



## Hortense and the Shadow

This story, and I, began in a grim little town in the North of England. Three years later my sister Lauren was born. We lived in a Victorian house that was once a funeral parlor, which suited our mother's taste for the macabre. She was married in a black veil. She is descended from Austro-Hungarian nobility on one side and Polish butchers on the other. "I get my sensitive nature from the countesses, and my well-developed biceps from the butchers," she used to say. One night, when we were six and nine, she went to bed and didn't get up again for three years. Our father, a distant person who grew up in a series of boarding schools, disappeared to his office. So we were pretty much left to our own devices.



I was dyslexic, and at nine I had just learned to read, which I was excited about. So for the next few years that's what we did—I read to Lauren. On the bus to school, at dinner, at bath time, at bedtime, after bedtime, long after bedtime. We haunted bookstores like a pair of miniature ghouls. And we discussed the future. We were going to move to London and build a house with a glass bird and monkey enclosure along one side, so that it would sound like the jungle. When people asked what we were going to do, I said I was going to write books, and Lauren said that she would draw the pictures. We were disappointed to learn that Russell and Lillian Hoban and Alice and Martin Provensen weren't brothers and sisters.

Soon we grew up. Neither of us had changed much, so Lauren studied Illustration and Fine Art (just outside London) and I studied English (at Oxford). Then there were a few years when we hardly saw each other; Lauren was in London designing film sets and window displays, and I was abroad writing travel books. Then I started writing script reports in my spare time, and three years ago I was offered a job as head of script development at a small production company in London. That Christmas Lauren took me to see one of her windows.

*"It's funny, you really did end up an artist"*

*"And you're a writer..."*

I celebrated New Year's abroad, and on the plane home I wrote a list of ideas for picture books. Then we chose the story that we didn't think we had read before. It was about Hortense, a little girl who hates her shadow and slowly realizes that her shadow hates her back. We were influenced by Carson Ellis, Joan Aitken, Lemony Snicket, and most of all by Jirí Trnka's

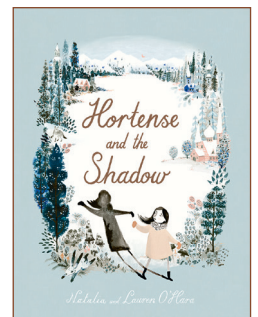
1959 edition of *Andersen's Fairy Tales*. When our mother's family fled from Soviet tanks in 1968, she packed that book instead of socks. We emailed her an early version, and she wrote back soon after: "Beautiful, my girls. Reminds me of the books I read as a child. But it's rather sweet for my taste. What if Hortense died, and became the shadow?"

I'm sure you'll agree that most childhood ambitions, like building a glass monkey house, are best left unrealized. But if you are lucky enough to hit on a good dream when you're young, and a couple of decades later you do the thing you always wanted to do, the feeling is wonderful. About a week after we started working on *Hortense*, Lauren gave me a new notebook. "That's for writing the next one," she said.

*Natalia*

With sincere regards (and illustrations) from

*Lauren*



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