

Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist

One: At an early age my sister Gretchen exhibited a remarkable talent for drawing and painting. Her watercolors of speckled mushrooms and bonneted girls were hung with pride in the family room, and her skill was encouraged with private lessons and summer visits to sketching camp. Born with what my mother defined as an “artistic temperament,” Gretchen floated from blossom to blossom in a blissful haze. Staring dreamily up at the sky, she tripped over logs and stepped out in front of speeding bicycles. When the casts were placed on her arms and legs, she personalized them with Magic Marker daisies and fluffy clouds. Physically she’d been stitched up more times than the original flag, but mentally nothing seemed to touch her. You could tell Gretchen anything in strict confidence, knowing that five minutes later

she would recall nothing but the play of shadows on your face. It was like having a foreign-exchange student living in our house. Nothing we did or said made any sense to her, as she seemed to follow the rules and customs of some exotic, faraway nation where the citizens drilled the ground for oil paint and picked pastels from the branches of stunted trees. Without copying anyone else, she had invented her own curious personality, which I envied even more than her artistic ability.

When Gretchen's talent was recognized by teachers, both my parents stepped forward to claim responsibility. As a child my mother had shown a tendency for drawing and mud sculpture and could still amuse us with her speedy recreations of a popular cartoon woodpecker. Proving his to be a latent gift, my father bought himself a box of acrylic paints and set up his easel in front of the basement TV, turning out exact copies of Renoir cafés and Spanish monks brooding beneath their hooded robes. He painted New York streetscapes and stagecoaches riding into fiery sunsets — and then, once he'd filled the basement walls with his efforts, he stopped painting as mysteriously as he'd begun. It seemed to me that if my father could be an artist, anyone could. Snatching up his palette and brushes, I retreated to my bedroom, where, at the age of fourteen, I began my long and disgraceful blue period.

Two: When painting proved too difficult, I turned to tracing comic-book characters onto onionskin typing paper,