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## Guest Opinion: The Portrait

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# The Portrait

Marjorie L. Payne

I recently sat as a model for a portraiture class. My friend, Janet, was taking the class taught by a local artist of some reputation and they had no model for their final session. I would be doing them a favor, she assured me. It was an opportunity to meet an artist whose work I admired so I agreed. Janet didn't know and, indeed, I had forgotten myself until that very moment, that I had had some experience in the modelling field. I recalled that hot July morning nearly ten years ago, visiting old friends recently moved to New Orleans. For a lark, a "touristy" thing to do, my husband and I arranged to have a portrait done by one of the street artists who are the main attraction on a summer morning in the *Vieux Carre*. I remember sitting under the awning that filtered the strong southern sun. Even in the heat I was amazed to find that forty-five motionless minutes could pass so quickly. But it was just for a lark and it was fun to watch the passers-by as they watched the artist at work. I was enjoying just being alive and loved and in that place.

Vividly, I remember my first sight of that portrait, the misty charcoal image looking back at me: the eyes, my eyes, full of -- what? melancholy? plaintiveness? sadness? I had sat there (I thought) full of festive spirits and the artist had seen and captured a mood, a feeling, a life of which I had no knowledge and whose nature, to this day, I cannot define. With a few strokes of charcoal she had destroyed my sure sense of who I was, as completely as, a year or two later, a falling object shattered the glass that protected the image. It had never been framed and hung but had stood in a corner of the dining room leaning against the wall, studied and puzzled over every now and then. Masking tape held the shattered glass together and covered, in a starburst, the cracks radiating from my shoulder. Only an eyesore, then, the portrait was put away in the attic. Occasionally I would come across it and peer into the eyes trying to identify this woman and discover the source of her sorrow. After a time it was forgotten, or it was until I was asked to model for Janet's class.

It was a misty, dark June morning but I sat under the glare of an overhead lamp -- a make-believe sun on my face. The master artist moved among the women offering advice or instruction, sometimes encouragement, pointing out planes and shapes and color tones. But as I sat, conscious of their

concentration, the occasional measuring pencil extended toward me, I felt something draining out of me -- no, something being drawn out of me. "Fatigue," I thought. Even so, the morning passed quickly, rest periods relieving the stiffness, offering the opportunity to see the emerging features as the drawings progressed.

One portrait was especially good. No sadness here, no plaintive, pensive something to puzzle the eye. But there was something there, some vital force looking back from the chalk eyes, a haunting extension of myself. I thought of the taboo among primitive peoples against the camera -- that it steals and captures the soul and I wondered if perhaps the fear were not so "primitive" after all. Maybe it is we who are naive to consider ourselves beyond such superstitions, I thought. But this portrait, in soft browns and golds, gave an aura of warmth and quietly subdued my fears.

I talked with the artist about buying the portrait for an anniversary surprise for my husband. "I'll be in touch," I told her. But then in the preparations for my first trip to Europe, I forgot that portrait, too. It faded further in the excitement of Paris and was lost completely in the beauty of the French countryside.

I had been home almost a month when, passing the art gallery one morning, I glanced in the window. I saw there, not my reflection, but the warm, golden browns of myself in the portrait. It is a peculiar feeling to see yourself when you least expect it and to hear the woman at the desk say, "Oh, you're the lady in the portrait. Such sensitivity. And an excellent likeness." I wondered how long that bit of me had been leaning there and how many people had seen it and recognized the face. What a disquieting thought! I had been six thousand miles away but this image, this indefinable portion of myself in paper and chalk, had stayed behind without my knowing, propped up against the gallery wall, exposed and vulnerable.

Well, I bought the portrait. "For posterity," I said. "It's very flattering," I said, "and the price is so reasonable." Now it is framed and hung on the livingroom wall, in a corner, between two windows, level with the eye. My friendship with it is not a totally easy one. Ancient taboos and superstitions hover between us. Have I cheated the gods of time? Stolen a cog from their ravaging wheel? Perhaps there is a moment



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lurking just ahead when people will say to my husband, "How fortunate that you can see and remember her as she was just before..." Perhaps I feel safer hanging on the wall in my own home, less vulnerable than crushed in a portfolio who knows where, chalk flaking off, smudging and blurring me. I try not to think of the slightly distorted portions of me caught in the other sketches made that morning. When I glance at the portrait I wonder if I will come to fear the future and despise its toll while this mute image mocks me with its advantage. I remind myself again that these are superstitions, irrational non-realities, and I push them back into the dark corners. This is just chalk and paper. Nothing more. But the blue eyes meet mine across the room, not harboring some private, unspoken sorrow, but thoughtful, straightforward, looking out at the world with confidence and an eager curiosity. "Are you my friend?" I ask. "Can I trust you?"

One day soon the novelty of its presence will wear off and it will fall into the background of landscapes and family photographs. One day soon I shall walk down the hall, turn the corner to the stairs and not glance in to see if it (or I) has changed. One day soon I shall tell myself, "I really did look like that once." One day too soon.

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