MONOLOGUE

SAFETY PIN

Bara Swain*

I am told that I climbed to the top of our porch trellis when I was two years old. I used to believe that I remembered that moment—the ivy tickling my stomach, a caterpillar crawling into my underpants, clinging to the slats until my father’s outstretched hand supported my bottom, letting go, feeling weightless, feeling safe. But now I think I don’t remember this at all. It was my father’s retelling of the story that was real. His voice rang with pride.

Here are some things I do remember. I remember watching my dad trim the hedge that lined our sidewalk. The top of his hands were hairy. His knuckles were scabby and his fingernails stained brown. He had a workbench in the cellar. Copper-headed nails were kept in a mayonnaise jar. Screws and loose buttons were saved in empty cans of Del Monte Fruit Cocktail or Whole Sliced Pineapple. I remember eating canned fruit before every meal. Dad sweetened his coffee with leftover syrup and made my mother laugh.

I am eight, nine, ten years old. We are climbing Beech Cliff Mountain in Maine. Dad leads the way. We are lost for hours. I scout ahead and find an old farmhouse. No one is there. We drink water from the horse’s trough. I take off my shoes and balance across a wooden fence rail. We leave. The woods get darker and colder. Everyone complains. Jill is afraid of starving to death. Harry is afraid of bears. Sarah doesn’t want to pee in the bushes. I look into my dad’s steel blue eyes. I feel safe and happy. Dad puts my cold hands under his armpits to warm them. The next day, I take a safety pin off the strap of my bathing suit and remove a dozen large splinters from the soles of my feet. It hurts but I don’t care.

Other memories: My father boycotts lettuce. He wears jeans to grandma’s funeral. His first story is published. He gets pneumonia hiking the Appalachian Trail. He gets depressed. He travels through England on a three-speed bike. He quits his job. He washes the dog before Sarah’s wedding. He loses friends. He wins an O’Henry. He gets a job. He writes a novel. He visits my husband in the hospital. He buries our dog. He buys a color TV. He reads to my toddler. He falls down the stairs. He retires. He stays with me after my husband dies. He hikes with my daughter up Cadillac Mountain. They get lost. I’m not worried. I inspect the bottom of my little girl’s feet when she gets home.

A few years later: my father is depressed again. It’s summer. My mom goes to France on a sabbatical. My daughter and I visit over the weekend. Dad looks thin. I find a salt shaker in the freezer and a chicken breast in the dish washer. I borrow his car keys to drive to Dryer’s Farm. As we turn onto Orchard Street, my father

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says to me, “You know, you drive just like my youngest daughter.” I pull over to the side of the road. “Dad,” I say, “I am your youngest daughter.”

(Silence)

A few weeks ago, my father died. The morning of his funeral, I tried on three different outfits. My daughter slipped on a pair of blue jeans. She looked beautiful. I held her hand during the service. She knew that I was proud of her. I told her so every day.

(WOMAN closes her eyes.)


(WOMAN opens her eyes.)

Then I cried.