

Father's Day

by Lucinda Kempe

"What do you want for Father's Day?" she asks.

"Sex," he says, his mouth curling at the corners, "and a bottle of Shiraz."

On the wall just past his shoulder hangs a watercolor of a street in Meknas, northern Morocco. The street ascends, hemmed on either side by sandstone buildings. It's a dreamscape of blue skies, curving steps of reddish-hue, and doorways painted pinks and greens—a landscape with no humans, so unlike the here and now where the two of them stand facing each other in the foyer of this house, their house. His hand rests on the railing leading to the bedroom. Her hands hang at her sides, tranquil.

The watercolor, painted a hundred years ago by her grand uncle, is one of many such paintings she inherited from the dead. She never met the painter or his brother, her grandfather. She rarely saw her Dad, Godfrey, who also dabbled in the arts, yet he lives indelibly in her mind. One of his oils—signed with the assumed name of Durrell, a writer he admired—hangs in her bedroom. Godfrey's visits were impromptu. He'd arrive with either his canvas and paints, or a stray dog he'd adopted spontaneously that he hoped to foist onto her mother. A Black Irishman, wavy, jet-colored hair, his skin like white plaster and his eyes as blue as her blond-headed dolls, he'd plop down into Uncle Walter's chair made of plumbing pipe in the back yard. She can still see him painting, one leg crossed over the other, and one foot jiggling madly as he worked.

"I'm revolutionary," he'd exclaim, his fingers frenetic in the paint.

The revolt was in his head. A schizophrenic, her Daddy went out swinging from a belt he'd nailed into the jamb of his bedroom door. In the house where he lived with his Mama—ten blocks away from her, his only child—the buckle locked and the belt looped around his neck, he pushed the chair out from beneath him. His ashes were delivered to an above ground tomb. Fifteen-years-old, she stood with his mother, whom she'd just met, facing his nameless vault, his ashes sealed behind the slab. His mother left him unidentified—she couldn't bring herself, she said, to write his name in stone.

Today he is an engraving, a blue-eyed ghost with intangible skin, in her heart.

The man standing in front of her with his hand on the railing is her children's father. He's not her fantasy man, but then who is? Who could compare with specters from beyond?

“Could you think of something that includes the kids?” she asks.

“Afterwards? We could all go to the beach, I guess,” he says, his smile widening. He ascends to the bedroom, leaving the door ajar. The curving steps in the painting beckon as she climbs the pink-carpeted stairs, one foot following the other, one step at a time.

