Fig. 3-20 The original photograph is shown at left. To produce the photograph on the right, I applied the selection created in Figure 3-19 and used the Curves and Saturation tools to darken and soften the background. Even though I made a very substantial change to those areas, there's no visible evidence of masking; the boundary between the foreground and background still looks natural and clean.

Mask Pro (http://www.ononesoftware.com)

Mask Pro is an elaborate and expensive ($200) masking plug-in. It actually incorporates three related tools. The Mask Pro filter extracts portions of the image, Mask Pro Select defines a mask that you may use with other Photoshop filters and tools, and Mask Pro Work Path converts a channel or selection into a work path. I primarily use Mask Pro Select.

Peculiarly, this "professional" plug-in is limited to working on 8-bit files. That's inconvenient, but masks are portable, so there's a work-around. If I want to create a mask with Mask Pro for a 16-bit image, I duplicate that image, convert it to 8 bits, create my mask, save it in a channel, and then copy that channel back over to the original 16-bit file.

The two tools I use most often for creating masks are the Highlighters and Eyedroppers (Figure 3-21). Highlighters are good and fast when there are large areas to mask that have relatively simple geometries. Run the Keep Highlighter tool around the inside of the perimeter of the area to be selected. Run the Drop Highlighter tool around the perimeter of areas to be excluded. You don't have to be terribly accurate; what Mask Pro does is analyze the range of tones and colors in your "keep" and "drop" selections and use those to find the edges of the regions you want to mask.

The Keep and Drop Eyedroppers sample many points in the photograph to build up a palette of colors and tones that you want to include (Figure 3-22). The Eyedroppers are vital when you're trying to isolate poorly distinguished areas like wisps of hair or similar colors.

Usually, once you've made these selections, you'll activate Mask Pro's Magic Brush tool and tell Mask Pro to apply it to the entire image. That creates the whole mask based on your criteria at once. If you need to be
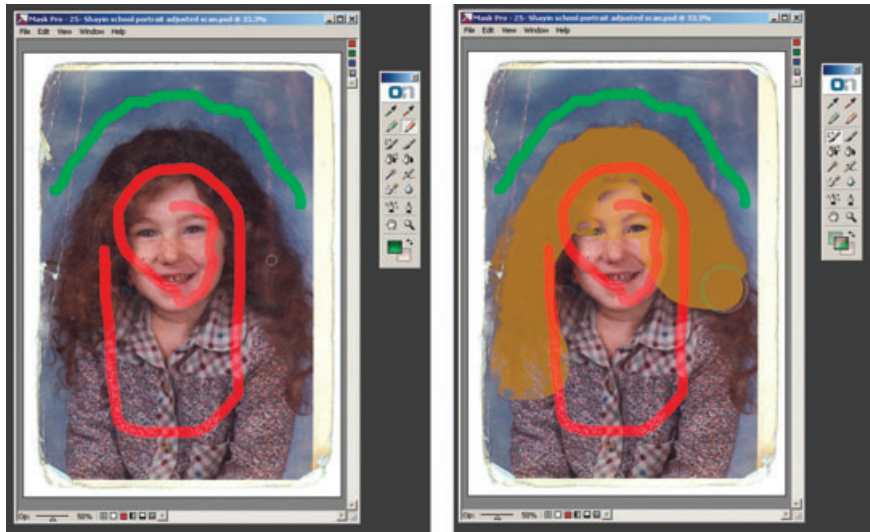
Fig. 3-21 The Mask Pro plug-in for Photoshop has extremely sophisticated selection tools. I used the Keep and Drop Highlighter tools to tell Mask Pro which colors I want to select (the green squiggle) and which colors I want to mask (the red squiggle) in the figure on the left. I activated the Magic Brush tool (green cursor circle on the right) and painted it over the photograph. Mask Pro automatically generated the mask, shown in tan. Mask Pro does a good job masking along complex and diffuse edges, such as the boundary between the girl's hair and the background.
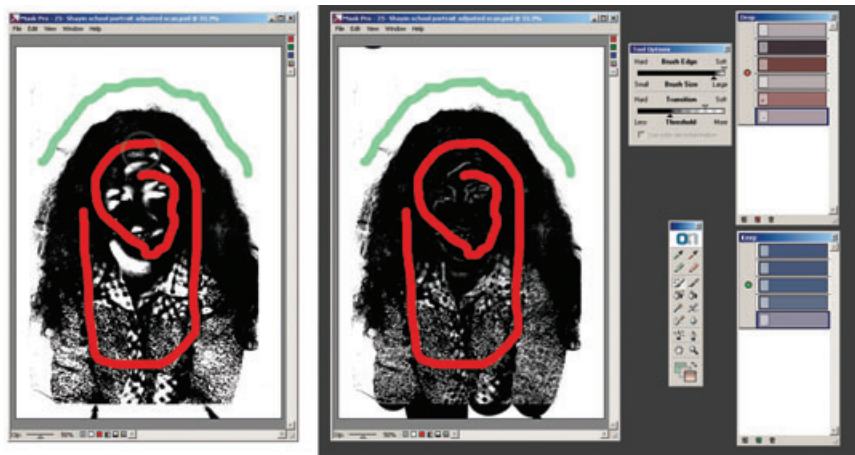

Fig. 3-22 Mask Pro's Keep and Drop Eyedropper tools let me refine the mask selection. I repeatedly clicked the Eyedroppers on the photograph to create palettes of colors that I wanted to keep and drop (shown on the right). Then I applied those choices to the whole image. The mask on the left is the one that I generated using just the Highlighter tools. The mask on the right is the one I created with the help of the Eyedropper tools.

more selective and fine-tune what you're doing, you can use the Magic Brush to paint in the mask manually. You can create very elaborate masks, altering the "draw" and "keep" selections and palettes on the fly to use one set of criteria for masking one part of the image and another set for another part. You can also vary the strength and threshold settings for the mask brush as you work to control how "aggressive" your masking will be.

Unlike Photoshop's Extract tool, Mask Pro can analyze the entire image based on the inclusion data and create a very elaborate mask with multiple regions that need not be contiguous (Figure 3-23). Mask Pro isn't the least bit fazed by complicated mask criteria and geometries. Mask Pro is much more flexible and versatile in applying its functions and does a better and more sophisticated job of analyzing what is to be selected than does Photoshop's Color Select. Mask Pro is less confused by noisy originals; its selections are much cleaner and require less touching up.

A unique Mask Pro tool is the Chisel. It shaves off or adds pixels at the edge of a selection, based on your selection criteria; it doesn't just mechanically alter masks like "expand" or "contract." Chisel always smoothly follows the perimeter of the selection, so you can't accidentally take a big gouge out of your selection.