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## The Portrait

Lesley Quinn

I watched as my daughter surveyed the portrait artists crowding the perimeter of Montmartre's Place du Tertre. I saw her stand a little taller, screwing up her nerve, and I had a sinking feeling, but what could I do? It was like witnessing a collision in slow motion.

Molly was thirteen at the time.

And here it came. "Can I get my portrait done?" she asked, tapping politely on my arm. "Please, Mom?"

I looked around, trying to hide my horror. Waiters with trays full of drinks cursed the hordes, tacky souvenir vendors barked and beckoned. The 14<sup>th</sup> century square, once home to genuine Bohemians and artists, was now, on this sweaty summer night, all noise and neon.

But this wasn't your everyday pleading for a vacation keepsake—an Arc de Triomphe pencil sharpener, or Marie Antoinette-in-a-silver-guillotine charm. No, this reminded me more of the courage she'd had to summon in order to attend her first boy-girl party. I understood this wasn't a time for a knee-jerk no.

When I looked over at my friend, Arlene, she was rolling her eyes because her eleven-year-old, Emma, was making the same request. They, however, had less at stake.

"Let's just go look," I said to Molly, finally. "No promises."

Our excursion had begun impulsively at the end of a long and happy day in Paris—seven cheerful, overfed people jammed into a station wagon with a moon roof. We all felt it was too early to call it a day, and majority ruled: Montmartre at midnight would be our nightcap.

When we reached the top of the hill, the boys set off in search of glasses of beer and cold *citron pressé* in a faux Boho café while we girls surveyed the talent. Such as it was.

Business was brisk; almost every artist, cigarette dangling, charcoal or pastel in hand, squinted into the face of a giggling tourist. Most of the hungry-

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looking caricaturists drew grotesque cartoons meant to amuse overeager subjects—and sometimes crossed the line into outright insult. Others depicted innocent prepubescent girls, like ours, as brainless, big-eyed nymphs.

I turned to Molly. “You like these?” I asked, trying to sound neutral.

“They’re pretty, Mom.”

“Really.”

We circumnavigated most of the square before I started rehearsing how to explain why this wasn’t such a good idea. “Listen, honey—” I began.

And that’s when we noticed an artist much older than the others, a man with a weathered face and shaggy gray hair, smoking quietly on a lawn chair as he watched the crowds stroll by. He looked tired and sad and maybe a little disappointed in himself. Beside him, in pastels, was a drawing that looked *exactly like him*. Every wrinkle, his rumpled shirt, his uncombed hair, his down-turned eyes. This old guy, it appeared to me, had soul.

“What about him?” I whispered to Molly.

She hesitated.

“This is the one,” I said, squeezing her hand. Bending toward him, I asked how much. He rose slowly to his feet, mumbling something reasonable. I nodded.

For a long moment he stood without smiling, one hand tucked in the opposite armpit, the other scratching an earlobe, considering Molly. He beckoned for her to sit on a high stool in front of his easel. When I took a hairbrush out of my purse to redo Molly’s ponytail, he tapped my shoulder and shook his head no.

Molly, picking her cuticles nervously, watched him assemble his pastels. I positioned myself behind him and pantomimed nail-picking so she’d stop. I nodded and smiled encouragement.

He lit a fresh cigarette, pulled out a sheet of gray paper, and switched on a small light to illuminate Molly’s face. A few people stopped in the dark to watch. With plastic butterflies bouncing on springs in her hair, she looked so small, and brave.

She didn’t smile, either. Instead, she straightened her back, looking slightly defiant. Also vulnerable, and sad. Complex. There’s no way he’ll capture this, I thought.

He worked slowly. For a long time, nothing appeared to be happening—just disconnected lines and lonely strokes—but eventually, like a defrosting windshield, an image began to surface from the paper. By this time, my

husband, Dan, had left his lemonade and come to stand behind me. When I turned to greet to him I noticed a small crowd had formed, maybe a dozen people watching in silence. Molly seemed unaware of them. Occasionally someone whispered, but otherwise all I heard was the sound of my own heartbeat.

Her face emerged, lifelike, unsettling.

I realized, suddenly, this was not going to end as Molly hoped. I'd made a big mistake, and now I felt short of breath. I tried to calm myself and keep smiling. When I could fake it no longer, I reached behind to press Dan's hand, signaling him to take up the role of reassurer, and I set out to find Arlene and Emma.

Jostling my way through the crowds, I noticed the return of sound. I heard music—a poisonous blend of accordions and electric base—with people shouting and laughing and sloshing beer. Women who looked like prostitutes hovered in the shadows. Tripping over a sandwich sign with a large hand pointing down a dark alley toward the Dali Museum, I stumbled against a rack of 3-D postcards, bounced off a large man with an oversized mustache, and narrowly avoided stepping in a pile of dog shit steaming in the middle of the sidewalk. I hated this horrible place.

Finally, there was Emma smiling in a tall director's chair, her thick brown hair flowing down her shoulders, her blue-green headlight eyes. I searched the crowd for Arlene, but when I found her, she was shaking her head, dismayed.

“What?” I said.

“Look—” she gestured toward their artist. The young man, was playing to the crowd with a rendition of lovely Emma as Monica Lewinsky. What a way to end our nice day.

When I returned, Molly raised her eyebrows at me, wanting to know how her portrait was progressing. I slid in to stand near Dan so I could see.

There on the gray paper, her eyes. Deep and dark, searching, sad. Painfully alone. There on paper, the asymmetry of her face, the blue translucence of her skin, the swelling and discoloration from the tumor behind her right eye. There, too, the tired tendrils of blonde hair escaped from her ponytail, the bangs I accidentally cut too short, the bouncy butterflies.

I looked at her in person on the stool, the version of her in the portrait, at the artist concentrating—fully immersed, it seemed, in the effort to capture what he saw. I watched him, the way he studied her face, the way his eyes

moved back and forth between her face and his easel, back and forth, holding between thumb and forefinger a bit of yellow crayon. He seemed to whisper into the portrait with his fingers a hint of yellow, a tiny bit of white, an intimation of green, and blended gently with his thumb. Ashes fell unnoticed from the cigarette dangling from his mouth. I reached for Dan's hand. I heard him breathing deeply.

Another man, an even older man with paint under his big fingernails, set a beer down next to our artist, who nodded briefly in thanks. The friend stood back to watch.

The crowd behind us continued to grow. I glanced around at their faces, wondering how much of Molly's story these strangers could begin to guess. Not the months in intensive care, certainly, or the epilepsy. Perhaps they noticed some hint of neurological damage, the hearing aids. Maybe they mistook her small stature for that of an eight-year-old. I felt certain they noticed something wrong with her eye, but they might not suspect an inoperable tumor—maybe, instead, a small accident, a simple run-in with a cupboard door?

Molly continued to sit tall and very still, and all she wanted, I suddenly understood, was to be made beautiful, to be seen as beautiful. She looked straight into the artist's eyes, now, without artifice or fear. She was determined, almost fierce, and she was genuine and sincere and unbearably sweet. In all that animated her in that moment, I *saw* her. I saw her and she was luminous and she was *alive*.

I felt my throat constricting, my eyes burning with tears. A woman in the crowd stepped toward me, patted my shoulder with tenderness. When I turned, I saw that she was smiling but her eyelashes, too, were wet. "Luffly," she said with a German accent.

"Oui," I nodded. "Oui."

Minutes passed, maybe an hour, or more, the crowd swollen to a small congregation.

Finally, the artist stood and stepped back. He leaned in again to add a shadow, a blue and pink background, small brown tick marks to help us with framing. He wrote quickly in charcoal: "Victor Romanoff. Paris 1999. Montmartre" and then he wiped his hands on his pants.

Molly hopped off the stool and came around to see. I took a breath, standing behind her, holding her shoulders.

"Oh," she said quietly.

“What do you think?” I whispered in her ear.

“I...*that* doesn't look like me.” Her face, first so hopeful, sagged with disappointment. “Does it, Mom?” How I wanted to whisk her away from the artist, the crowds.

Turning quickly to Victor Romanoff, I smiled, taking out my wallet, handing him a wad of bills. He continued to watch Molly dispassionately.

“*Merci beaucoup*,” I said as he rolled the portrait in a sheet of waxed paper. With a small bow, he handed it to Molly. She responded with a perfunctory nod and crept away with Dan to find Emma. Victor Romanoff lit a fresh cigarette, stretched, and took a long drink of beer.

“Monsieur Romanoff,” I began, looking into his deep-set eyes, “I really appreciate the way you—”

“I am sorry,” he said with a thick Russian accent, shaking his head. “I no speak English.”

“Oh,” I nodded. His friend, the man who had brought the beer, stepped forward, saying something in Russian. Victor nodded and for the first time, I saw him smile slightly.

“Do *you* speak English?” I asked the friend.

“Yes.”

“Could you tell Mr. Romanoff...that I...that he really captured something in my daughter? And that it hurts to see it but that I...”

The friend began translating into Russian. Victor Romanoff stared at his shoes and listened, nodding.

When the friend paused and turned to me, I continued, “...it hurts to see what you saw, but also it is...deeply—”

Again the friend translated until Victor Romanoff interrupted. He looked directly into my eyes and said something in Russian.

“He say ‘Only I paint what I see. What I see in your girl many things. She is beauty. As God make her.’”

“Yes,” I nodded, tears now flowing down my cheeks. “She is beautiful.”

“She is beautiful,” Victor Romanoff repeated in English. And then he turned to begin setting up for his next portrait.

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