So someone has asked you to paint their portrait. Or worse still a portrait of their family. And there are eight in the family, not counting Aunt Fanny who might or might not be seen in the photo.

The photo might have been taken twenty years ago. It is in sepia. It has been chewed by the dog and you can hardly make out who is who. But the person is asking so nicely and they have the greatest faith in you as a painter.

And just as you feel yourself weakening, they ask if you could do it in colour and make it three feet by four.

Now, the only circumstances under which you should possibly say yes to such a commission is if that person once saved your life. Dragged you from a burning building at the very least.

To take on ANY commission that you feel uncomfortable about is a terrible idea. And don’t say yes just because you fear they will think you are UNABLE to do it if you say no.

We as painters are a sensitive lot and should only EVER paint what we chose
for ourselves. Choosing a subject is a personal and instinctive move. And the subject that moves our soul might leave the next artist completely disinterested. But if it moves us, then we should paint it.

Some subjects are just not paintable. Or at least would give no joy to paint. But if the person with the sepia, dog chewed photo can’t be refused then it could be suggested that the family be assembled in the bright sunshine for a new and updated photograph. On seeing all those lovely lights and colours in the new photo it just might happen that the photograph itself will be good enough to frame and you will be let off the hook. Then you can skip off to paint that lovely headland in fog that caught your eye.

Don’t be afraid to let people know that you have preferences and limits. Painting is not done to a recipe or a pattern. If a subject does not have magic in colour, tone and content and if you do not feel excited about painting it……that lack of excitement will come through in the painting.

You won’t have to ask yourself if a subject is magic, you will “feel” it.

Then of course, there’s the situation when someone asks if they can paint YOUR portrait. If for some reason you are not comfortable with the idea, and there could be several reasons…. (1) It’s bad enough you have to look at your own face and can’t see why anyone else would want to look at it. (2) Or you worry that the finished painting will make you dislike your face even more than you did before. (3) Or if the person keeps the painting, who will look at it? If they give it to you, will you WANT to look at it?

Oh it’s a worry. But on the other side of the easel are the feelings of the painter and I understand the position they are in too. My first recollection of ‘being an artist’ was when I was about 8 years old. I had just made my best friend sit for me while I drew her. She wasn’t very good at sitting. I think she had fleas. When my drawing was finished, I was so proud of it, my head was spinning. My best friend took one look at it and burst into tears. “Ooooh, it’s sooo ugly. It looks nothing like me.” And she went home. I blame the fleas. A sitter must be able to sit still.

Happy painting…..Ros.