

Self-portrait

(short story)

Aglaia Bouma

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Self-portrait

My father was right. I'm nothing but a limp dishcloth. Used, twisted and a bit slippery from the filth of adolescent experimentation in a teenager's single bed. But nobody sees it. Now I'm an adult. Now I'm almost finished.

My father was often right. "Without a profession, you're a nobody", is one of the pieces of wisdom that has survived him. A truth as simple as One, Two, Three. Never have I met anyone who didn't ask what kind of job I had in the first few minutes after meeting, an effective tactic to form an unpolished opinion based on prejudices, from behind a mask of interest. I would have liked to reply that I was an artist. Practicing art is the ultimate excuse for doing nothing and it gives you the air of elusiveness at that. But I was talentless and missed the much needed creative mind. So I decided to go to law school.

*

Studying the law was the wooden frame on which I stretched, the only solidity in a world without energy, character or feeling. The dishcloth was being processed, sucked itself full of adhesives, oil, stupid knowledge and solid primer. Reborn I felt, a tabula rasa, ready to be filled with impressions from outside, scholarship, desirable behavior and logical responses.

The first sketches were way off. They were nothing but awkward, false strokes, transparent lies about unparalleled lines, which only brought about surprised faces. The lovely chin of the girl who asked how I felt after my First Time (finally, finally!), shriveled into a shaky pudding filled with bumps when I replied with a shrug: "Empty." Little did I know. Why would she ask such a question?

I've studied long on developing a better response.

Slowly but surely, the idea came into view and I was formed. I specialized in philosophy of law and thus posed as a thoughtful, honest person. It was received well. I left my mother, who, after the death of her husband, just sat peeling bitterly, for a room in a noisy dorm. And I got myself a girlfriend. A redhead, with freckles and a knack of inattention. She never noticed my winds in bed, nor the fact that I was constantly busy with my self-portrait.

*

I started working on the background. Just a father who's often right won't do. For the first time in all those years I visited his grave and stared at the gray headstone until my eyes became irritated and a tear on my cheek was blown cold by the wind. Then I went to what was left of my mother. Ignoring her questioning looks, I took the big old box of photo albums from a cupboard and handed her an extremely heavy copy. With her trembling fingers she pointed at uncles, aunts and cousins, and even at a picture, curled by dried moisture, of my little brother who died after two futile days as an infant.

"Where does all this interest suddenly come from?" We had worked through three books and she had insisted on pausing for tea. Her voice followed the trembling of her fingers.

"A man has to have a background", I said, which apparently softened her. The still half-full cup of tea cooled mercilessly while we thumbed through the fourth and final book. A holiday in France, me as a toddler, completely colorless and with the inflexible elasticity of a new dishcloth. My parents didn't seem to notice. They take turns smiling at me from the past, always with a hand on my shoulder or my buttocks on their arm. They're earth-colored, violet, and carmine smudges, with a touch of ultramarine smeared near the edges. Carefully placed black dots show the inevitable traumas and disappointments, in perspective.

*

The first strokes with which I colored myself were rather thick. Too often I hugged people where a handshake had been more appropriate, or I started laughing about jokes before the punch line was told. My girlfriend thought it was naive kindness making me do these things, but I knew better. Patiently and carefully I spread out the paint a little, following the lines of the design. When I took a step back to look at the result, I thought it looked quite nice. My girlfriend took me to the birthday party of a colleague and I behaved just like the other guests. I asked the right questions and didn't laugh too hard, nor too soft, about whispered dirty jokes. Two weeks later I found myself having acquaintances. I couldn't call them friends though; I've never seen the point of such energy-wasting, pointless pastime. In retrospect I think a boy from law school tried to get close to me. He was a pale watercolor and made a habit of sitting at my table during breaks, where he ate his sandwiches with sausage and mustard with slurping sounds. I practiced on him, discussed the behavior of the professors with cadmium orange voice, or mused over the principles of ethics. He didn't notice how kitsch I was.

One afternoon he sat across from me with a very large grin on his face. It seemed as if his colors were brushed up and the white background had withdrawn.

"I'm in love," he said, without much ado. "Tomorrow she's having a party, because she wants to meet my friends all at once. So you're invited too."

The intention obviously was for me to accept the invitation, perhaps even congratulate him, but I wasn't ready yet. Those first colors were really only suitable as a foundation, which should suppress the still light-gray glow of the dishcloth and provide it with more depth. Since that day he never again sat at my table.

*

A second layer of color made things look better. I gave myself confident jaws and the eyes of men who play the romantic type in movies. Their gestures and words were so often imitated by me that they became second nature. For every situation a sensitive man can find himself in, I learned the most appropriate emotions by heart. "Great", I should have replied back then, I understood, when a broad-shouldered television star with sheets lying chastely over his worn out, squeezed out groin kissed a woman tucked in up to her armpits. So that's how it was done.

*

Nine months ago it was time for the final details. I retouched previous mistakes, added some accents and white dots in the eyes, so that they reflected the bright white teeth of the red bride, who had just found out that she was pregnant.

In the shadow of my neck some cracks had arisen, which I smoothed away with black and dark red. The result isn't that bad, although it's obviously the product of an unpracticed hand lacking creativity or talent. I patiently lived and dried, avoided being in places too dark or too bright, endured the morning sickness with averted head and an ear playing deaf. It's a boy and I'm finished.

This layer of varnish should prevent the surface from becoming filthy for a while, but it will also yellow me. By then, I'll be forgotten, be nothing but a lackluster memory with shapes vaguely resembling a dishcloth. If my son then remembers in what light he saw me when he still was a baby, hanging in his room, he might want me to be revived.

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About the author

In addition to being a writer, Aglaia Bouma (1970) is an entrepreneur, empathic misanthrope, emotional rationalist, light-hearted pessimist and a social *einzelgänger*.

Her Dutch novel 'De dwaling' was reviewed positively and her short stories often win in contests. The Dutch versions of 'Self-portrait' and 'Unleashed' were published in literary journals. 'Heaven on Earth' she read to the audience attending the presentation of an anthology the story was published in. Some other short stories were published in collections as well. When writing, she tries to describe the characters roaming her fantasy in a way that the resulting story keeps hanging around in the head of the reader for a while. Because you, dear reader, is what it's all about!

If you enjoyed reading this story as much as I did writing it, I'd really appreciate you leaving a review at your favorite retailer.



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