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750 words (approx.)

Papa Plays

by

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People say she looks like me and now, holding her round freckled cheeks between my cold palms, I see myself a generation ago reflected in her clear gray eyes on the verge of blue. I see the magic there. The light. *Papa gave her that light*, I think. That's what Papa does best.

With sturdy hands, he pushes my daughter high on the homemade rope swing slung over a sturdy branch in the backyard. Higher than I'd ever push her. Laughing, she stretches her small feet toward the Colorado sky and leaves a smudge of white cloud with the sole of her shoe.

"Is it strange," I ask, "to watch your babies having babies?"

He looks at me and nods a little. I've never seen Papa without a beard, except in pictures of him as a young man, long before my soul chose his.

"Makes me proud," he says. "You're doing a good job."

I want to cry, because it is enough.

Papa knows how to find strength in the wind. Trees speak to him and always have. I look at the barren branches overhead. Snowflakes wet my eyelashes.

"Bet you can't make it halfway up," I hear Papa say and suddenly I am small again, ready to prove him wrong as all children set out to do at some point along the way.

"Ten dollars," I say, lifting my chin. He strokes my long hair and calls me Princess. I see myself climbing, not halfway, but to the very top where the branches are thin and bendy. Papa taught me to climb, so I had no fear of falling. But if I had, I knew those hands would catch me.

Papa speaks of truth and has little tolerance for nonsense, though he plays along well. The grandkids crack themselves up at his funny expressions, mimicking his tone and style. They pull him across sparkling snow in the sled and watch him launch raw vegetables across a vast prairie, gleeful as a kid. They call him Pops and camp out in the backyard, roasting marshmallows until the candy turns black and bulges their cheeks with gooey sweetness. He says silly things to make them laugh. He tells stories of cultures that have it all figured out, tales of people who understand the wondrous ways of the universe. All the while, he fills them with truth and the importance of being.

Right now, they don't have a clue about the light.

He pushes my daughter high on the homemade rope swing and she laughs at the tickle in her belly.

"Don't let go," I whisper. "It's important to hold on."

My brothers and I used to swing out over yawning caverns with nothing below but dusty dirt and brittle rattlesnake skins to break our fall. We never fell. We flew far, plucking stars from the endless blue.

Snow collects at our feet. I watch Papa's hands, creased and dry. Those hands once held mine, guiding me along so I could keep my eyes off my feet. Those hands

channel the wishes of the gods. Those hands have caught me more times than I can count.

In a while, we will open presents by the tree. Papa will wear a Santa hat and dole out gifts. Then he will play. The voices speak from far away and spill from his fingertips as they bounce across the ivory and ebony keys of the piano in the study. The soundtrack of my life is filled with his musings and I can find a mood to fit every piece I hear. I love watching his shoulders move, his elbows bend, his aged hands find the perfect note. He becomes lost in the sounds, like leaves whispering secrets meant just for him. Papa listens when the voices beckon. He plays because the music finds him and stays a while. It comes on a winding path and Papa knows how to return it home, back to the source of such sublime things.

Papa taught me to listen when the trees speak their wisdom, when the wind pushes me in a different direction than I am willing to go. There's nothing more he could give me. No other gift I need.

Papa plays my song on the piano and I remember swinging high and reaching far, leaving my mark on the sky with the sole of my shoe.