

Painting Seventeen

A Ten-Minute play

By:

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CHARACTERS

Saskia, 30	Any race/ethnicity, jaded, feels like she's lived a long, long time
Saskia, 17	The same race/ethnicity as Saskia, 30, feisty; lives only in the present and longs to have a real life

This play is inspired by the Matisse painting *Odalisque with Red Culottes* (painted 1921) and was originally produced off off Broadway as part of the "Matisse Plays" with the Milk Can Theatre Company.

"Painting Seventeen" is published in *The Best 10-Minute Plays of 2014* (Smith and Kraus, Lawrence Harbison, ed.)

"Painting Seventeen" won "Best Short Play" at the Planet Connections Festival and was a finalist in the "Short and Sweet" Festival in Sydney, Australia, the largest short play festival in the world. The play is often produced by high schools and universities across the U.S.

Playwright's notes: It is important to show that Saskia, 17, is "inside" the painting. One thing that has worked effectively is placing a frame around Saskia on the floor so she is literally "trapped." Also, it is important in casting that the actors look similar, since the characters are the same person at different ages. While Saskia, 30, looks directly at 17, 17 can never see 30.

SASKIA, 17, is inside a frame and wears loose lingerie pants and a tank top.

SASKIA, 30, wears a bulky sweatshirt. She has been working on her self-portrait all day.

Saskia, 30, paints on an easel directly in front of her.

SASKIA, 17

(dramatically) I am the naked woman in the painting *by the stairs*.

SASKIA, 30

Will you quit your whining? You have something on—not to mention the yellow walls and bed made for a goddess—but no stairs, sorry. And those beautiful breasts. You lie back and they're still perfect. Do you think my breasts ever looked like that?

17

I don't know, did they?

30

Seventeen years old.

17 looks around for someone else.

17

Who's seventeen?

30

You. Take a good look in the mirror. This is the best you'll ever look.

17

I don't have a mirror.

30

Well, then, trust me.

17

I feel--

30

Uh--no one asked you how you feel.

17

How can you create something and then be so mean?

30
Parents do it all the time. Hey, look at our parents.

17
Our mother told us to take a good look in the mirror, didn't she?

30
What do you know?

17
Nothing. So what exactly do you look like?

30
Like you, only older. When I smile, my face moves and lines form--

17
That sounds so great.

30
Wrinkles?

17
No. Smiling! We have people to smile with? Tell me every detail. Do *we* have children?

30
No, *we* have a divorce. Be grateful *we* don't have children. *They* would be miserable.

17 twirls around the room.

17
A divorce! How exciting

30
I wish you would stop moving around.

17
We were married! We were married!

30
How do you know about these things?

17
Because I'm super smart.

She tries to smell the flowers next to her bed.

17 (cont.)

These suck.

30

Those roses remind me of Brooklyn Botanical gardens.

17

Did we meet our one true prince in the gardens?

30

No, I met my first love, Mike, at Myrtle Beach.

17

Mike—what a romantic name!

30

It's actually a pretty common name. Bill, Bob, Mike, John—common names.

17

Oh.

30

But we have a great name.

17

What is it?

30

Saskia.

17

Wow---Saskia! Saskia and Mike!

30

I was looking at the ocean; the water was cold on my ankles and my hat flew off my head. I turned around, and it was in his hand. We walked over to this group of rocks.

17

I knew it! The rock garden!

30

Weelll, they were big and slippery rocks with sharp edges--

17

That's so romantic!

30
He did play with my hair—

17
While the sun was setting!

30
We knew immediately that we liked each other. I said I was just out of a relationship and wanted to take things *slowly*. I almost fell off the rock when he agreed . . . We had sex that night.

17
Is that slowly?

30
Yes. Uh, no. Well--

17
Love at first sight!

30
You could say that.

17
And I bet we shared intimate secrets until all hours—What's it like to kiss someone? To have them touch your face—to have your nose near their nose, your elbow--

30
Amazing.

17
He was your soul mate. I can hear it in your voice.

30
We tried having children. I kept losing them.

17
Where did they go?

30
Never mind. He moved in with one of my girlfriends from high school—Mary Ellen—she was like me—the same color hair—we were both transplants to the south.

17
(*romantically*) The South. Wait—where are we now?

30

Born in New York. Raised in South Carolina. College in Virginia. Married Mike in South Carolina. Divorced in New York. A fling in Paris. Well, I haven't told you about that yet. And now, New York. Try to keep up with the story.

17 (overlapping)

Do I know her? Mary Ellen? If I'm seventeen and we were in high school and best friends with Mary Ellen--

30

She wasn't my best friend.

17

Oh. I was hoping we were best friends. Can I remember her if I try really, really hard?

17 tries really, really hard.

30

You're two dimensional; you have no memories.

17

Come on, tell me everything. Every detail. What it's like--love, friendship, pain, loss, lovers, moving, blowing bubbles, spitting--

30

Spitting? You want to know what it's like to spit?

17

I want to know what it's like to breathe.

30

When I finish this painting, people are going to admire you. You will be beautiful. Frozen.

17

I don't want frozen; I want life. Spill it. Every detail: 18, 19, 20, 21, 22--

30

After fifty, maybe even forty, men don't admire you at all. Overnight, you go from being a piece of meat, dealing with the "woohos" and the "hey babies" to a fly who moves through the world with no one watching. And you think about getting rid of the dark circles under your eyes and the varicose vein on your right shin. You could be a naked woman on the stairs, and no one would even notice. You're invisible.

Wow--are you forty or fifty? 17

Thirty. But I see it coming. 30

You make the future sound like so much fun. 17

It gets much worse. All of it. 30

I want to experience it. Every second. I think you should paint me a staircase, and I will walk right outta here. 17

She tries to leave the painting. It's clearly not working.

I can't. Stay where it's safe. 30 (overlapping)

I don't want safe. I want freedom. 17

She continues to try, unsuccessfully, to leave the painting.

These four walls are a prison. Paint me a staircase; let me out of here!

It sucks out here. I wouldn't mind living in a painting for a while. 30

It's numb here. 17

Numb sounds like a welcome change. 30

I would choose pain over numb any day. 17

That's because you've never experienced it. 30

I don't like what you've become. 17

30
I don't like you either.

17
Then why do you want to be me?

30
I *was* you. And you are an *assignment*.

17
What are you talking about?

30
I am taking a class at a community college—

17
I love college!

30
Shut up! I was assigned to do a modern version of a Matisse painting and for some God-awful reason, I'm painting *you*.

17
We turned out so mean, Saskia.

30 doesn't respond.

17 (cont.)
You can't see how quiet it is here. The color that never changes. There's no future, no past. And your present is stale like old bread. But your breasts look great—because they're not real. You can say "best friends" and "marriage" and "divorce" but you don't get to experience it. But oh my God, if I got to smell real flowers, if I got to walk on the beach, if I got to sit in a rock garden, I would never come back.

30 (overlapping)
In three months from now, the first boy you ever loved--

17
I knew it! I knew I had a first love!

30 (overlapping)
He'll die in a car accident on Avril road. And your parents will get divorced when you're twenty-one, after they've been married twenty-five years—and you'll act like it doesn't bother you at all. And you'll work like a dog to have time to paint—you'll do temp jobs and waitress and work in a bookstore. Your sister will die from cancer—

17

I have a sister?

30

And you'll get married quietly, without much fanfare. And your marriage will feel like a trap while you're in it and a loss when it's gone. You'll find someone new, take one more chance at love, follow him to Paris, stroll and look at Matisse paintings and realize the paintings are more real than the relationship. Do you want to hear more?

17

Yes! Yes! What's my sister's name? Was she my best friend?

30

She was a History teacher for one year. When she got cancer, her students wrote her everyday. She joked that her students were nicer to her when she was in the hospital than in the classroom.

17

I would love to know her now.

30

Me, too. When I was seventeen, it felt like the right age—like this would be my age forever. And my parents would be forty something and my grandparents sixty-something, and it would always be that way. Like a painting. Thirty felt so far away at seventeen. And my breasts never turned out how they were supposed to.

17 jumps up.

17

Maybe you're hiding behind a difficult decade where you paint in boring pastels. Maybe you've forgotten the sweet moments that skirted the edges of despair—

30

You sound like a poet.

17

We are poets. And painters. And passionate. You may know the facts, but I know what's possible.

30

You don't sound so numb now.

17

What are you saying? Oh my God, am I alive? Is this life, like right now? (*squealing with glee*) Eeehh! Did you paint me a staircase? How can I ever thank you? Will I get to be thirty something and forty something, get married, divorced, know my sister, go to Paris, and be best friends with sooo many people. I can't wait to---

30 walks behind the painting to gather new colors to finish the painting.

17

Saskia? Saskia? Why aren't you answering me?

30

Sometimes, when it's late at night, my paint brush on the canvas sounds like rain, and I imagine lovers from all over the world touching elbows, touching noses, shifting their bodies so they fit just right, even if it's just for a moment. And I look at you. The one I come home to. Happy Birthday, by the way.

17

I'm seventeen, today, like today, like it's my actual birthday! Eeeks!

30

Forever.

17

Oh. Right. And you're thirty.

30

How did you—

17

I'm super smart. And —you said it before, you know--

30 is putting the final touches on the painting. 17 watches the painting in its final stages.

17

You aren't going to paint me a staircase, are you?

30

You make seventeen sound like sooo much fun. I miss that.

17

Being seventeen?

30

Fun. I could die here with you in these four walls, and I can't do that. I have to go. It's due. And it's time.

17

Oh. Well. Heck. Don't worry about me. I'm fine. I'm--two dimensional . . . Our mom—she was just feeling bad about herself. It wasn't her fault--or your fault. It was no one's fault. . . .You look great.

30

You can't see me.

17

So what.

30 moves 17 into her final resting place.

17s arms are above her head, as in the Matisse painting, *Odalisque with Red Culottes*.

30

Bye 17.

17

Bye 30.

30 takes a good look at 17. Fade to black.

End play.