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Below: Lydia Corbett, *Girl by Camaref Vaso*, watercolour with pen and ink, 2016. Right: Sylvette David, as she was then named, with Picasso in his Vallauris studio



PABLO SAW MY PONYTAIL

AS A SHY 19-YEAR-OLD, SYLVETTE DAVID MOVED TO VALLAURIS IN PROVENCE, WHERE SHE (AND HER STRIKING HAIRSTYLE) WAS SPOTTED BY PICASSO. NOW AS THE 80-SOMETHING PAINTER LYDIA CORBETT, SHE ASSESSES THE IMPACT OF THAT ENCOUNTER ON HER LIFE

My mother, who loved AS Neill's books, decided to send me from France to his progressive school, Summerhill, in Suffolk, even though I spoke no English. All the pupils were very free there, and I didn't do much studying – though some discipline would actually have done me good, for I was a dreamer. It was there that I met my boyfriend – and future first husband – Toby Jellinek. Inseparable, we travelled to Vallauris, a ceramics town on the Côte d'Azur, to live with my mother, a potter, who had split up with my father (the art dealer Emmanuel David) before the war and rented a little flat there. Unlike my dad, she was very broad-minded about our relationship; this was, after all, 1954, and I was only 19.

Toby, who had been apprenticed to Terence Conran, set up a little chair-making workshop in the village close to Les Fournas, the former perfumery where Picasso had his studio. One day, we were sitting on the flat roof of Madoura pottery, chatting to some youngsters. Suddenly, a picture of a girl in a ponytail shot up above the parapet – we couldn't see Picasso as he was too short, but somehow we knew it was an invitation, so we wandered over to his studio. He must have seen me walking about. I remember thinking: why me? I was so shy and unsure of myself, and had no idea I was good-looking. It's funny when you're young, you have so many complexes; now, of course, I'm much more confident.

In his studio, Picasso immediately put me at ease. He told me: 'I like your hair, dangling down your long neck. It reminds me of something ancient Greek.' That high ponytail was quite ahead of its time – though Brigitte Bardot would later make it popular. My father gave me the look. He'd seen the dancer Leslie Caron with that hairstyle in the ballet *Antigone*, and he said: 'Try it, try it!'

I don't know how many times I visited, but it was always accompanied by Toby, who would leave when Picasso wanted to start work, fetching me two or three hours later. He would dip his brush into big pots, and the paint dribbled on to the floor; but he didn't seem to mind mess. I would pose in a rocking chair in

the painting room of his studio, looking out at a grassy courtyard, where I'd sometimes go to chew on stalks. Beyond I could see hills of mimosa and olive, smoking chimneys and the roofs of the potteries. Now Vallauris is full of skyscrapers, very ugly. Picasso was a comic; he liked laughing and playing the clown. He was always clean-shaven and smelled very nice, despite being a chain-smoker. I recall he would make a pyramid of his lovely blue *Gitanes* packets – like a sort of installation ahead of its time.

Even though I needed the money, I wouldn't let him pay me for modelling as I felt he'd then make me undress. I was quite firm. Once he showed me a kind of Van Gogh bedroom, and he wanted to jump on the bed and play games. Ooh, I thought, I'm not going in there. But really, he was like a little boy. Having been hurt by my mother's boyfriend, I was wary of flirtatious old men – but he was always honourable and kind. Amazing really, given his reputation! Françoise Gilot had recently left him, taking the two children, and he seemed rather lost. He once told me I was a consolation.

At the end of our sessions together, he took me to a room that had maybe 40 paintings and drawings of me, saying I could choose one. Young people tend to like realistic art, and I chose a side-on pencil work that was almost photographic. To my regret, in 1958 I had to sell it, as we had nowhere to live in Paris.

Picasso was the most sensitive and generous man I've ever met. He gave me the confidence to start painting myself, though I didn't begin till I was 45 years old. In between, I had a family and had to divorce twice. The dark, scratchy line of one of my father's clients, Bernard Buffet, has influenced me. I also love Giotto and Piero della Francesca. Above all, Chagall. Now in my eighties, I feel like one of his angels flying over the whole of my life. In a way I'm sad to get old, but, in a way, not – everything in my past feels closer. ■ Lydia Corbett's solo exhibition runs at *Beside the Wave* in London NW1, 14-27 Oct, and at *David Simon Contemporary* in Bath, 4-29 Nov. For details, ring 01225 460189, or visit davidsimoncontemporary.com