

The Strongest Girl in the World

by David Booth

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1.

I believe we have worked out our technical problems and that everyone can hear me. Can you hear me? I want to begin by thanking the Colorado English Language Arts Society for inviting me to deliver today's keynote address. This is my first time in Denver. As I look around the auditorium, I spot a few familiar faces—Jean, Harley, Cam, Mona. Most of you I am meeting for the first time. Some of you I can't see and will not likely meet soon, as you are watching me on video screens in places like Honolulu, Santa Cruz, San Francisco, Atlanta, upstate New York, and Montreal. I understand that we even have one participant in Edinburgh. Hello, Scotland!

Dedicated to my closest friend Enosh Cohen (whose death in 2007 preoccupies me more as time passes, rather than less) my talk is called "The Strongest Girl in the World: Orphan Heros in Children's Fiction." This is the last in a series of speeches inspired not only by my late friend, but also by his daughter Adva, who after

her father's untimely death founded the The Ugly Duckling Project and its popular website www.uglyducklingproject.org, where teenagers who have lost a parent share their creative writing.

Today, with the aid of one of the most famous protagonists in children's fiction, I want to share with you my theory that every fictional orphan is an *autodidact*. She must teach herself rules for living. She must make sense of life largely on her own. She must convince herself of a past she cannot know as fact and be at least all right with it. In fashioning her own story, she exaggerates to get what she wants. In fact, she uses invention to test the limits of what may be a simultaneously plausible *and* exotic narrative, as she zeroes in on some sort of truth. I want to surprise you, she says, without scaring you away. I want to tell you who I am. This is Ms. Astrid Lindgren's famous orphan, Princess Pippolota, known to us as "the strongest girl in the world," and as Pippi Longstocking:

...it's very wicked to lie. But I forget it now and then. And how can you expect a little child whose mother is an angel and whose father is king of a cannibal island and who herself has sailed on the ocean all her life—how can you expect her to tell the truth always? And for that matter, let me tell you that in the Congo there is not a single person who tells the truth. They lie all day long.

I will return to Pippi Longstocking momentarily. Right now, I must at least briefly show you into my own childhood. My story begins with a young girl. She is not a fiction. Though I have known her all my life, I'm not sure how old she is in the story I am about to share. (Pippi was nine when Ms. Lindgen introduced her to her Swedish readership.) Not only can I not place the age of the girl I am about to introduce you to, but I cannot remember how we truly used to talk to each other, as the tone we take with each other today is one of exhaustion, our having failed as brother and sister to answer unanswerable questions about our upbringing. This—our—story took place a long time ago:

At the edge of the forest, his sister began to complain about how everybody—their mother and father and all of her friends included—hated her. It was exasperating, the light she sometimes

put herself in. The fact of the matter was that she received more than her fair share of attention, and far more than he ever got.

"The only way anybody's ever going to hate you," he said as they stepped in with the trees, "is if you make them."

"How can I make them?" she said.

"By letting them know that you think they do," he said, "when really, in your heart, you don't believe it's true. Now keep close. It gets a little steep here."

"But it *is* true," she said.

"I don't believe it."

"But even if I could make them," she asked as she found her footing, "why would I?"

He raised his finger to his lips. At that moment, an enchanted animal, the likes of which he had never seen, was passing through the forest. The boy motioned frantically, waving his sister in behind him. If they stayed both still and quiet, they might just get a peek at it.

So went the story of a boy—a fictive me—and his sister. In response to her feeling that everyone despised her, he—or I, as the case may be—led her into the wilderness, where they discovered something beyond words. Maybe they made eye contact with this so-called "enchanted" animal, were filled by its gaze with a breadth of wisdom that brought an end to the sister's pain and confusion, and then it was over with. Or maybe there was no end to the girl's suffering; so that he might enjoy the spell cast by the passing animal uninterrupted, the brother silenced his sister in the same abrupt manner she felt everyone did.

My *real* sister—call her Penny—strictly forbade me to write a more direct treatment of our relationship as children. In our age of tell-alls, exposé, and everybody's autobiography, she wouldn't allow me to jot down even one word about her. She made it abundantly clear to me that her life was nobody's business. How do I know? Because before I penned this vignette about siblings and an enchanted animal, I wrote a hundred-and-sixty-seven-page memoir about my life with Penny and called it *The History of Adoption*. It

began with my take on Penny's inability to draw a connection between her present-day, adult life in Los Angeles, California, at the beginning of the twentieth-first century; our shared childhood in Front Royal, Virginia, in the early 1980's; and the Fall of Saigon in 1975. It began near the end of the Vietnam War with U.S. President Gerald Ford's decree that our government would evacuate Vietnamese orphans from Saigon and carry them in C-5A Galaxy cargo aircraft to the United States, where they would be adopted by American families.

Mostly, my now nonextant memoir began with my bewilderment at Penny's refusal to uncover or discover her past. We are both now coming into middle age and to this day she knows nothing about the Indochina Peninsula. Nothing about the country where she was born. After conducting painstaking research, I once told her about the Dong Son drums of antiquity and could tell, for the way she sat with her arms and legs crossed, for the way she wagged her foot and looked away when I described the scenes of daily life in the Red River Delta in 600 BC, as depicted in images engraved in the drums, that she was only pretending to pay attention. She resists learning *anything* about Vietnam.

I suspect there is a formal psychological diagnosis for a person who boycotts her heritage—this insistence that some part of you doesn't exist—but I have not found it. She carries on this way, she has always said, because she can never know the identities of her birthparents. This is true. To our knowledge there is no record of this couple anywhere. They are lost in history. But she could at least try, as I try, to make some kind of a record.

“Why the fuck are you writing about me again?” I remember her asking after she had read an early draft of *The History of Adoption*. I had driven from San Francisco to downtown Los Angeles to see her and talk to her about the possibility of her writing a few chapters for my *History*. In a last-ditch effort to stitch together some kind of an enduring narrative, I was pitching a “collaborative memoir” as we walked down Olympic Boulevard, through the Fashion District, toward the Otis College of Art and Design, where she was studying

pattern making. We'd covered everything else. After my updating her on where I was with my alcoholism in the context of her old addiction to crystal meth, and her talking at length about necklines, waistlines, armholes, and leading me to wonder if the hideous dress she was wearing, something red and navy and tiger-striped, something Mod inspired, something out of the 1960's, was something she had made herself, we had finally come to the topic of the manuscript. "You promised me," she said. "You promised Mom and Dad. Our lives are off-limits."

"You can be your own author," I said.

"You promised," she insisted.

"How about if I change our names," I said, noticing that the hydra tattooed on her shoulders and down the length of her arms had grown a few new heads. "You could be Michele or Penny. I'll call myself George. I'll *fictionalize* it. No one will know our true identities."

She was chewing gum vigorously and watching me through fluttering eyelash extensions as we walked along. Not only had I never seen her wear so much makeup, but she had recently had her breasts enlarged. She had always felt she looked too young. Too boyish. Too Asian. Today I didn't know how to look at her. I said, "It's not like this is ever going to be published."

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about, David," she stopped and threw her up her arms. Her mouth flashed from the stud in her tongue. "I could be *Michele*? I could be *Penny*? The last time we went through this you wanted me to be *Lien*. The time before that I was *Trinh*."

"I'm trying to accommodate you," I explained.

"Fuck you, Dave," she said.

"Please don't hate me," I gazed at the blank blue sky, "for oversimplifying the lives of people."

"What time is it?" she asked, glancing at her wristwatch.

"That's just it," I said, but I wasn't sure what I meant to say. My aim was not to expose her or to appropriate her story as a way of advancing myself as a memoirist. At least I didn't think it was.

Whatever the case, her final response was clear, binding and, for her sudden recollection of my favorite childhood book, astonishing. She said, "I'm your sister, David, not that cunt you read to me about when we were young. I don't want you to write about me ever," she said. "Do you hear me? I don't want to be in any book. Contrary to what you think, I am not Pippi Fucking Longstocking."

I hadn't thought about Astrid Lindgren's protagonist in years. Now Louis Glanzman's illustrations flickered in my mind like the animated sketches of a flipbook. Pippi celebrated her birthday. Pippi lifted a horse onto her front porch. Pippi played tag with some policemen. Pippi climbed a tree. Pippi sat on a gate. When I was a little boy, my obsession with the Pippi Longstocking novels made about as much sense to my parents as an interest in dolls and cross dressing would have made. She was a pale, freckle-faced Swede with a potato-shaped nose, carrot-colored hair, and two tight braids that stuck straight out. Her belongings included a suitcase of gold pieces and a pet monkey named Mr. Nilsson. She wore the same outfit everyday: a patchwork peasants' dress she had made herself out of swatches of red and blue, mismatched stockings, and black shoes as big and bulbous as winter squash. Pippi was a girl's character. Pippi had no parents. From the novel, we read:

Pippi was sure her mother was now up in Heaven, watching her little girl through a peephole in the sky, and Pippi often waved up to her and called, "Don't you worry about me. I'll always come out on top."

When we were kids and I would read to my sister, she could never understand this: how could a girl with a dead mom come out on top? "How?" she would ask. Even more perplexing to my seven-year-old sister was Pippi's rationale for the absence of her father, a sailor who had been blown overboard and drowned at sea. Pippi had concocted an elaborate story about how her dad had actually not drowned, but had swum to an island inhabited by *cannibals*—a term I enthusiastically defined for Penny by proclaiming, "sometimes people eat people." In Pippi's version of her father's fate, instead of being eaten he became a leader stronger than any president,

monarch, or prime minister: “My papa is a cannibal king,” she explains. “It certainly isn't every child who has such a stylish dad.”

My first memorable arguments with Penny concerned Pippi Longstocking. We pitted our imaginations against each other, asking what's so stylish about a cannibal king? What did a peephole in the sky look like? How did a mama look through it? Our imaginations had gradually faded, and maybe the intensity of our collaboration in the narratives of our lives had too. Driving back from Los Angeles on the day I had offered my sister the pseudonym Penny, I decided my authoring of *The History of Adoption* would be our last argument.

When I got home I wrapped my copy of the manuscript in newspaper and tied it with twine. After stashing the bundle in the back of my closet—I would later burn the package in a fire pit at Ocean Beach—I deleted the electronic version of the memoir from my hard drive and sat down to write a story about my life with my sister that could not be traced back to either of us. I wouldn't name anyone. I would make no mention of Saigon, Operation Baby Lift, Gerald Ford, Catholic Relief Services, the fact that all the children on the C-5 flights were not bona fide orphans, or even my parent's motives for adopting a child from Southeast Asia in the wake of my father's tours of duty in Vietnam. I would leave that part of the world out of it. I would compose a vignette about love, patience, rage, compassion, and awe. I would use only abstract nouns. I would write in code. I would write in the third person:

At the edge of the forest, his sister began to complain about how everybody—their mother and father and all of her friends included—hated her. It was exasperating, the light she sometimes put herself in. The fact of the matter was that she received more than her fair share of attention, and far more than he ever got.

Against my better judgment, I brought my vignette to Enosh Cohen, the man to whom this speech is dedicated. Who was once my closest friend in life. This was a few months before he died. Like Penny, he never understood my interest in orphans. After all, I wasn't the one who was adopted. When you got right down to it, he

was fond of asking, was *not* my “obsession with orphans” a little illogical, if not a little narcissistic? Was I *not* comparing myself to an orphan in order to draw attention to myself as a writer, when in fact I had enjoyed what I often described to him as a *wondrous* childhood in Front Royal, Virginia—in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains? Was I not living a rewarding life as a middle school English language arts teacher? Though he could sympathize with my wish for my sister that she reconcile herself with a reasonable version of her past, he was more of the mind that “all of that was a long time ago.”

Still, I brought him my vignette, if only because I could count on him for some provocative feedback. If someone had told me that his response would lead me here to Denver to talk to you about Pippi Longstocking and the fictive orphan as autodidact, of course I would have thought that person insane. If that same person had told me that by the time I arrived in Colorado to speak to you, I would be estranged from my sister and Enosh Cohen would be dead, I would have followed that person everywhere he went, pestering him to clarify his message—begging him to tell me what he meant.

