

“SISTERS IN THE SNOW”

by Holly Johnson

SCENE ONE

American Embassy in Vienna

*In the darkness we briefly hear bells ringing, then the round “Frere Jacques,” sung in English and Flemish by two little girl voices.
Enter Abby, an attractive tall woman, confident and intense but at the same time clearly upset. She's an American tourist, carries an all-purpose raincoat, wears a bright scarf, travel handbag, etc.. As Abby anxiously enters from one side, a man in a suit, Jack, greets her, walking toward her from the other side of the stage. They shake hands center stage.*

JACK

Sit down. Can I get you coffee, Ms. Freebright?

He leads her to a small table with chairs.

ABBY

You're so kind. But, no thanks. Sorry I'm flustered. What was your name again? They told me at the front desk, but I didn't listen....

JACK

That's OK. I'm Jack Schultz, public affairs officer at the Embassy. Where did you last see your sister?

ABBY

In the art museum. The Kunsthistorisches Museum here in Vienna.

JACK

(Taking a few notes)

When exactly?

ABBY

About 24 hours ago. Yesterday afternoon about one, to be precise. We arrived day before yesterday. I was looking around in the museum near this Bruegel painting, and couldn't find her anywhere. I must have looked for about an hour. I talked to the guards: No one fitting her description had left. In fact, no one else was close by at the time. I can't imagine where she could have gone. She didn't show up at the hotel. People kept saying she'd come, and not to worry. The

police were notified, and apparently they checked around the area outside the museum, around the palace. I talked to them, but I'm not sure they understood me. I was up all night.

JACK

I'm sure they understood you. What is the purpose of your trip here?

Abby

It's the first time we've traveled together, my sister and I. We'd been estranged for a long time, due to personality differences, and basic conflict stuff that families deal with--and after about six months of urging and pleading, I finally got her to come to Europe with me (*a quick unexpected sob, then tears*). And now she's gone. (*angry*) It's so typical of her.

JACK

So you're on holiday, not here for business?

ABBY

Business? With my pathetic German? That's too funny.....during the cop interview, everyone looked at me blankly, like I was speaking Klingon or something, when I tried to answer in the mother tongue. I finally switched to English.

JACK

I am at your disposal. I've already called the local police again, and there isn't much they can do without more information, but if you don't want to be alone, I can spend time with you today, going over anything else you can remember.

ABBY

Thanks. This sounds strange: but I'd like to go back to the museum. I think I lost an earring there, like this one (*she shows him her other*). I may be screwy, but that's where I last saw her, and it was near that Bruegel painting "Hunters in the Snow." I also thought I heard something, maybe the sound of a bell—or bells.

JACK

That's impossible. The museum does not allow any sound, unless there's a special event. This is Austria. Sound is limited to Strauss waltzes in the city square, Mozart and Schubert quartets in the coffee houses from 4 to 6 pm accompanied by Sacher torte and espresso.

ABBY

It might have been music. Very faint. A drum far away maybe. Probably my jet lag. Or echoes from my Ipod which was connected to my ears for 10 hours on the plane. I imagine Bea is playing some trick on me. We've never gotten along...Can I call you Jack?

JACK

Of course! May I call you Abby?

ABBY

Goes without saying. We Americans are pretty casual.

JACK

Hey, I'm American too. I'm not very casual over here, though. Lots of starch in the *schlag*. That's German for whipped cream. I've been in Austria so long I've forgotten what it's like to be a Yank.

ABBY

The more I think about it, I feel some kind of joke has been played on me. (*She sighs deeply with relief*). I think I'd just like to go back and look for my earring, and see more of the museum as well as the city. To be uber-casual, totally American, I'd like to add—Damn Bea; to hell with her. '

JACK

I'm just curious; Has she done anything like this before?

ABBY

Yes, in fact. When we were in our twenties, she left me in New York city, in Brooklyn, where we were both staying for a couple of months during summer vacation from college. I wasn't exactly with her, she would never allow that, she was with a friend living close by. But she flew back to Portland, Oregon, ---that's where we're from-- without even telling me. I was *so* hurt. I get pissed off just thinking about it. That bitch. (*pause*) Oh, God. I hope she's OK.

BLACK

SCENE TWO

In the painting “Hunters in the Snow”

Lights up within the painting “Hunters in the Snow” an enlarged image projected upstage: Bea wanders, a bit stunned. She meets Hans, one of the hunters, who is watching her. He's attractive, five or ten years younger than she, all in Dutch peasant clothing like the hunters in the painting).

BEA

How did I get here? This is amazing!

HANS

I saw you out there. You looked lost, desperate.

BEA

(looking around)

Wow!

HANS

Rest, rest. It must have been quite a journey (he helps her sit)

BEA

I'm not tired. This is so picturesque!

HANS

What can I say? It's a picture...a painting. Look around. Enjoy.

BEA

Stunning.

HANS

(he looks at her). Yes, stunning. I'm Hans.

BEA

I'm Beatrice. Bea.

HANS

Hello.

BEA

I have to confess something to you. I have to tell somebody.

HANS

At your service.

BEA

I'm glad I came here. I wanted to get away from my sister. I can't explain it. I feel like she's needy. She's suffocating me. She wants things I can't give her. This is just the place to hide.

HANS

It is?

BEA

We're on a trip together. Big mistake.

I'm not exactly sure why I'm here. But it feels marvelous. I like the cold! Something has changed in me.

HANS

It's not a real place. The artist made it up. The Flemish lowlands with hills! A fantasy. Combined with imaginary Alpine mountains, very jagged. Kind of silly, really. But romantic in a way (*he looks around*). Piques the imagination, yes?

BEA

Indeed.

HANS

We can go anywhere you like. Down to the skaters, over to a fire burning. In that direction. See the smoke? Smell it?

Dogs start barking in the distance.

BEA

You must like dogs. Me, too.

HANS

We have many of them, too many. I have a few favorites, although they often drive me crazy. Flea-mongers!

I think you may have to face your sister sooner or later.

BEA

Abby. Her name's Abby. Can you hide me here?

HANS

I can't hide you. I don't have that power.

BEA

I guess not.

HANS
Hiding from your sister? Aren't you two adults?

BEA
Yes, of course. No.

HANS
And I can't stop her from coming here.

A Strauss waltz is heard in the background, gradually getting louder.

Would you like to waltz?

BEA
Now? I don't think so.

HANS
It's quite easy.

He takes her to the dance floor, music swells a little)

BEA
Are you like this with all the women who come here?

HANS
I'm supposed to be. But I'm not. Only with special ones. You dance elegantly.

BEA
Me? I've never heard that line before.

HANS
You're elegant. And sweet. But I'm not going to hide you from your sister. You can escape to a new place, but you always take yourself with you.

BLACK

SCENE THREE

The Museum

Jack and Abby have put on coats and start walking across the stage, as if back to the museum; maybe there's a moving floor to give them momentum. They talk as they walk).

JACK

I'm playing detective here, but do you remember what she was last wearing?

ABBY

Here's a recent picture of her.

She shows him an image on her cell phone or a snapshot.

I already showed it to the polizzia or the gendarmes or whatever your cops are called. Taken right outside the museum yesterday. Another thing: she recently has been walking with a cane. Never said why. Wouldn't tell me. I guess it's for effect. Weird because she doesn't draw attention to herself.

*The "Hunters in the Snow" painting by Bruegel comes on to the stage while they've been walking.
Maybe some music, Bach, upbeat.*

JACK

I've worked in the Embassy for 12 years, and I cannot ever remember personally dealing with a missing person case, at least a case when anyone was gone for very long or didn't come crawling back hung over from too much schnapps. This is new to me.

*They stop in front of the painting, and stare at it together.
Clearing her throat, playing docent, standing painting, maybe putting on glasses, and lecturing out at Jack, with a sweep of her arm.*

ABBY

This is a work by Bruegel the Elder, Hunters in the Snow, inspired by Italian art. It's from 1565, one of his winter paintings. He explored the expressivity of winter, showing mood created by landscape. I love this work. And I don't even like the cold. *(she deflates a bit)* I'm showing off. I think I'm so smart. I googled a bunch of info, probably from Wikipedia., about some works in this museum. And sort of memorized it to be cool. I was an art history major long, long ago.

JACK

Hey, I'm impressed. What I know about art you could stick in a thimble. Still, I know what I like, as the saying goes.

ABBY

It's a gut response, isn't it?

JACK

It's funny: Even if you don't know anything about art there's an emotional connection that defies words. You walk up to something in a museum or gallery, and, wham! Electricity blasts you, and even though you may at first not know the name of the artist or the painting or even necessarily what it is about, you are galvanized with feeling. Kind of like falling in love, I guess. Logic leaps out the window.

ABBY

I know that feeling.

JACK

I experience that with travel, too. I took a lot of trips on my own when I was young, doing hardly any research in advance: I wouldn't know anything about a country, but once I landed there I felt nothing at all or got a feeling that was strong, pulling me into some deep memory of something that was never mine in the first place.

ABBY

I know what you mean!

JACK

Travel is an individual high. Never the same for two people. I remember going to Nepal with my best friend: To my surprise, I got vertigo from the mountains. Not by climbing them, but just by looking up at them!

ABBY

Art is personal. So is travel. I was hoping in this case it would be a shared experience.

Suddenly the lights go out for several seconds, and the painting lights up, as if from within. We hear dogs barking and crows cawing, children ice skating. The painting seems alive. Then abrupt silence and complete darkness. The image has disappeared. A few seconds later it comes on again, and two live actors are posed as hunters, in the painting, although still in tableau. Lights out completely once again, then up. Painting looks normal, the actors have disappeared.

ABBY

Did you see what I just saw? And heard?

JACK

What are you talking about? The lights went out briefly, but...

ABBY

For a moment I thought I saw my sister's face.

She walks toward the painting, lights dim and she disappears.

BLACKOUT

SCENE FOUR

A Viennese police station.

Office room. Jack is talking to Elsa Schwartzkoff, a local detective/police woman with a slight Flemish/German accent. She's restless, maybe pacing and smoking.

ELSA

These damned Americans. They think they can just come to our country and dematerialize merrily into the sunset. They're as crazy as a box of frogs when it comes to chasing after culture, about which they know very little. *They've* got a big country, why don't they just stay *there* and disappear?

JACK

(A bit dazed, still).

It was so strange. One minute she was next to me, and a second later, thin air.

ELSA

I don't have time for this. I'm involved in a really juicy case involving the mayor. This missing woman is probably poking around the museum, even the palace, somewhere. I'll wait a few days, then we'll check it out. *(she yawns)* God, I'm not getting enough sleep.

JACK

This poor woman Abby wasn't sleeping much either, after her sister was gone. Sounds like they don't get along.

ELSA

Tell it to the Marines, as they say over there. Tourists. Pooh! I'm returning to Belgium for early retirement one of these days, and never coming back. There's not much police work to do here.

JACK

That's right. You're from Flanders.

ELSA

Born and raised in Antwerpen.

JACK

Then you probably know something about Pieter Bruegel.

ELSA

Bruegel the Elder? The painter? Peasant Bruegel? He was my great, great, great, great grandfather. Just kidding. I *wish*. I guess I know more about him than you do. He was born in Antwerpen too.

JACK

I guess it's the Elder.

ELSA

If the painting we're discussing is "Hunters in The Snow," it's the Elder alright. Every school kid in my town knows that.

JACK

Why don't we go to the museum together and look around? Maybe Abby's there somewhere.

ELSA

Oh, Jack, I just can't. There's no time.

JACK

There's no time like the present, you mean. I think this case requires attention. I am worried about this woman, this Abby. You can put on your snooping hat. And snoop.

ELSA

That's what I do best. I'll let you know.

JACK

Let me know soon.

BLACK

SCENE FIVE

In the Painting “Hunters in the Snow”

We hear the allegro movement from Grieg's Holberg Suite or maybe upbeat BACH by an all-saxophone quartet.. It's loud, cheerful, then fades. Sound of wind blowing, dogs barking, crows cawing, a fire crackling. The enlarged image of “Hunters in the Snow” is projected on upstage backdrop, but the hunters aren't in the image.

*We hear a male voice with a slight Dutch accent offstage.
Dogs bark.*

HANS

Down, Siegfried. Down, Mad Meg. Stop that, Trixie! There are enough scraps for everyone

*The growling fades.
A gunshot is heard: A crow falls from the ceiling.*

HANS

(Stepping into view)

Got you!

Hans grabs the crow, and throws it offstage.

Enter Abby. She has her coat wrapped around her tightly, and is clutching her purse.

ABBY

Christ, It's fucking freezing! Am I where I think I am? First I was blathering on to Jack about the painting, and now I'm *in* it! I felt this energy, pulling me in. It's beautiful, but cold! Wow! The birds are real! And I heard the dogs. And snow! Gorgeous.

HANS

Hello, miss. My name is Hans and I'll be your, well, I'll be looking after you today. Shut up, you dogs!

ABBY

Um, I want to find my sister. I have reason to believe she's here.

HANS

Welcome to Bruegel's most popular winter scape, “Hunters in the Snow.” I'm one of the hunters, although my eyesight is not the best. But we have to play the part. It's amazing, the power of strong acting.

ABBY

Where is she?

HANS

Around here somewhere. We already had a rendezvous.

ABBY

You had a *what*?

HANS

(slightly seductive)

What are *you* hunting for, Abby?

ABBY

How did you know my name?

HANS

(bragging a little)

I just do. Insider's information. Your sister Bea was hunting for love, romance, friendship, intimacy, kindness, honesty, intellectual conversation, loyalty, and even dancing after a fashion.

He might count these qualities off on his fingers).

ABBY

What?

HANS

I made sure she found them all. Fritz and I are casually known as the Chippendales of Culture, except we're not gay, we don't take any of our clothes off, and we don't dance in people's faces. Oh, and we're *smart*. Of course, if you just want to be part of the painting, to immerse yourself in it for awhile, that's fine too.

ABBY

This is too sudden: I have to sit down.

Chairs for a little medieval version of a bar are to one side of the stage, with a table, They go over and sit.

HANS

Sit back and enjoy.

A Beat.

Look at how glorious the sky is; not grey exactly, but not green either. Not metallic, but soft. And eternally in twilight.

ABBY

Shut up.

A Beat.

ABBY
(softly, in wonder)

It's beautiful.

Hugging herself to keep warm, she looks at Hans, and Fritz who enters behind Hans; She quotes Shakespeare)

"He was furnished like a hunter. Ominous! He comes to kill my heart."

Breathless, Bea enters.

BEA

You made it. Finally. I thought you were right behind me

ABBY

Liar. How *could* you? How could you disappear like that, the way you've always disappeared on me, like you had to be somewhere else super-important? Making me feel an inch high? Like I didn't exist?

BEA

Would you just stop it? Listen a minute. I'm sorry.

ABBY

You *disappeared*.

BEA

It just sort of happened. I got sucked in, as it were.

ABBY

You totally left me, you card-carrying cow.

Abby's pent-up anger gushes forth.

BEA

That's colorful alliteration, even for you. We're dissing animals now, are we? Just leave the crows alone. I'm growing fond of them.

ABBY

I said cow, you cow. Not crow. Oooh, I'm so cold!

FRITZ
(a quick courtly bow)

Hello, my name is Fritz. Ladies, If you really want to get warm, Why don't you slip into something more comfortable and right for our setting? Try these

Fritz hands them burlap-rough skirts and waistcoats, gloves with cut out fingers, white aprons, little caps, other peasant gear inspired by Bruegel's paintings.. Warmish duds.

ABBY

You've got to be kidding.

BEA

They look warm.

The women slip them on over their clothes. Meanwhile, the men set up a table with drinks on the other side of the stage)

As the sisters change:

ABBY

I look like one of the peasants in the back row of "Les Miz." All I need is a torch.

BEA

Let's enjoy this. This is fun (*Abby glares at her*). Isn't it amazing? Hey, It looks good on you! Let's not argue. Let's not talk.

ABBY

(tucking in her waistcoat, whatever, putting on her cap),

You never talk. You never talk to *me*. You never talk about anything that matters. You talk to everyone else BUT me, with your long-winded bullshit conversations about spirituality and miracles. Let's not argue? LET'S NOT ARGUE? No, let's! You're not wriggling off the hook this time. And what's with the cane, Beatrice Jane?

BEA

Abby, think about it. This IS a miracle We're IN one. And you're still ragging on about what happened long ago. Grow *up*.

ABBY

They'll probably ask us to dance next.

FRITZ

Would you like to learn a peasant dance? It's quite fun. We'll show you. Afterwards, come to the bar. We have all sorts of Dutch courage: beer, advocate, ginevere

A Dutch folk dance between the four takes place, music offstage, maybe just two instruments, kind of like English contra-dancing, star formations, simple allemandes, etc.

As they dance they chat. Sound of drum, flute offstage.

ABBY

So... what do you guys do for excitement here?

HANS

There's an ice skating pond down in the valley. We hunt.

FRITZ

We have shouting contests.

HANS

The hill provides nice echoes. Sometimes we roll down the hill.

FRITZ

We make snow angels. We gaze up at the beautiful craggy mountains until we get dizzy. We paddle on the waterways in our little boat when the ice is melted.

HANS

We help keep the outdoor fires burning. We go to the pub, or brown cafe as it is called here. We meet up with our guests.

FRITZ

We discuss politics. We feed the dogs.

SCENE SIX
The Painting

Fritz and Abby fade into the background, ending their dancing; they're at the bar, talking silently. Bea and Hans are downstage left, maybe looking out at the view together.

BEA

I still can't figure out how I got here.

HANS

I saw you in the museum, said to myself "I must meet her," and reeled you in (*he giggles mannishly*).

BEA

How sweet. I'm a bit older than you, you know.

HANS

Who cares? You're quite lovely. I had a really good time with you last night.

BEA

It wasn't actually night, was it? I mean, it never gets really dark here, does it? Kind of perpetual twilight, like the landscape of the Native American spirit world,: neither night nor day. Eternal dusk. When the gods come out to play.

HANS

You're right. It doesn't. But I felt romantic: Like we were under the moon and a sky of a thousand twinkly stars.

BEA

"O, look at all the fire-folk, sitting in the air." Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Victorian poet, said that. He was whacky but tender.

HANS

Sounds like a dignified duke.

BEA

Not exactly. A passionate Catholic.

HANS

I felt passionate about you, but also very peaceful with you. Like I could fall into a happy sleep mid-sentence during our conversation.

BEA

(Grinning)

Thanks a lot! Falling asleep during your sentence or mine?

HANS

No, really. It was delectable. Looking out at the snow together. Talking for hours. Showing you some new dance steps despite your use of a cane. Bringing out a fox I had just shot. Here, let's put it on you

Hans reaches for the fox behind the bar.

It's for you.

BEA

What *did* we talk about? I don't remember. Yet I haven't forgotten any of it. My sister always complains that I don't talk to her enough. I love the fox (*she puts it carefully around her shoulders*). Thank you. You look like someone I used to know, but you're completely different. Which is a relief. I felt peaceful with you too.

HANS

Thanks for listening to my woes about hunting last night. I just can't get the hang of it. That fox was a large accomplishment for me. I know men are supposed to hunt, but I just don't make the connection between gun and game.

BEA

(sniffing the fox cautiously)

It's a great honor to wear your fox, although I'll need to get it tanned eventually.

She hands it back to him gingerly.

HANS

I've got something I need to ask you....would you like to stay here?

BEA

I think I would, yes.

HANS

Would you really?

BEA

I feel very different here: No pain. It's odd. It's so...bracing and otherworldly, isn't it?

A church bell rings, much like the bell sound Abby heard at the museum.

Entering wearing a trench coat, Elsa's been standing there in the shadows a moment. They all appear surprised.

ELSA

What about Bruegel? What do you do to honor him? You couldn't be here without him. Before I got into police work, I studied art history and wrote a long paper about Bruegel the Elder (*looks at the women*). You are under arrest. Both of you. Not really. However, I'm keeping an eye on you. You've caused a lot of trouble (*looks at BEA pointedly*). Especially you.

BEA

Um, sorry.

ABBY
(*To Elsa*)

How did you get here?

ELSA

I tap danced a little and jumped through a few hoops. Tap, tap, tap. Hoop, hoop, hoop. And here I am. It pays to have connections. Also to believe in the impossible. *Gott in himmel*, I have to go--an important case awaits--but I'll be back to check up on you. Just wanted to make sure you were here-- as I suspected.

She melts into the shadows.

ABBY

(*Referring to Hans, who is wiping glasses at the bar*).

He looks just like a young version of Emile, doesn't he? It's incredible.

BEA

Would you just forget Emile? That was long ago, Abby.

ABBY

How can I ever forget? We both loved the same man and he chose *you*. That hurt is lodged in my heart. Kind of like a big ax. Even now.

BEA

But I let him go. He was just a fling. I let him go, and well, I met someone else soon after and got married. To Max.

ABBY

I felt so ashamed. So devastated. How could you *do* that to me?

BEA

I didn't mean to. It's just happened.

ABBY

And now it's happening again with Hans.

BEA

Not exactly. But something's happening, all right.

ABBY

How do you know if Hans is even real? How do we know if any of this is real? I know you're not well despite that cryptic way of yours, but right now I don't care, and really hate you.

BEA

He's real.

ABBY

You don't look sick to me. Hail and hearty, in fact. I think you're faking it

She grabs BEA around the collar, and shakes her. BEA throws down the cane, the fox fur goes flying, or maybe Bea uses it later to slap Abby with).

Lets find out.

BEA

Let's step outside.

They move upstage. It has been snowing, at least, there are clumps of snow on the ground. BEA grabs a handful, fashions a snowball and rubs it into Abby's face. The snowball fight between the two begins...take this step at a time mixed with dialogue..

ABBY

You cow!

BEA

Oh, moo to you, too! I've had enough of your accusations!

They start pushing each other, or throwing snowballs, all girl fight stuff. As they fight they talk.

ABBY

You had so many boyfriends. I had so few.

BEA

That's not *my* fault.

ABBY pushes snow down her front.

Oh, ew! That's cold! Mom always favored you, thought you were so beautiful and brilliant. Those were her words.

ABBY

That's not *my* fault!

BEA

I knew we couldn't travel together. I knew you'd gum up the works by getting confrontational and start to blame me for stuff. And then *cling* to me! Some things are better left alone.

ABBY

I disagree. And I'm not clinging!

BEA

I'm sorry I pushed you off the swing when you were three, but get over it!

ABBY

Oh, *please*.

BEA pushes her.

Ow!

You confide in strangers more than you do your own family.

BEA

Ah, the kindness of strangers. Well, sometimes there's good reason for that.

ABBY

I love you, but I don't like you one bit. Why do people always say that about family members? (*Bea pins Abby's left arm behind her expertly*). Ouch! That hurts, big sister!

Suddenly the two sisters freeze in place in a fighting tableau. Stage darkens. Lights focus on Elsa.

ELSA

I'd like to share some of my college term paper on Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Do we really know what he thought and felt? There's not much recorded about his life, and the guys who wrote books about him probably made up at least some of it. All this focus on facts. God!

Bruegel: scruffy beard; curly hair. Spoiled by his mother as a boy; he used to have flying dreams, where he was soaring, floating, levitating over Flanders, Belgium and Holland as we know it today; Over flat land, beneath starry skies and cloudy ones. He tried to get back down, but every time he willed himself to descend gracefully onto some moonlit wheat field or cobbled thoroughfare, he'd actually bounce up higher. He had to concentrate very hard to land gracefully. Then sometimes, he'd float just a few feet off the ground all night, but that felt nice too.

Bruegel the elder was from a rather respectable family. Many of his relatives were artists too. Dead and alive. I picture the ones that Bruegel knew happily popping in and out of each others studios, especially on Saturdays, to chat or borrow supplies

Suddenly there is darkness, maybe a flash of light. Thunder. We hear dogs barking, then fade. Bruegel enters the scene. He has a

beard, a little bowl-shaped cap, and wears a painters smock. He's imposing but there's a twinkle in his eye.

BREUGEL

Did I hear my name? *Wat gebeurd er?* What in Hades is happening here? Where did you come from, madam? There are no women allowed in this painting, unless you count the ones down below in the village, out of sight, keeping the fires burning. And you, the royal know-it-all, how *could* you make up things about me behind my back?

ELSA

I didn't mean.....

BRUEGEL

You really are a piece of work, a silly exhibitionist and a delusioned harpy. And you ladies fighting in my painting, one of my *favorites*? How dare you? Such bad manners. You might mess up the pigment or crack the canvas. Do I have to come up here and check in every day? Phew, that's a steep walk up the hill.

Hans hangs his head contritely, steps back respectfully.

BRUEGEL

I just wanted to fix this one area.

He takes out a paint brush and a small pallet from his smock pocket, and paints a few strokes in the air on a "corner" of the stage.

The disparity between the black trees and the white snow, is so important, don't you think? Without one, we really couldn't have the other, could we?

HANS

(Clueless)

Um, I do not think so.

BRUEGEL

It's where the eye falls first in a painting, where the contrast is strongest. That's why the Flemish custom of black suits and white collar ruffs is so satisfying, so authoritative, so *sexy*.

ELSA

(Proudly)

I knew that.

BREUGEL

Contrasts and opposites on the color chart create magic, don't you see? Green and red, purple and yellow, blue and orange. You can have fun with color, children, but in order to be creative and produce art, you must keep everything neat and tidy, and that includes your personal lives.

The only irregular thing I allowed in my art classes were funny noises I made to scare the students (*he demonstrates, maybe a shrieking bird call*). That got their blood going in the cold mornings. (*laughs*).

He goes to Elsa, who is backing away into a corner.

We really can never know what a person has experienced unless he has kept a very concise diary, which I did not do unfortunately. Did you realize, for instance, that I used to dress up as a peasant and sneak in to their weddings and parties, pretending I was one of them? I bet you didn't know that, and it's in the history books. My friends were mostly important people in the community, intellectuals, upper middle class, but I enjoyed the common folk. I admit it's interesting to have people make up things about me, but I don't mean people like you. Grandiose, self-serving. Moderation is the key. Flying dreams! Pooh.

ELSA

Sorry, Herr Bruegel.

BRUEGEL

You better well be, moving about here as though you were the master. I'm the master. I'm afraid to ask what you've told these people. You really have some nerve.

ELSA

I assure you I didn't mean...

BRUEGEL

Yes, I'll admit to some flying dreams, but so what? Everyone has them. Who let all of you in here anyway? Whoever it was hasn't much respect for the sanctity of art. Art is what it's all about, not necessarily life.

ELSA

I wouldn't argue with you there.

BRUEGEL

Although life's important, too, of course. I'd rather have my paintings serve as a sort of mysterious diary than writing a bunch of words. Keep people guessing. "Ars longa, vita brevis." Art is long, life is short." From the Greeks or the Romans—or both. (*he's lecturing now*) Actually it was my time spent in Italy that was so indescribably wonderful that I cannot find words to even remotely bring it to life. Plus seeing all those craggy mountains while traveling through Switzerland. Unreal. You'll notice I use them liberally in my paintings, which are part Dutch landscape and part fantasy wilderness. We have no mountains in the lowlands, in case you haven't been paying attention. It's all from my mind's eye. Captured forever in pigment and lovingly cared for by docents and preservationists. Very satisfying for yours truly

Stage lights back on. The sisters break out of their freeze, panting, clutch one another, spent, as if they've been fighting. They've not even seen Bruegel.

ABBY

Oh, BEA, I'm sorry. I'm so *sorry*. Can you forgive me? I don't know what got into me (*she hugs BEA fiercely*). Oh, God. Did I hurt you? You don't have to say anything. You don't have to talk ever. Just say you're OK.

She's a tad bit hysterical and tearful at this point.

I've been awful. I'm always envious of you, and that's not your fault either.

BEA escapes Abby's grip, and sits down on the floor, exhausted. Abby joins her. They're both stunned, and they sit close. Or maybe sprawl out. BEA rubs her leg. They are both winded.

BEA

Actually, my leg feels better.

*A long pause.
Both are thinking, panting, cooling down.*

Feels good to sit.

A silence settles over them.

ABBY

Remember those times riding with Dad in the car, late afternoons, summer? Just going on errands? Lying in the backseat of his Studebaker, no seat belts. Our folks didn't even notice if we used them or not. Watching the dappled light on the big leafy trees on the highway: oaks, maples. Feeling happy for no reason. Or riding in the car at night, too tired to sleep, those same leafy trees lit up grey in the headlights, their tops dark. The sweet smell of pine. Out in the country on some errand or other. If I can hold onto those memories--nothing else matters. Everything else fades away.

BEA

He was very slow behind the wheel.

ABBY

Used to make mom nuts. She was the original backseat driver.

BEA

Remember sketching with crayons when we were little, when no one was home? Making up a story as we went along, page by page--about the little girl alone in the woods, and how she finds an empty cabin, sweeps it out, finds a table, then a chair, then a red teakettle. What abundance we had as kids, conjuring up things...and ideas. When we sketched things, they came alive. The little girl with orange hair...finally a prince would come and find her and invite her to his castle.

He always wore blue robes and had a yellow pageboy. We had complete power over what would happen next, and it was always something good.

ABBY

Mom kept every one of those sketches in a box. Then later she forgot about them.

BEA

I found the box, and still have it.

ABBY

Some of those sketches are mine

BEA

I was just looking after them. You can have them any time.

ABBY

I wanted children. You got them, two girls. I felt so bereft, a failure in comparison with you.

BEA

Yeah, but the girls are exactly like you! Do you ever think of that? They're argumentative, bright, sensitive. Stubborn. They even look like you.

ABBY

But they're not mine.

A Beat.

I have just one question to ask you that I hope you'll answer.

BEA

Fire away.

ABBY

Why did you leave me that time in New York City when we were in our twenties? Never even left a message to say you were leaving and going back home. I didn't know where you *were*. I was left alone. Why'd you do it?

BEA

I don't know. I didn't think it was important.

ABBY

What? Well, it *was* important to me. It made me feel so small.. Like you didn't care. You were the one that invited me out there, and then you ignore me and disappear.

BEA

I was depressed, I guess. Breaking up with Max.

ABBY

But you two got married.

BEA

But that was much later. After the grief he gave me..

ABBY

And then there was the time we were on that archeological dig in Arizona. You just upped and took off midweek without telling our leader, me or anybody.

BEA

I had to get away. I felt restless. It was too hot for me. I was suffocating.

ABBY

Why didn't you tell me? I would have understood..

BEA

I'm sorry. I'm not very good at sharing stuff.

ABBY

That's putting it mildly.

BEA

And I didn't think you'd care what I did.

ABBY

You're kidding. I wanted to know. I felt so---abandoned.

A Beat.

BEA

Hunters in the Snow. Hah. We were like hunters, scavengers, really, sniffing around for bits of attention and approval, always hoping mom and dad, or at least one of them, would forget their creative projects, painting, gardening, you-name-it, and pay attention to us. Abby, we have to find love, even though our parents didn't define what it was. It's not too late. Me? I'm hunting for happiness, for wellness. What are you hunting for, Abby?

ABBY

I'm trying to get you out of my head.

BEA

look for your own path, and follow it.

BEA

You never *stopped* being jealous, Jealousy has chewed at you like a dragon with sharp teeth and big green eyes. When you envision people are out in the world doing fabulous things, they're actually at home playing Solitaire or staring at the walls, wondering what color to paint them next.

ABBY

But, you always....yeah, you're right. Jealousy is exhausting.

BEA

Your vivid imagination defeats you. You imagine grand achievements for others, and discredit the things you've done. Having lots of boyfriends in one's past doesn't necessarily make for a life of peace and joy. Just because you feel people have more than you doesn't mean you have less. Anyway, you don't know what they're going through, deep down.

ABBY

Omigawd, you're actually *talking* to me.

BEA

Jealousy comes from a deep, colorful imagination. You've got one. But you waste it creating other people's wonderful lives.

ABBY

But what I really feel is abandonment. Like I'd been left out in the rain to dissolve or disappear. What I can't bear, what tears me up is being ignored or forgotten.

BEA

But you're not

.

ABBY

Let's change the subject: You've fallen for Hans, haven't you?

BEA

Not exactly. Well, OK, yes. I like his silliness. His bravado. He's relentlessly cheerful, which is fun. And he really likes me. More than that, though, I love this *place*. My pains are gone. I feel good here. I was thinking of staying here with him. At least for awhile. I don't need the cane anymore.

ABBY

I asked you about the cane, but you changed the subject.

BEA

I know. I'll explain.

ABBY

When I first saw your face in the painting among the peasants or wherever it was, it seemed to fit. But what's going on with you?

BEA

I feel being here can help me. I think I'm in the very early stages of cancer.

ABBY

Jesus, Bea,! Why didn't you tell me sooner?

BEA

. I wish I could take it more seriously, but I can't. I don't feel anything, not a single ache, at least not here. The cold doesn't bother me they way it does you.

ABBY

Omigawd. Not cancer. I can't bear that.

BEA

Relax. I can. Now that I'm here. Oddly enough.

ABBY

What about a doctor? You must see one.

BEA

I choose not to. Anyway, I feel so good now. The doctor I saw before we left had a very strong foreign accent. I'm not really sure if she said I had the beginnings of cancer or the legs of a dancer.

ABBY

I don't know what to say.

BEA

Nothing *to* say.. I feel great right now.

ABBY

I know better than to argue with you. We may never be close like other sisters. That hurts.

BEA

Hey, we don't know what other sisters are really like, do we?. At least we've used our words We're trying. Two steps forward, one step backward.

ABBY

Sometimes, you are so wise.

BEA

There's something about the air here. When I was writing poetry, before I became a lit teacher, I always felt my poems sort of came out of the air, particularly on a clear, cold day. Breathe out the old. Take in the new

ABBY

You never should have stopped writing. You were good.

BEA

I was average.

ABBY

Not true. I loved your work. You gave up too fast. Remember; One man's poetry is hieroglyphics to another. Something like that.

BEA

When my professors in grad school looked at me with kindly blank gazes, I knew I wasn't the brightest star in the firmament. I didn't know you remembered my poems.

ABBY

Maybe this new place will inspire you.

BEA

Maybe all the good poetry has already been written. Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Donne, Dylan Thomas, Yeats. Emily Dickinson. How they would all love it here!

ABBY

(RECITES)

When I look out upon the starry plain
The heavens smile, embrace me in the dark.
The clouds ride soft, unbridled by the moon.
I'm tangled in the night, whose beauty leaves its mark.

The incurious moon inflates on its low perch
The stars watch close as I fly over hills
Above the evergreens and toward the sea,
Past attic rooms with gleaming windowsills

Down boulevards where street lights shine like gold,
Across a market square and cobbled street,
Near steeple tops, I move upon the wind,
And land in churchyards where lost spirits meet.

All this blackness takes me in its arms.
Indigo world with lustrous points of light
From moon, stars, candles, bonfires, torches, flares
Day can be grey: I much prefer the night.

BEA

I must have been 21 when I wrote that. I can't believe you know it, word for word!

ABBY

I memorized it.

BEA

Now you're making me cry. I'm touched that you know it. Why?

ABBY

Because I love the night. And the poem.

BEA

Wow. I'm speechless.

ABBY

I thought the light was changing, getting darker, but it's a trick of my mind, a memory. It can't change here, can it?

BEA

BEA

BEA

The snow. It reminds me. We were closer when we were young. We played in the snow together. We walked, we sledged.

ABBY

The temperature's dropped. Can you feel it?

BEA

No.

ABBY

I need to go.

BEA

I'm staying.

ABBY

I know. Thank you for those winters.

BEA

Thank you for remembering my poem.

ABBY

I really need to go back. The cold affects me differently. My burning questions have burned themselves out in the snow. For the time being. Nothing matters anymore. You look great in the outfit. I, on the other hand, am taking mine off this minute

She does so, and her regular clothes, sans coat, are underneath. The two sisters face one another, one in peasant clothing and the other in modern dress. They take hands.

A beat.

Damn! I left my scarf up in the museum. But my coat's here somewhere.

The sisters look at one another, with a new understanding.

BEA

I Probably won't be back. I'm staying here.

ABBY

I know. I wish you would come with me. Please. Think about it!

Bruegel enters.

BRUEGEL

You're not going, are you? Oh, Miss Abby, I wish you would stay a little longer. I have so much to say to you. You're very special, and you read poetry so well.

ABBY

And I have much to ask you. But I'm sorry. It's time for me to go.

She and Bruegel embrace warmly.

SCENE SEVEN

The Hilltop, in the painting

Bruegel and Elsa meet on the 'hilltop. They are both looking out at the skaters.

BRUEGEL

Did you hear that poem? Beatrice wrote that. So she has flying dreams as well.

ELSA

We all do, don't we?

BRUEGEL

Those two sisters are very intriguing. Abby has a personal aura of bright colors, a lot of dark turquoise blue and vermilion. Lovely. Bea has a clear aura: pale translucent coral with yellow sunbursts, but there's an edge of dark Payne's grey. I wish they had been my daughters.

ELSA

It's amazing you can see such things. I don't know whether to believe you or not.

BRUEGEL

As a painter, I'm extra fortunate to have that skill.

A beat.

Do you come here often?

ELSA

Now and again. It's bracing, but so picturesque. *Beautiful*. No one can find me here to ask for police paperwork. I *knew* Beatrice had been drawn into the painting when I heard she had disappeared.

BRUEGEL

I'm sorry I snapped at you.

ELSA

Snapped at me? You bit my head off.

BRUEGEL

I lose my temper very easily these days. But I'm also quite carefree. You have an inexplicable power over me.

ELSA

I do?

BRUEGEL

Yes, you remind me of my mother. She had your hair, only tucked into a little white cap. She used to boss us around. I loved her madly, although she was impossible. I was her favorite.

ELSA

That's always a problem.

BRUEGEL

I was listening on the sly to the sisters just now. I didn't know Beatrice was a poetess! There's something delicate yet strong about her. Still, there's that dark edge I cannot decipher. I'd fancy doing her portrait. Abby's too.

ELSA

Abby is my favorite. She appears smarter, more alert. Not such a dreamer, chasing after something.

BRUEGEL

Yes, chasing after her sister, I'll warrant. She always seems a step behind. I wish she would stay.

ELSA

I've been listening to them, too. They've shaken up your winterscape a bit, with their fighting. But it's over. The wind has shifted, metaphorically speaking.

BRUEGEL

What do you want in life, Ms. Elsa?

ELSA

What do I want? I want my husband Bruno to stop snoring and watching football all the time. I want to see India before I die. I want to catch the mayor red-handed, although nobody really cares. There's just not enough juicy crime here. I want to go home for good, back to Antwerpen.

BRUEGEL

That's where I used to live when *I* was at home.

ELSA

I know. That part of my term paper was true, at least. I do love the power of being a police detective, even in a starchy old city like Vienna. But still, I'm ready for a change. I don't know what it will be. I love your paintings, did I tell you? I wish I could create such magic.

BRUEGEL

I'm touched. Dank u well (*pause*). Would you like to go ice skating?

ELSA

Now?

BRUEGEL

Well, now, or---sometime.

ELSA

Is that like, on a date?

BRUEGEL

I suppose. It's a lot of fun.

ELSA

I'm a married woman. Not a perfect marriage, but whose is, these days?

BRUEGEL

It's just skating.

ELSA

You know, I look out of this painting at the visitors in the museum, and I often see Bruno: I think he has followed me. Or maybe I imagine it. He comes by regularly and looks at all the paintings, and seems to spend a lot of time at this one. I'm sure he can't see me, though. I think he's going through midlife crisis..

BRUEGEL

You have a robust imagination.

ELSA

(Looking out)

Oh my god! There he is!

She hides behind Bruegel.

BRUEGEL

I doubt very much that he can see you. You're fantasizing, surely. I didn't know you could look out and see people! I just cannot do that.

ELSA

You're gifted with seeing auras. I've got *this* gift. I look right past the canvas into the museum. My god, it's Bruno, all right.

She moves in front of Bruegel, looking closely out.

What a minute. He doesn't see me at all. He he's looking at the painting. Very carefully. I think there are tears in his eyes! He's moving on to the next. He's examining the art. My dear Bruno. My little Cupcake. I didn't know he came to the museum! He's never told me.

BRUEGEL

Maybe you never gave him a chance to talk.

ELSA

We're going to have to have a little chat. I must go to him

BRUEGEL

Be sure to let him answer you back. Express himself. Not just you!

ELSA

I will. I promise.

She leaves breathlessly.

BRUEGEL

I wish *I* could see the people who come to admire my work.

SCENE EIGHT
In the painting

Abby and Beatrice move downstage, still talking.

HANS

Here you are!

He and BEA embrace.

I told Elsa we are in love and staying together.

ABBY

What'll I tell the folks at home?

BEA

That I fell. into...something.

A Beat.

BEA

(to Abby, slowly, carefully)

I love you, you know.

ABBY

That's the first time you've said that. *Please* come back with me.

BEA

Mom was right: You are beautiful and brilliant. *(Abby tears up)*

ABBY

Don't overdo it. *(BEA grins. They embrace, tentatively, carefully).*

ELSA

I really ought to arrest you, Beatrice. However, since you will be staying here, I'll let it go. For the time being. For Hans' sake *(she smiles officiously at him)*. Can love blossom in a cold painting? I say that it can. You two are really something. Ho, ho.

Bruegel enters from one side of the stage.

BRUEGEL

Do you two want to go deeper into the painting? Be my guests. It is an adventure. However, it is not always so nice. It can be poverty and confusion, darkness and despair. There's no direction. Going deeper gets grittier. It's part of the painting no one can see. From the outside, viewers in the museum cannot know it. Beyond the far village and the marvelous jagged mountains, very over the top if I do say so myself, it's even colder. There's often not enough to eat. But, oh, the

songs are sweeter. The air is cleaner. Your thoughts are clearer and deeper. A startling clarity fills the countryside. Pain disappears. The air is bracing.

BEA

I want to go! How about you, Hans?

HANS

Yes, of course. Cleansing. . (takes a deep breath) *Purifying.*

ABBY

(to Elsa)

Have your pals in the police force ever come here to check all this out?

ELSA

(Snorting derisively)

Hah. Never. They don't believe. You have to believe in Tinkerbell and the Tooth Fairy and the Little Dutch Boy at the Dyke and Andy Warhol and someone else I've forgotten at the moment.

ABBY

I'd like to go back now. Before I change my mind. All this beauty—very crisp *(she wraps coat tightly around herself).*

BREUGEL

I'd escort you, but I'm due at "The Peasant Wedding", another favorite, in fifteen minutes. I have a busy schedule: I'm giving a little talk. By the way, they bake terrific bread there. I always prefer to visit my landscapes and peasant paintings.

ELSA

Why's that?

BRUEGEL

They're soothing and quite pleasing. Sometimes, they're a lot of fun, too.

ELSA

Are there some you don't visit?

BRUEGEL

The crowded paintings with all the little squirmy creatures and anything to do with religion, like "The Deadly Sins," or "The Fall of the Rebel Angels." Ugh. They raise my blood pressure, although I did craft them myself, and that was fun while it lasted. Now the little monsters won't sit still, and are always scurrying around, giving me a headache.

HANS

But it's a fascinating piece of art!

BRUEGEL

(To HANS) Hey, why don't you two lovebirds come with me to the wedding? You can bring the dogs! They're getting restless.

He exits with Bea and Hans.

ELSA

Give me a minute, Abby. I'll get you out of here. I've got the hang of this.

Explosive thunder is heard, maybe some vigorous upbeat Bach, played by a saxophone quartet. Abby wraps her coat about her, ready to depart, then disappears into the darkness.

ELSA

Ajuus, fraulein.

BLACKOUT.

From the Darkness.

Music, upbeat Bach. Then the sound of dogs barking animatedly.

ABBY

Get down! Stop licking! Down! Go away! Ew, Seigfreid. You stink.

Barking fades.

SCENE NINE
Interior of Museum

ABBY

Oh my god.

Abby is sitting on the floor .She looks around. She's back in the museum ,in front of the painting, which looks dim, obscure. She gets up, and tries to get back into the painting.

Let me back in!

She sinks back to the ground, pounding on the floor

Please! Come with me, Bea! No! Don't leave me!

Breaking into sobs

A few beats.

Recovering herself, she clutches her head, then massages it.

Jack enters. He looks a bit dazed himself. She starts to get up. He lends her a hand.

JACK

I thought maybe I'd find you here. Sooner or later. I've been waiting. For you to come back.

ABBY
(rubbing her head

Wow.

JACK

I've got something for you.

He hands over her scarf.

I've got something else for you too..

He takes off his beret,, and pulls out an earring.

ABBY

I thought it was gone for good.

JACK

I found it. Right here. I thought about wearing it, but it's not my style. I'm glad you're back.

ABBY

Me too.

JACK

Where exactly did you run off to? You look exhausted. Do you want to go somewhere with me and talk about what happened?

ABBY

No, I think I need to get back.

JACK

So soon? You just got here.

ABBY

Suddenly I'm very tired.

JACK

Maybe I should take you back to the hotel. I don't want to, but I will. What happened?

ABBY

It's too hard to explain. I doubt if you'd believe me anyway.

JACK

Try me!

ABBY

Maybe I'll go somewhere with you and maybe *not* talk about it. As I said, you'd probably think I'm a nutcase, and wouldn't take a word I say seriously.

JACK

I wouldn't be so sure. It's been weird, living here in Vienna.

ABBY

OK. I'd like to go somewhere warm and order a martini and a piece of cake *mitt schlag*. And would you please take my hand?

JACK

(Grinning)

Yes, of course. Oh. And get ready: there may be some waltzing in the city square.

The two exit slowly. Jack carries her travel purse over his shoulder.

A shadowy figure appears behind the scrim that is the painting. It is Breugel watching them depart.

We hear Strauss's "Blue Danube Waltz" as they go off.

SCENE TEN

A Hospital in Vienna

Another musical bridge, the same saxophone Bach, maybe something more solemn, like “Air on a G String”

There’s a steady beeping sound coming from somewhere. Upstage a partial enlarged image of “Hunters in the Snow. Abby overlooks a face in a bed, partially hidden from the audience by a screen. Bea is in it. Jack and Abby look down at her.

JACK

I’m so sorry, Abby.

ABBY

Don’t be. I know where she is.

JACK

What will you do now?

Abby does not answer. Bea’s face appears in the picture “Hunters in the Snow” ...She appears to be looking at Abby, as if trying to reach her.

ABBY

It’s snowing outside! Goodbye, Jack (Bea makes eye contact with Abby. She smiles and waves)

THE END