

PORTFOLIO ONE
"The Portrait", "Positive" and "Untitled"

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Creative Writing: Fiction
April 2008

The Portrait

She came to my door one evening, unannounced, while I was experimenting with dinner. I couldn't help but notice those eyes: two pale moons, brimming with sorrow.

"I took advantage of your daughter," she said. There was this unfamiliar girl, standing at my stoop, and all I could do was stare. She blinked. "I'm sorry."

Later, I would think about this moment. Canvas in hand, I would lay down rosy pink over blues, yellows, greens, trying to match her expression. It was oil on water, constantly shifting, changing.

I looked upstairs. Rachael was quiet.

"Come in," I said. She hesitated for a moment, and then stepped inside.

As I went to take the fried rice off the burner, she dodged the stacks of books and magazines in the living room expertly. She must have been here before, I thought to myself, as I cleared off a spot for her on the couch. I offered water, tea, but she politely refused. We sat amongst the paintings, sketches, and family portraits, staring at each other amidst a room full of dead eyes.

Her name was Katie, she said. She had a porcelain quality about her: a pristine face with purple eyeshadow applied just so; long, dark hair; petite, oh-so-slender frame. I used to order Victorian dolls for Rachael when she was small, in hopes that she'd learn the value of collecting. I wanted to pick up this girl and dust her off, place her on the shelf along with rest of them.

I looked at her. "Took advantage -- that could mean a lot of things," I said.

"And it is a lot of things," she said. "Too many things." Her hands began to tremble. I was afraid that they would tap together, crack, fall apart.

I remembered what it felt like, that awkwardness, facing parents after opening your eyes. Looking, knowing that you've seen things they've seen, but haven't, and shouldn't, and won't. Afraid that they'll find out, that they'll see their children, naked, reflected in your eyes, and that you'd melt in a pool of your, and their, shame... but never, never would I have brought it up. All the guilt in the world couldn't have overcome my fear.

I didn't know if that was why she was here, if she had shared something like that with my daughter. It didn't matter. In a way, she at that moment was more assertive, confident than I ever would hope to become. Yet here she was, crumbling under her own fragile weight.

And it was beautiful.

"Sit for me," I said. She looked at me, shaken, confused.

I grabbed a blank canvas that was lying beside the mantle. Rachael's outstretched hand, preserved in painted clay, pushed me away. Every time I tried to talk to her lately, she always pushed me away.

"Sit for me, Katie," I said.

Moments passed. "Okay," she said, nodding. I swallowed my shock as I dug around for my pastels.

Katie sat there, eyes wavering, as I began to sketch. I began outlining her face as she began to tell me about her friendship with Rachael. She moved to the neighborhood six months ago during spring break. The two met at a friend's house during a sleepover, and they became instantly inseparable. It started off slow, but soon she couldn't control it. Everything was crawling out from under her skin. It was a fire sale of emotions -- each and every defective one had to go.

They shared everything together -- secrets, thoughts, dreams. Rachael would go over to Katie's house and borrow her clothes. Katie posed for Rachael and kept her company in the darkroom. The room grew silent, so I glanced over the top of the canvas. She was fidgeting with Rachael's camera, a faraway look in her eyes. Once she realized I was looking, she dropped the camera and turned away.

They would sneak out of French, she said, and light up behind the parking lot. Sometimes they'd steal lighters and candy from the corner shop just because they could, or they'd cram for make-up exams, trying desperately to remember who won the War of 1812. Every now and then, a bunch of them would hitch rides downtown and hang out with her brother Vin and his strung-out friends at his apartment. Vin and Rachael got along famously, and they'd sit together, listening to The Doors and Zeppelin and "White Rabbit" on his turntable.

With each milestone in my daughter's short history, my sketch became more than that; it was alive, vibrant. Her words were passionate, fraught with such honesty, and I consumed. I breathed them in like vapors, colorful and rich. I wasn't even in control of my hands – they were possessed by her story.

That's when Katie's fairytale came to an abrupt halt. She told me how found Rachael, asleep at Vin's apartment, her bare leg dangling over the side of his bed. How she couldn't stop staring at his bare back, her best friend's arm wrapped around it. How she ran from his apartment, ill, not even knowing what she was feeling. How Rachael tried to explain everything to her, that nothing like that had happened, that Vin was nothing and Katie was everything to her. And no matter how much she believed what she was hearing, how much she wanted to go back to the way things were, she couldn't. She couldn't stop herself from taking her pain out on my daughter, telling everyone who would listen about how much of a slut Rachael was.

My hand stopped as the heated silence threatened to pop the walls open.

"And that's how it happened," Katie said. "That's how I took advantage of her."

I never told Rachael about what happened that night, and life went on. Yet years later, after the door has fallen off its hinges and her tears have run dry, I still see Katie's face. It is a ghost, there in every grain of rice, in every photo, in my daughter's brown eyes. And I wonder, did she go on? Did she ever get that closure she wanted, that absolution she so desperately needed? Or have I taken her worries as my own -- become her pack mule, lost in the desert, bearing all of her burdens?

Inside my closet, under my bed -- my room is full of her memory. All I can do is draw her perfect face over and over again, shaking with tears, slashing at her beauty with every pen stroke, carving away her guilt with my knife.

Positive

"Um, *what?*"

"Your lab results, Miss Stearns. They indicate that you're pregnant," he said.

"Wait, wait, wait. Hold up one second." I put my hands out and stopped. *No*, I thought. *Calm down. I must have misheard him or something.* I took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm sorry about that. Now, where were we?"

"When the lab processed your samples, there were high levels of a hormone called..." His words started to fade away. If there's one thing I hate in life, it's all of this medical jargon bullshit, even when it's coming from someone as handsome as Dr. Gabriel Kowalski. Once I realized that he stopped talking, everything began to process.

"So what you're saying is that I'm..." I couldn't bring myself to say it.

"Pregnant, yes." He looked at me. I must have looked two parts angry and one part sick, because he slowly took a step toward the door. "Did you want me to leave you alone or..."

"Oh no you don't!" I leapt off of the exam table toward him. "You're going to stand right here and explain this to me." I began moving around the small office, trying to reason with the instruments on the wall. "There must be some kind of misunderstanding..."

"There isn't," he said. He took a small step toward me, his brow furrowed.

"... or maybe there was a mix-up back there in the labs..."

"There wasn't." He was inches away from me, his voice barely a whisper.

"... all that pee! It looks the same, you know..."

"Miss Stearns," he said, his words delicate, yet heavy. He put his hands on my shoulders, holding me still, keeping me from pacing a hole into the clinic floor.

"Listen," I told him. "I cannot be pregnant. Can. Not. It's not supposed to be possible." I held out my hand again, this time using my fingers to represent cold, hard facts. "I mean, one: I take my pill every day; two: I can't even remember the last time my husband and I had sex; and three: ... I can't be pregnant!" At this point, I don't know who I was trying to convince more, him or myself, especially since I was lying through my teeth about at least one of those points.

"I really don't know what to tell you, but you are," he said.

I wanted to say something, anything, but all the fight was sucked out of me. "I can't believe this is happening," I said, leaning against the office door.

He tried to guide me away from the door. "Miss Stearns, can you please --"

"And would you *please* stop calling me that, Gabe? It's so... cold." I slid down, my body a right angle against the linoleum.

"Sorry, Suzy," he said. "I just get so..."

"I know, I know. I'm overreacting. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He sat across from me, propped up against the exam table.

We sat there, still, an almost sterile kind of quiet. Almost, of course, because obviously I wasn't, seeing that I was *fucking pregnant*. Seeing that it was my bad news, I figured that it was his responsibility to break the ice. I had enough to think about as is, without having to keep up a conversation.

He looked at my stomach, ripe with new meaning. "...so, Suze," he said.

"Yeah, Gabe?"

"What're you going to do about... you know?" He had his hands stuffed in his pockets.

Dr. Gabe Kowalski -- PhD in medicine, GED in bedside manner.

"You know"? Well, that's quite comforting, coming from a doctor and all," I said.

"It's different," he said. "You're not just any patient. You're *you*."

I sighed. I wanted to say so many things, to ask him how this could have happened, and why, why it happened now. Instead, I just said, "I don't know. It's just too much right now. It's, like, I should be crying right now, but all I can do is sit here and... I don't know, *be*."

He chuckled under his breath, staring across the room. "I know what you mean."

I was stunned, for I didn't even know what I meant. "Really?"

He laughed. "No."

"Oh," I said.

"I mean, how can I?" He pulled his hands out of his pockets and shifted his weight. "As much as I want to, I'll never quite understand. All guys have to do is just enjoy the ride, but women, you have to deal with all the maintenance. The weight gain, the complications, childbirth. We get off, then we get off, you know?"

"You have a point." I looked down at my stomach. "It's weird, though -- I don't *look* pregnant. I don't feel ill, either. I mean, I had that weird bout of stomach flu a couple of weeks back -- which, now that I think about it, probably wasn't the flu at all, huh?"

For the first time since he broke the news, he looked at me. "It's actually pretty common to not show any signs of pregnancy for the first three months, so yeah, it could've been morning sickness. I once had a patient that was five months along before she figured it out."

"Wow. That's pretty crazy."

"Yeah," he said. "It's a good thing you found out now, though."

"I guess so," I said quietly.

His hand reached across the tiles and lightly touched mine. I looked at him, in those hazel eyes, wondering if he read between the lines. I could actually remember the last time I was with

my husband, but that was months ago, before we'd even separated. Even more so, I could remember those evenings I spent with Gabe, and how I'd wondered if I could ever truly love my husband ever since.

His finger stopped tracing the outline of my hand. "I mean, Robert will be really pleased to hear about this," he said. "He told me that you guys are trying to work things out."

He looked at me, waiting for my answer. I held my breath, trying to find the right way to tell him that it wasn't true, that he was trying to work it out and I was trying to get out. As I opened my mouth, though, there came a knock on the door. We both jumped to our feet, Gabe hitting his head against the stirrups at the end of the exam table. "It's okay," I said, "you can come in."

One of the nurses poked her head inside. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but Dr. Kowalski? You have a phone call from the missus on line three," she said.

I stared at him as he looked down. "Tell her I'm finishing up with a patient, but I'll call her back in a moment," he said. "Thank you." The nurse nodded as she shut the door behind her.

He looked at me, trying to read my thoughts, when my phone began to vibrate. "I'm sorry -- I meant to turn it off, but I just forgot," I said to him, as he picked up my phone from the chair and looked the display.

"It's Robert," he said. "I guess you'd better take it."

I sighed. "I guess I should," I said.

"I'll see you at your next appointment, okay, Suzy?" He opened the door for me as I grabbed my coat and purse. As I walked past him, I heard him whisper softly to himself:

"... congratulations."

Untitled

A procession of cars passed them, highbeams galore, headed toward the city as they pressed on into the sandstorm. She pulled onto the lever at her side, her seat hitting the cushion behind her.

He looked at her as he pulled onto the shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I don't remember when I forgot how to feel," she said.

He turned the key, reclined his seat, propped his head up, and watched her.

"My grandmother used to take me to church," she said. "It was just the two of us – special time with her special girl, she'd always say. We'd scoot into the front pews and she'd sit there, hypnotized, and then all of a sudden her hands would just open up, ready to catch the sky. Everyone around me was crying, but I just couldn't understand, and I couldn't pretend like I could. Later on, we would sit down at her favorite diner, and over grits and hotcakes and lukewarm coffee she told me about how the spirit filled her soul, and that someday, someday I'd find out what that meant."

She cracked the window open. Sand poured slowly into the car as the seconds went by. "I would buy cigarettes only to light them, to watch as they slowly burnt down to the filters. Every now and then I'd take a drag, and I'd wonder, is this what she meant? Is this what it's supposed to feel like?" She pulled a cigarette out of his front pocket and struck a match against the car door, lighting it.

"Hm," he said. He reached over and touched her arm, ran his finger up the blue-green paths her veins made, under her sleeve and slipped his hand behind her back. She crawled up into his lap, her knee banging against the clutch.

"I used to sit in the shower for hours at a time," he said, smiling at her. "I had this plastic stool that I would take in there, and I'd find the spot where the water hit everything all at once, and I would sit, waiting until the water ran cold."

She shuddered. Cigarette ashes fell onto his chest as she composed herself. "I don't take showers," she said. "Not anymore."

He listened as his fingers ran up her back, inside her shirt, deftly releasing the clasps of her worn-out bra. Headlights shone across her back, masking her face in the shadows.

"I was fourteen," she said, looking out the window. "Grandma had told me that Jesus could see whatever I was doing, and I had a whole life's worth of hellfire to back that up. One morning, as I was rinsing my hair out, I looked up and saw two eyes on the ceiling. Two large eyes, embedded in the wood grain, staring down at me." She turned and looked down at him. "Seriously. It scared me half to death. I screamed, and as I tried to get out, I slipped and hit my head against the faucet. I almost drowned that day."

He lifted up her shirt and kissed her stomach. "Do you think Jesus can see us now?" he said, smirking.

I hope not, she thought as she closed her eyes.

He turned the key. The engine coughed, and he nudged the gas pedal until it hummed. "How do you feel?" he asked her as he pulled the car back onto the highway.

She stared into his eyes, hollow, as they chased the taillights into infinity.