



# WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS?

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A HUNDRED WORDS SURE, BUT was it worth a thousand? It was a faded polaroid, three-and-a-half inches by four-and-a-quarter inches, with a border of white that was an eighth of an inch on three sides and maybe three quarters of an inch at the bottom. She held the picture between thumb and middle finger of her left hand. Her fingers were dirty, stained from graphite that she had just shaved off the tip of a pencil. Along with an unlined notebook, she used a pencil for recording observations and ideas: picture to be taped to left-

hand-side page, text put down at right. And now there was a thumb print on the bottom of the snapshot. She took a tissue, touched it to the mouth of the kitchen faucet to wet it, then wiped the bottom margin. The gray mark spread, further sullyng the white space. Resisting the urge to continue rubbing at the stain, she fixed her eyes on the image.

It was moody, but was that by intention or the result of the medium? Polaroid cameras tended to produce gloomy or washed-out photos. Photos that looked old even on the day

you took them. Photos that made of your subjects figures from the seventies, even if they weren't wearing bell bottoms or mustard-colored turtlenecks or shirts with wide collars or tan leather moccasins. Nobody was playing a folk guitar. The women were not wearing thick eye makeup, and the walls of the kitchen did not have wallpaper. No one sported long and extravagantly bushy sideburns, no one smiled. Was this a reception following a wake? That's what their faces said, the people gathered round the table. Why had anyone taken a photo of that group? What could have been the reason? They were looking back at the camera, all of them but one. The one who was not looking back seemed to be looking toward the side. A woman of the Natalie Wood type, though maybe that was not fair to say; there was only one Natalie Wood, had only ever been one. And she had mysteriously drowned. Who knew what the future held—or had held—for this one? She was pretty with large eyes. Melancholy, meditative, mournful—all very seventies, even if this picture wasn't from the seventies. What period was it? How could you tell? There was not a cell phone in sight. And the phone on the wall had

a curling, pig's-tail cord, bouncing in spirals and knotted here and there; someone needed to straighten it out, unkink it. Maybe it *was* the seventies.

In front of one man wearing large-framed transition glasses meant to turn dark outside but never quite cleared up inside, a five-finger-tall whiskey glass sat with a thick bottom and a light liquid in it, faded like everything else. A hint of yellow. Probably scotch. Or rye. Did anyone drink rye anymore? No doubt, it wasn't ginger ale. He looked like a serious drinker, and a cigarette smoker, someone who would likely die in thirty years or so of lung cancer or cirrhosis or dementia—or a cocktail of the three. Did one die from dementia? But now he was smug and knowing. As if he understood something that the others didn't, or thought he did, or didn't care. His world weariness was not the result of world travel, she imagined (she had an uncle by marriage just like him), but from having grown up in the Bronx, having worked at Con Ed, having spent time on Arthur Avenue buying mozzarella and special canned plum tomatoes for making pizza at home. He looked like he had only just shaved off his mustache, which explained the faint sneer. He had cut himself just above the lip, and it was smarting.

She looked more carefully. The faces were small. There were many of them within the bounds of the photograph. She counted nine. Skin color ranged from pale-zombie-gray to deep-black, with shades along the scale pausing at mocha and rust to cherry on a cheek. She had thought no one was smiling, but it seemed to her now that two wore grins of complicity, conspiracy—a man and a woman. They stood beyond the table, leaning shoulder to shoulder, at one corner of the room, at the picture's top-left. Suppressed mirth activated the air before them like a mirage, causing invisible ripples in space. They did not look at each other, as if for fear that it would usher in a burst of forbidden laughter.

She didn't know them, individuals held fast on glistening, plastic-sealed paper, but they felt familiar—as if they might have been her relatives, people she knew now in a different form, shown here at an earlier stage of life. Women and men who had aged out of their expressions and outfits, those relationships and attitudes, becoming utterly different people from those who had been photographed back then. And it must have been a back then.

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Of course, photos are always back then, the moment the shutter clicks, the sound echoing in memory. But here she felt past more deeply. That was the effect on her of the image, an unstudied snapshot of life that awakened in her nostalgia for her own life, both the one she'd lived and the one she hadn't.

She taped the photograph into her notebook and suddenly pictured herself among the others in that quiet, fixed group of figures, looking out. It felt good to be among them, safe from all possible disasters except a fading obscurity and then darkness. Turning away, she closed the cover of the book. ♦