

SmokeLong Quarterly

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by Julia Strayer

Let's say I'm being robbed, but I choose to believe I'm pushing my daughter on the swings in the park across from the Methodist church, autumn leaves collecting on the grass as the wind blows, and with each push she becomes a year older until she's my age and I'm still my age, but she knows more than I do because that's how kids are these days. She knows what we'll have for dinner, that it will rain at eight the next morning and that I'm dying. The robber doesn't mean to shoot, but he's young and twitchy, and I've seen his face. When he planned the whole thing he hadn't thought it through, and thinking on the fly isn't his strong suit. Even his mother knows that much. She told him and told him, as he grew, he'd never amount to anything unless he could learn to think five steps ahead, but he didn't, couldn't, so robbing was one of his only career choices, and he isn't very good at that either so he shoots me in the chest and runs. I look down in disbelief and plug the hole with my thumb trying to remember what I'd touched with that thumb and imagining all the resistant bacteria mobilizing into my bloodstream, and if the bullet didn't kill me the infection surely would. I never told my daughter where the will was or the insurance policy or the secret bank account where I was saving up for something crazy like tightrope lessons or a yearlong driving trip across country from one small-town diner to the next, or to live off the land put up a windmill, keep chickens and grow our own food, just to see if we could. I want to keep pushing her on the swings, but I don't want her to be older than I am. She'll blame me one day, when she realizes she lost so many years of her childhood from the swings. Yes, she'll be angry. I can already see the anger building in her, little lines spiderwebbing at the edges of her eyes as the detectives try to tell her they're doing the best they can to find the twitchy kid whose mother shakes her head when he gets home with trembling hands and my blood splattered on his t-shirt. And she knows he's done something stupid that can't be undone so she wipes the sweat from her forehead with her handkerchief embroidered with violets, and she sits on the couch to give her heart a chance to slow down so she can catch her breath while his eyes dart around the room and he makes wild gestures, laying out the whole story while I'm still lying on the street wondering if spinning my daughter on the merry-go-round would take off the years the swings put on so she'll be little again like I remember her when she seemed too young to walk home from school by herself, her backpack almost bigger than she was, when she had nothing but opportunity in front of her; I'm thinking the same thoughts the twitchy kid's mother is thinking about her son when he was little, with long dark eyelashes that made the girls follow after him, and she still had hope. And we both play the What-If game, me wondering whether things would be different if I'd stopped at the dry cleaners before the bank, the mom wondering if she should have pushed him more toward sports or the band or the science club and if it would have mattered, if he'd still be standing before her crying about how he shot a woman in the Elm

Street parking lot and ran. The mom knows it doesn't matter what she did or didn't once do; it only matters if she sends him to the shower while she burns his clothes with the autumn leaves she raked up and collected in the barrel out back, or whether she picks up the phone.

About the Author:

Julia Strayer holds an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and teaches at New York University.