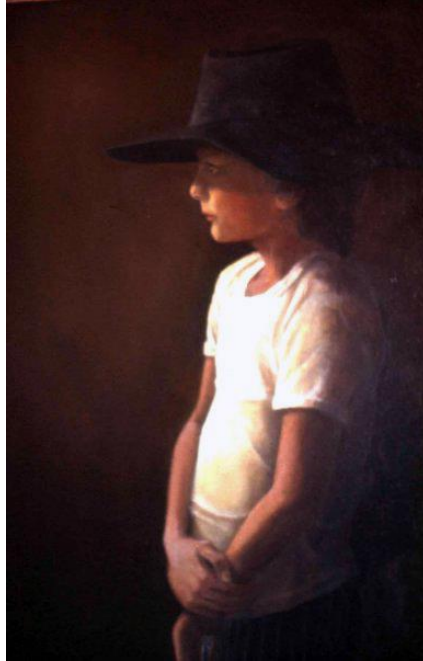


The Peacekeeper

By Phil Rice



Rick Davis and I met in the summer of 1971 when I was eleven years old and Rick was in his early twenties. We both lived in Crown Chalet apartments in Madison, Tennessee, a bedroom community of Nashville. I was vaguely aware of the bigger world of that time—Vietnam, Attica, Idi Amin, Apollo 15, Nixon, etc.—but my world that summer was mainly focused on swimming, collecting baseball cards, and playing kickball.

I have a hazy memory of talking to Rick on the stairs beside the apartments' swimming pool. I can smell the concrete and chlorine even today, but, curiously, I can't quite see his face. He asked me if I'd be interested in modeling for a painting, offering to pay one dollar an hour (not bad money for an 11-year old in 1971) for my services. I'm sure I was quick to say "yes," but he insisted on discussing the matter with my parents before getting started. My father, a notoriously astute judge of character, decided that Rick was sincere in his intentions, and thus I had my first paying gig.

I spent several afternoons at Rick's, trying to stand still while he painted. Many of the details of those sessions have fled my memory over the years, but a few impressions remain firmly embedded: he drank instant coffee prepared with hot tap water, and at my insistence he once shared a cup of this tepid brew with me; he had a girlfriend who was quite beautiful and who doted on me whenever she saw me (she once gave me frozen peaches and strawberries for a snack, a very late '60s thing to do, although I didn't know it at the time); he was always kind and

he treated me with respect—he was never condescending; he always patiently answered any of my questions as best he could; I availed myself of his relative wisdom on many occasions, even stopping by to visit between scheduled sessions; and he thought the Coke commercial “I’d Like To Teach the World To Sing” was the greatest thing on television. These are a few of the memories skimmed from the top; other memories continue to float upwards as I ponder the experience, and all of the memories are a delight to pick up and hold.

Rick finished the painting before the summer of 1971 ended, and he brought the painting to show my parents one evening. My dad took a photograph, and then the painting returned to Rick’s bohemian nook. I still saw my friend Rick occasionally in the weeks that followed, but by the next summer someone else was renting his apartment and my family had moved to a house on the other side of the city. For the next few years my dad’s photo would resurface during the annual family slide presentation, but by 1980 the slides remained in one of the boxes we simply didn’t bother to unpack.

Although I was a kid and he was an adult, Rick was my friend, and, significantly, my first friend from the adult world who was not also “a friend of the family’s.” I was even then struck by the idea that he was a painter—an artist—, and that being an artist was inseparable from his earthly identity even though he had a regular job somewhere. Years later, when I found myself slipping on a necktie and trudging to an office job, a job that was suffocating my creative desires, I remembered Rick the painter, and the memory fed my hope. If I could hold on a little longer, maybe my time would come

When I came across a website for a Rick Davis one day, naturally I had to investigate. I discovered some marvelous artwork on the site and certainly had reason to believe that this was the same Rick Davis who so indelibly marked the summer of my eleventh year, and a quick email correspondence confirmed the suspicion. A phone call shortly thereafter was very pleasant but thirty-five years is a tough distance to cover in a single conversation. I still have no idea of the details of Rick’s journeys after that summer, no knowledge of the joys and pains, the healed wounds now forgotten or the scars forever tender to the touch. But I have spent some time studying his paintings on the website—at least to the extent that one can study paintings on a computer screen. And while I could fill a few pages with my reactions, I’ll go for the concise critical assessment for the moment: Rick Davis is an extraordinarily gifted painter and a marvelous artist.

Rick Davis taught me that, for an artist, painting is a process, and sometimes that process is painstaking and laborious, involving false-starts and careful revisions—the very lessons I now cite whenever I am discussing the art of writing. Back in 1971, Rick seemed to look upon me as a child with enormous potential for growth. He called the portrait of me “The Peacekeeper,” and the painting remained a fixture in his art shows before eventually being sold to a law firm in Nashville. Somewhere along the way his vision of me eluded my own grasp. Nevertheless, even with my own neurotic self-esteem issues, I take some gratification in the knowledge that I played a small role in his development as an artist, and I’m grateful for the role he has played in mine.