

I HAVE VERY FEW photographs with my mother, and almost none of just the two of us. In those days, art and family didn't really mix. She was always buried in her studio, or disappearing abroad. We didn't connect often, but when she did appear, she could be exhilarating. And never more so than on this weekend.

I was 14, home from boarding school for the Easter holidays, and walking with her on a crisp spring morning near our home in Camden. From nowhere, she asked me if I'd ever seen *The Fall of Icarus*, a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, housed then, as now, in a Brussels museum.

I hadn't even heard of it. When I told her, she said I must see it right away. So she whisked me home to pack a small bag, before we shot over to Victoria and caught a bus bound for Brussels.

I still can't explain why we went. She'd never been impulsive and was far from a mad bohemian artist - instead she was always as glamorous as a movie star, and worked endlessly.

Sitting on the bus, I was thrilled. For a whole weekend I would have my mother to myself. I could ask her all the questions I'd wanted to - what she was working on; how she was coping with my father (who was deteriorating rapidly with multiple sclerosis); which films she'd seen. When it came to it, I was too shy to ask anything of the sort.

We arrived in Brussels the next day. We looked at the Manneken Pis - a famous statue of a boy urinating - which I found horrifying and she thought hilarious. She bought me a beer, and a funny green drink I recall as absinthe, but of course it can't have been.



The next day, we found *The Fall of Icarus*. I stood there, staring at it for a while, and felt puzzled and confused. I could see the man tilling the fields in the foreground. I could see the greenish-blue sea, the cliffs and the ships. But I couldn't see Icarus.

'Look more closely,' she told me. So I did, focusing on the cloudy sky. Still no Icarus. 'Look again,' she said. And then I saw him. In the bottom right-hand corner of the canvas, a tiny splash and two legs stuck up in the air. Icarus had fallen already. She didn't know

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why Bruegel did that, and asked me what I thought. We stood there for a while longer and discussed it, reflecting on how magic and fantasy is pushed aside by mundanity. Overall, though, we didn't know. It was a beautiful riddle - just like that whole weekend.

When we got home, everything went back to normal. My sisters and I continued only to see our mother fleetingly. We were still broke, too - she didn't make any money from paintings until the '80s - and our father still ill. But I had that magical time, when we truly connected. I'm just glad we had the foresight to pop into a photo booth while we were there; before I found these, neither of us remembered it ever happened. — *Interview by Guy Kelly*
Paula Rego, Secrets & Stories, a documentary by Nick Willing, is on BBC Two at 9pm tonight. Paula Rego: *The Depression Series* is at Marlborough Fine Art until 1 April (marlboroughlondon.com)

A BEAUTIFUL RIDDLE

Nick Willing remembers a whirlwind weekend with his mother, the artist Paula Rego, in 1975