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Kitchen Theater

by Katherine Robinson

I'm eight years old and I'm working on my spelling at the kitchen table. My dad comes in from the living room behind me and says, "don't go anywhere!" I slump in my seat because I know exactly where he's headed, down to the depths of his basement library, to pull up probably the oldest most boring book he has. He comes back up with a collection of poetry, which is even worse than when he brings up the Shakespeare.

"That's my last duchess painted on the wall, looking as if she were alive..." he reads aloud to me from the spotlight in the kitchen. I can still hear and see him standing there, pointing to an imaginary painting on the blue kitchen wall behind him.

I sit quietly and listen, my back pressed against the hard wood of the kitchen chair. He was always interrupting my homework for our kitchen theater sessions. Fuck, I was just trying to learn how to spell "tomorrow." I didn't need to be listening to Shakespearean monologues and old English poetry.

"What was Browning talking about?" my dad asks me. "What's going on in this poem?"

I shrug. I wasn't really listening in the first place.

"They're negotiating a marriage. Here, listen carefully this time." This time, I do listen. The poem is still lost on me. We go through a few more rounds of our kitchen theater with an intermission for my actual

homework, and he finally retires the book, and I learn how to spell words with double consonants.

I'm eleven and I have to write a book report every month. This is a nightmare. I sit at the kitchen table for hours the night before its due typing on my mom's laptop. Every time I think I'm done, my dad proof reads it and turns it back to me for editing and we cycle like this for hours until eventually I'm screaming at him. This is when I start hiding my writing from him.

I'm thirteen and I can't even be in the same room as my father. We don't talk any more so he quietly leaves books on my desk that he thinks I might like. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell and *The Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters. Sometimes he leans against my door frame and tells me about the latest book he's found for me and I just sit and wait for him to leave and close the door behind him. I don't read the books but I make space for them on my shelf with the others.

I'm fifteen and my high school English classes start piling on the assigned reading. *Animal Farm*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Julius Caesar*, and I pull the books off my shelf for the first time in two years. I bring them to class every day and make a very convincing show of reading them.

I notice my dad's notes in the margins. I use them to cheat on the open book tests. I scan the book for pieces he's highlighted and annotated "The fault, dear Brutus is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings." That part must be important. I slip it into my essay as a quote.

I'm sixteen and my dad is teaching me how to drive.

These driving lessons are the only times we see each other since I moved in with my mother. I can see how hard he's trying to make amends with me. How hard he's always tried, but I'm still sixteen and angry.

We drive to a local Barnes & Noble and he goes to the classics section and I pick through the YA fiction. I like the romantic books. I read lots of Maureen Johnson and David Levithan. He likes Charles Bukowski and essay collections.

I take a stack of books to the café, buy a coffee, sometimes hit on the barista. Then I sit there and read the first chapter of every book I pulled from the shelf, I put my coffee receipt in the front cover of the book that I like the best, with the Barnes & Noble logo sticking out and I meet my dad at the car. He sticks the book he likes in his jacket and then slips it in the trunk of the car in a way that he thinks is subtle. We do this nearly every night because the five-finger discount never expires. We both pretend we don't notice. This goes on for eight months, just car rides and shoplifting and coffee.

I'm eighteen and I'm sitting in the back of my English class. "That's my last duchess painted on the wall, looking as if she were alive..." My teacher reads from the front. I open my textbook for the first time all semester to read the poem I'd heard ten years earlier. I find that I can still hear it in my father's voice.

When I get home that evening I pull out the old anthology of English poetry my father had given to me. The cover is purple with gold lettering and all of a sudden

the book looks like royalty. What a shame to leave it sitting here, untouched for five years. I read “My Last Duchess” one more time. Then I read “A Woman’s Last Word” and then I read on to “Porphyria’s Lover.” Then I call my dad, and I go to his house for the first time in 6 months.

I read “Porphyria’s Lover” to him while standing in the kitchen, right underneath the domed ceiling light. “The rain set early in tonight, the sullen wind was soon awake” I read aloud to him from the spotlight. He pretends he hasn’t heard it before.

Then he reads to me from “The Post Office” by Charles Bukowski. Just the first and last few lines. Then I read to him from Hamlet, “Alas! Poor Yorick, I knew him well...” He reads to me from *1984*, the section about doublethink, and our kitchen theater goes on and on without intermission.