

The Portrait

Leslie, what is this painting?

Oh my goodness! I can't believe my mother saved it. I painted it when I was fifteen years old. My mother always thought it was a portrait of my younger brother, but it wasn't. I don't know who it was. I gave him blue eyes, and my brother has brown eyes. I don't know why I painted him. He was the little mystery boy.

Although this story puts us ahead of the timeline by about a decade, it feels important to share it here. After Leslie's father died in 2001 in Johannesburg, we were cleaning out an old closet in her parents' house, and I found the painting, which had turned yellowish brown with age but was still clear enough to make out the features. While she was debating about whether to keep it or purge it, I stared at the painting, surprised by how much it looked like me as a young boy.

Leslie, tell me more about why you painted this?

Well, we were living in Aden, a seaport city in Yemen, for about a year because my father had work in the Middle East, and I had become incredibly ill. In fact I went through periods of extreme delirium, and they thought I might die. I remember leaving my body during hallucinations, but I got through it and lived to tell the tale. Afterwards my mother bought me some paints and brushes to keep me entertained during my recuperation, and the painting just came through me. I normally painted abstracts and landscapes, never portraits, certainly not of strangers. And like I said, I have no idea who the little boy with blond hair and blue eyes was. Interestingly I painted a large golden-yellow halo behind his head. Can you see it there? My mother convinced me it was a straw hat slung behind him, so I actually added some features to make it look a little like a straw hat, but I've always known it was a halo.

So if you were fifteen at the time you painted him that would have been 1961–62, right?

Yes. That's about the time we lived in Aden.

Do you remember more or less when during that time you painted it—what month?

Well, let's see... I had to miss school for the illness and was recuperating right before summer vacation began, so I must have painted it around early May of 1962. But why do ask?

Leslie! That's right when I was born! Early May of 1962.

Oh my goodness.

And oddly enough it reminds me very much of a pastel portrait of me that my parents commissioned when I was eight years old. Leslie, I think you painted me! I think some part of you checked out of your body during your delirium and came over to the US to be with me and to support my birth.

I think you're right. And you know something else, Brad? I remember when I was very little, maybe about six years old, I asked Spirit who I was going to marry, and a voice said, "A man in America." I held onto that memory for the longest time, but when I married my first husband, who was South African, I discounted what the guide had told me, figuring it was misinformation.

Wreathed in smiles and reeling with excitement, we gazed at the painting and at each other, marveling at the incredible magic of it all. Spirit works in mysterious ways, indeed.

Needless to say we didn't purge the painting. It still hangs in our home and serves as a constant reminder of our enduring soul connection and of our predestined relationship in this life.



Leslie's portrait, May 1962, my birthdate.



Commissioned portrait, July 1971, age 9.