



Wilson Bigaud, *La Negresse*, 1953

The Girl with Peacocks—A Triptych

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I HAD NEVER BEEN AS EXCITED BY A UPS delivery as I was the morning the Bigaud arrived.

A large man and his four-wheeled dolly rolled the brown-paper-covered, double-bubble-wrapped painting to the door. At his hand-off, I carefully gripped the edges with both hands and slowly slid it into the front hall where it lay, leaning against the back of the couch until I could rustle up another pair of hands.

It may have taken only one person to get it to my door, but it was going to take at least two to open and hang this seventy-year-old painting that began its life in Haiti, made its way to the United States, and connected three generations.

ONE

As family lore goes, *The Girl with Peacocks*, or *La Negresse* as Haitian artist [Wilson Bigaud](#) titled it, was purchased by my grandfather in the midfifties when he

and my grandmother were vacationing in Haiti. They reportedly bought it from the painter himself for very little money, which tracks because my grandfather—an art appreciator—was also quite frugal.

The Girl (what I called her) hung over the fireplace in my grandparents' house in Philadelphia my entire childhood. Behind immense, black, half-open oval eyes suggesting a detached attention, this beautiful, brown-skinned girl from the Caribbean watched as the adults in my family drank cocktails and the children dipped Triscuits into chopped chicken liver in my grandparents' living room before heading into the dining room for dinner. She looked on as my grandfather played piano, eyed my grandmother as she teared up listening to opera, and kept watch as our family grew and gathered for reunions and Tuesday night dinners.

As a young Jewish girl who had never been anywhere but the Midwest and the eastern seaboard, I found her mesmerizing.

Though most of her body was concealed by green vines sprouting with pink and white tropical flowers, she had one exposed breast. She was the first naked woman I ever saw—not insignificant in the pre-Internet sixties. *The Girl* carried herself with a certain *je ne sais quoi*, her head slightly tilted, one hand on her hip, standing confidently. She was flanked by two fully grown peacocks, feathers in partial flare, and she held a baby bird in one hand as another stood at her feet. *The Girl with Peacocks* was exotic, and I was captivated by her.

When my grandparents downsized to a city apartment, the painting hung in another exalted location in their living room, right behind the chair my grandmother always sat in and across the street from the Philadelphia Art Museum and Rodin's *Thinker*. Artfully speaking, she was in good company. *The Girl* regarded us with her familiar remove as we congregated for birthdays and holidays and witnessed a fourth generation entering the family when my children and cousins' children were born.

TWO

After my grandparents died, my father took ownership of the Bigaud, but instead of his living room or dining room, he placed her in his book-lined study. I often wondered if she ever got bored just watching him read. No more large family gatherings or live music to observe with her dark black eyes. Her more obscured position in his apartment, along with his frequent travel, kept *The Girl* and me more apart than together. I knew she was there, safe and secure, but I missed watching her watch us during those years. I was also really missing my grandfather, and *The Girl's* new concealed location amplified the ache.

Before his death, I asked my father if I could be next in the family line to host her. I would put her in a distinguished spot in my home where I could keep my eye on her and she on me. And he complied.

During the time it took to pack up my father's apartment in Philadelphia and send the painting to me in Chicago, I wanted to fill the gaps in my knowledge about *The Girl's* journey. I turned to my uncle—my father's brother—who confirmed that my grandparents had traveled not just once but twice to Haiti, but he wasn't certain about whether Grandpa bought the work directly from Bigaud. My grandfather was a *Wall Street Journal*-reading, stocks-and-bonds-buying business entrepreneur who had an eye for art, furniture, music, and cuisine. To this day, I can still conjure so many unique artifacts that he selected for his home: a super shiny, turquoise ceramic Buddha now owned by my uncle; an art-deco china cabinet that lives with my brother. I have a few of his primitive clay vases and a painted wooden bowl. He had a taste for delicate German pastry—plum tarts were his favorite. He was what we call an aesthete.

Back in the seventies, *La Negresse* landed on the cover of an art book and legend has it that my grandfather was contacted by someone in the art world offering a substantial amount of money for the painting. Bigaud was having a moment—his 1950 *Murder in the Jungle* had secured a place at MOMA; the painting is still there. My grandfather reportedly responded politely in his German accent, "No zank you. I'd razah haf ze painting."

THREE

Whether my grandfather met Bigaud or simply bought the painting from a dealer is something I'll never know. But it doesn't really matter because now *The Girl with Peacocks* lives with me.

When my husband got home that night of the delivery, we carefully cut into the box and unwrapped the layers of bubble wrap and pulled out the oil painting on Masonite mounted without glass on a carved wood frame. I spent hours searching for just the right location and light in my house and landed on the sunroom for its lemon-yellow walls, tiled



floor, Vietnam lamp, and braided jute rug. It had both prominence and a sense of the tropics in the Midwest. My brother was concerned that the sun would fade the colors. But I was determined to put her in a place where she could see . . . and be seen.

And so the sunroom is where she now lives—the room with the most light and the best view of the dining room and the kitchen and the backyard, where everything important happens.

I've since learned that Bigaud suffered a series of mental breakdowns in the late fifties, and after being institutionalized his work changed. In the capricious world of art value, his

stock fell. But I now possess a painting that—like my grandfather—I never intend to sell, representing the work of an underappreciated artist with a brief fifteen minutes of fame. That my grandfather chose art over coin inspires me on those days when I struggle around making money as a word artist.

Every morning I look at her over my coffee, yogurt, and blueberries and give her a little wink. She gazes back at me coyly, and I think of how many people, years, and miles it took to get this treasure to my front door. Beyond her beauty and the magic of Bigaud's brushstrokes, she and I have shared a lifetime, but for *The Girl with Peacocks*, there's the possibility of several more. ☪