibility of choosing something that would make me happy. I looked up at Grandpa, hoping he would give me a clue, but his calm eyes communicated that the choice belonged to me. I slowly paced down each aisle, from the board games to the curly-haired dolls and then on to the rows and rows of stuffed animals.

In the photo, I hold Grandpa’s hand. In the other, I clasp close a wooly stuffed toy to my heart. It’s my Moo Cow. When you tipped its head, from deep inside its body, came a moaning sound just like it was lowing.

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Pretend you are on a playground. You’re all grown up now, but still you run to the swing. Perhaps you are grieving that friend of yours with recurrent lung cancer or the one who died young, like your grandpa, from a mystifying stroke of misfortune.

After you swing to-and-fro, you’ll find your airy stride, oscillating between memory and hope, a perfect pendulum for your ponderings, soothing the ancient ache in your bones, allowing you to cry a little.