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## THE DAY I BECAME SOMEBODY ELSE

The dream began on my 10th birthday when my parents gave me a set of water colors. They always encouraged my scribbles and sketches and school papers often embellished with penciled pictures. My grandmother sometimes let me look at cards tied together with a ribbon and covered with cartoons grandfather had drawn during his college days when they were courting. During senior year in high school I pasted a picture of an artist's palette on the cover of my career book project. We believed, my family and I, that some day—not too far off mind you—I would become a famous artist.

All our high-flown schemes came to naught because teaching school brought in a regular paycheck during the Great Depression. Art with a capital A did not. So the whole summer of 1944 was a heady experience borrowed from the career I really wanted to follow. Even to be accepted in Cranbrook Academy of Art Summer School was a thrill that took away my breath.

In those early days of its existence, the faculty consisted of the Finnish architect, Eliel Saarinen; Carl Milles, the Swedish sculptor; Zoltan Sepeshy, a Hungarian painter; and Maia Grotell, a weaver from Finland. They all lived on the grounds of the Academy. It was a rarified atmosphere, which Anne Lindbergh also sometimes enjoyed when staying with friends nearby in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. The day I elected to stay in my room and paint instead of going to the pool with a fellow painter who knew the famous lady was the day Mrs. Lindbergh spent an afternoon with her by the pool. This was not my big day, nor did I have a second chance.

Opportunity never knocks twice. But the great day waited just around the corner. Cloudy days make sunny days brighter.

Cranbrook operated on the European apprentice system and it was a little like living in a large family. Students were invited to resident artists' homes and studios to watch them work. I remember an exquisite table in the Saarinen dining room with an inlaid top designed by its owner, a sunburst of natural wood yellows, pale orange, and browns. Carl Milles' studio had a high ceiling to accommodate statues ready for casting, and his living room was completely filled with ancient Greek and Roman statues he had shipped from Europe. When he showed them to us, his hands followed their contours lovingly, calling them his library.

After dinner we could spend the evening in the school's main lounge. Christ-Janer, who later became famous in the New York art scene, played the grand piano. Outside, a mist of water trickled down the Orpheus fountain, a copy of the Milles fountain in Stockholm. Sometimes in the evening my friend and I "threw pots" in the ceramic studio where we were allowed only because we religiously cleaned up afterwards, including any mess left over by day students.

I had chosen to work with the master painter, Zoltan Sepeshy. I say "with" but days went by when he did not appear except to pass quickly through our painting studio. His assistant arranged for models and other logistical matters including some criticism of our work. When Sepeshy did appear, his comments were laconic and to the point—one could say, unsparing. We were supposed to grow and flourish like air plants by breathing the atmosphere. I was totally overawed by my surroundings and had to pretend I really belonged there, painting furiously, making believe I was an artist.

One day—THE DAY—Sepeshy stopped by my easel and stood still for what seemed an eternity. The other five students put down their brushes and listened as we all did when the master spoke. The subject was a nude, a no-longer-young, red-haired woman named Leah. The figure hadn't been much of a problem for me, but the background insisted on painting itself in spite of my best efforts to change it. My brush worried the canvas over and over and I tried to scoop off some spots with my palette knife, but the original layer kept emerging as if my hand were propelled by some interfering and obstinate bystander.

Finally, looking at the model and then at my painting, the master spoke as if he hated to admit it, "That's a very good portrait of Leah's back."

He paused and I thought, "Here it comes—that dumb background!" Summoning up all my courage I told him, "I really tried to change the background but it wouldn't change."

What followed was almost beyond belief. He scowled fiercely, "Don't touch it! This painting reminds me of Picasso's Blue Period." He paused. "It has a lot of El Greco's technique too." He stopped again for a moment, thinking. I began to feel dizzy. His voice reached me from far away – maybe a passing cloud. "Are you familiar with the work of Oskar Kokoschka?" he asked. I shook my head. It was all I could manage. "Well," he said, "you should look up his paintings in the library, or better still, find some originals in museums and look at the brushwork. If I didn't know better, I'd swear Kokoschka painted your canvas."

Oh joy beyond compare! Oh swelled head as big as a giant pumpkin! More than fifty years later I can still hear Zoltan Sepeshy's exact words and see the other five students standing around with their mouths open. The model put on her clothes and went home. It was the day I became somebody else.