

Straight Up

By Tania Hershman (UK)

My father was not a slouching man. Every night when he finished dinner, he pushed back his chair and sat up straight as a rod, the way he did when demonstrating posture to his class of teenage girls at our school. He drummed his fingers on the table, tap, tap, tap, and looked at me, my shoulders, my slumped neck, the way I was shoveling mashed potato into my mouth, and I felt the heat of his discontent. He jerked his head upwards, and this was the signal. I was to instantly drop my fork and, as if some invisible cord was sliding through my spine and out the top of my head, I was to ascend. My shoulders lifted, my neck unkinked, and I grew, and as I grew, so his face softened, his brow lost its furrows and the corners of his lips lifted. He would nod his head back and forth, saying nothing. This was how it was every night. This was how it was on a good day.

I saw my father teach his class only once. I was supposed to be ill, supposed to be feverish and damply sweating into the overwashed sheets. But I was a faker and good at it. An accomplished liar by the age of ten, I knew the tricks, thermometer against light bulb, moans and groans. My mother, who couldn't miss a day at the factory, set me up with juice, water, a pile of comics and instructions to call if I vomited but otherwise to stay exactly where she left me.

Of course, I didn't. I got dressed after I heard the front door slam, sidled downstairs and stood, breathing in the empty house, the sweet smell of freedom. What drew me to the school? It should have been the furthest thing from my mind. But I was pulled in that direction the moment I left the house.

Like a spy, I slid along walls and around corners. When I got there, I crouched beside the window of the room I knew he was teaching in. Slowly, slowly, I straightened up until the window sill was at eye level and I peeked in.

At first he didn't look like my father. The context was so strange, it was as if he was in front of one of those painted movie backdrops. He was pacing backwards and forwards by the blackboard upon which he had drawn a spine, with all its vertebrae, moving up into the neck and head. The girls were clearly not very excited about whatever he was telling them. I saw two of them passing notes, a few were chewing gum, none of them was sitting up straight. He didn't have them, they weren't eating out of the palm of his hand, not at all. They put up with him, as if he was a lost dog sniffing around their feet, but then, when the

bell rang, they jumped up, grabbed their bags, streamed out of the door. And I saw my father standing by the blackboard, by his perfect drawing of a spine, standing up as straight as he could, and I could see in his face that he was hoping, straining, for some kind of reaction from them. But the girls didn't even see him. I was the only one. I was the only one who saw him standing there.