



Brynolf Wennerberg, *Elly and Astrid*, 1908

Image info

Portrait

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BRIGHT DAUBS OF OIL PAINT PATCH together a recognizable image: two little girls sitting on bentwood chairs in an artist's messy studio. It's a portrait of my older sister and me, six and five years old. The artist applied the paint loosely and the perspective erratically, so any closer than, say, two feet away, realistic representation dissolves. My swinging leg becomes streaks of pink and peach and lavender, ending abruptly in a slanted, white patch to suggest a sagging ankle sock. My face, turned in profile toward my sister, is a pink curve punctuated by a barely-there flick of a nose. A simple green and yellow wedge at the nape of my neck hints a snarled mess lurking beneath bobbed hair.

My sister's image is more sharply formed, perhaps because she was better at sitting still for the artist, or perhaps because as a six-year-old teetering on the official threshold of reason, she was more formed as a person. She sits almost facing forward, her eyes sliding sideways to avert the artist's direct scrutiny. Her skinny legs, crossed at the ankles, reach the ground instead of swinging; she clenches her hands in her lap. The strain of keeping the

pose requested of her, particularly as I kick my foot within inches of her shin, is evident on her tense, purple-shadowed face.

Patches of blue-gray paint suggest the softness of the worn, corduroy jumpers we wear, and hasty white dashes limn our turtlenecks. Elongated, cherry-red triangles obscure the back of my chair, capturing the stiff wool folds of my mother's draped winter coat.

The painting, which hangs in the living room of my childhood home, is so familiar that I rarely study its surface. Instead, my gaze glances off it, ricocheting in a time bend that reveals what that five-year-old child saw. I see the young artist jabbing a brush at her pallet, ducking behind her easel, swiping at her canvas, tilting outward like the Little Teapot to study my sister and me, ducking back behind her canvas. I see my mother seated beside her, reading from a large, maroon storybook to keep my sister and me in our seats and oriented toward the artist.

If I dwell on the painting, I start to feel against my neck that wedge of yellow hair—an ugly, tangled mass, like an old Brillo pad, that I disguise under a lightly-brushed layer of outer, fine hair so it doesn't attract the attention of



Hans Heyerdahl, *The Sisters*, 1887

my meticulous mother and her fierce comb. I smell snowflakes melting into my mother's wool coat. I feel one of the coat's bun-shaped leather buttons pressing into my back. In effect, I indulge a small and highly specific out-of-body experience, one where I drop well below the astral plane to tuck back into my sturdy five-year-old self.



My sister and I listen raptly as our mother reads one of our favorite stories, either "Thumbelina," or "The Day the Dolls Came to Life." Often, at the beginning of a studio session, our mother begs us to choose a different story just this once, but we protest and she yields, risking her own sanity under the threat of pouty portraits. My sister and I are besotted with the thought of a girl so tiny she can ride on the back of a swallow,

or, better yet, dolls who don't require a child's imagination to animate them. How wonderful to have tiny best friends readily available to play with us and share our meals and bedtimes! We assume their cute little wills would align precisely with our own—that they would favor the same games as us, the same snacks, the same stories. Our mother could no doubt have warned us otherwise.

The way the artist studies me is disconcerting, so I twist sideways, kicking my leg toward my sister so she will react and draw attention from me. But no, she ignores me and maintains her pose.

The artist is a college student who has just married her much older art professor, a friendly acquaintance of my parents. I am puzzled that she chooses to paint two scruffy kids instead of any of her beautiful, hippie classmates—skinny

girls with flowing hair and madly flowered bell-bottoms and maxi skirts. (At the time, my reference for glorious long hair and trippy florals is Barbie, but these girls seemed much . . . hazier than Barbie, the way a dream is softer than a commercial. Their hair ripples rather than bristles; their smiles flicker rather than beam. Years later, after my Introduction to Art History course in college, I recognize these girls as Pre-Raphaelite beauties, one hundred years late to the party and happily less tubercular.) After much thought about why anyone would choose to paint my sister and me, with our knobby knees and crooked bangs and difficulty sitting still, I conclude that art students must be required to start out painting pictures of babies and small children and work their way up to adults, devoting their final college semester to portraits of bearded old men with sad, rheumy eyes, like Rembrandt's feather-hatted noble in my Masterpiece board game.

Because the artist is young and barely married, she probably doesn't realize how much she is asking when she suggests that my mother bring two restless children to a cold studio week after week, in the same clean outfits, and keep them still. The artist is friendly to us, and normal-pretty, with long, brown, unfussy hair like Penny's from my favorite TV show, *Lost in Space*. She is nothing like what I have learned of stepmothers from fairy tales, yet her new husband already has three daughters from his previous marriage. This I know because my sister and I sometimes inherit dresses from these girls, who are a few years older and live in New York City. Their hand-me-downs are smocked, pastel party dresses with labels in French, so I imagine them the castoffs of spoiled, rich girls, whose divorcee mother sniffs derisively at dresses from anywhere but Paris. The girls are probably insufferably pretty, with white patent pumps and velvet headbands to smooth back their shiny, untangled hair—the kind of girls who would never give me, with my buckle shoes and lumpy coiffure, the time of day. I assign the artist, a young stepmother who wears a paint-spattered shirt and faded jeans, the role of Cinderella in their family drama. Maybe the professor married her to do chores, like cleaning

his art studio and buying him cigarettes. Maybe he sells her paintings to keep his daughters in fancy French party dresses.

The artist leaves the studio windows open a crack to freshen the studio with crisp winter air, but the smell of turpentine still overwhelms me, seeping in through my pores. When I complain to my mother about the dizzying odor, she explains that turpentine is for thinning paint and cleaning paintbrushes. "It comes from tree sap," she adds, so I won't find the smell so offensive. I turn this over in my mind but can't make sense of it; sap is sticky and messy, unlikely to clean anything. In fact, I have often drawn crude designs—peace signs and daisies and smiley faces—on my arm with a sap-covered twig, knowing that by the end of a day playing outdoors, I will have a clearly-visible dirt-tattoo in that shape; these survive at least three baths before fading, adhering far better than the blistering tattoos from Cracker Jack boxes.

And the odor of turpentine doesn't faintly resemble the fresh, green smell of the towering



Emanuel Oberhauser, *Siblings with Roses*, 1887

pine trees I climb to convince myself I could, should the occasion arise, scale a magical beanstalk. No, turpentine has a dark-gray, oily smell, like unhealthy fumes from the moldy bottom of an abandoned well. Maybe because “turp” sounds like “burp” and I am considering wells, I decide turpentine is what a toad from the bottom of such a well would smell like. Which brings to mind, as I try not to squirm on my seat, a disturbing fairytale about a careless princess who drops her favorite golden ball into a well. (No one ever said princesses were smart.) A toad rescues the precious ball in exchange for a dinner invitation. Unfortunately, according to the strict rules for rewarding amphibians enforced by the king, the princess must allow the toad to share her own little golden plate at the dinner table. I imagine her gagging on her Spaghetti-Os as she politely pretends the smell of toad doesn’t offend her in the least, because princesses, however stupid, have impeccable table manners.

I start to feel nauseous and a little swimmy in the head, so I shift my thoughts away from toads and back to “The Day the Dolls Came to Life.”



Today, as I look at the painting, I recall my younger self so vividly that it seems strange that she has no reciprocal impression of me. But the painting doesn’t work as a window; no, it is more like the one-way mirror in the local drugstore, behind which lurks the dim shadow of some sharp-eyed store manager eager to thwart shoplifting and illicit purchases of Rokitussin. I look back to my childhood self clearly, or so I think, but five-year-old me never sees her future self. What kind of boring fairytale would that reveal to her, anyway? The one where a lively, adventurous child turns into a middle-aged woman who never married a prince, never befriended a chatty woodland creature, never stole gold from a giant,

and frankly couldn’t climb a beanstalk if her life depended on it? Of course, childhood me did sometimes fantasize about the future, planning for the fabulous cat farm that my sister and I intended to operate, but I always focused on the kittens, on the milk-crate beds and felt toys we would craft for them, and on the cunning tricks and impressive manners we would teach them, rather than on my adult self.

And yet here I am, decidedly an adult, but somehow still the same person I was at five—give or take ten thousand life experiences, grown children, a driver’s license, and a genuine hankering for green vegetables.

I suddenly wonder about the artist, so talented at a young age. What became of her? I Google and immediately recognize her face in a posed photo, though her hair is now steel-gray and bobbed. She looks refined, dressed all in black, her neck draped with multiple strands of amber beads. I read about her successful career in the arts, though not as a painter. I learn that she left the husband, raised a son, moved to California. There is no way she remembers two little girls shivering in her undergraduate studio so many decades ago, so many miles away. But she left behind a scrap of her imagination fixed in the colorful, confident brushstrokes of her younger self, preserved in the hardened resins of the oil paint as if in amber.

And as she painted that canvas long ago, layering shade and tint to capture the outward appearance of two little girls she barely knew, I was equally busy inside my head, savoring old fairy tales and spinning new stories to make sense of the world. Those stories linger about the painting, invisible and still, until I stir them up like dust off the frame, and they glint in the air. Of course I follow them, like dropped breadcrumbs, to my faraway childhood, where I lived once upon a time. ✎



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Lee Hoetger and Her Sister*, c. 1907