



PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

Hecate Foley



WHEN I TURNED FORTY, MY mother gave me an album of photos and other memorabilia from my childhood: baptismal certificate, report cards from first through eleventh grade, papers I wrote in elementary school, local newspaper clippings of awards, and a copy of the one-hundred-dollar check I got for winning a national playwriting competition. As I leafed through the book, my boyfriend at the time looked over my shoulder and remarked wistfully, “Nobody cared enough to save any of my report cards!”

I imagine Mother rummaging through the scarred cedar chest jammed at the bottom of the parental bed, pulling out old embroidered linen runners, strewing the floor with crumbling envelopes preserving the quarterly records of our lives at school, all seven of us, tossed higgledy-piggledy together, followed by shoe boxes and rubber band-bound clumps of photos, folders full of news clippings, notebooks, letters, postcards. All the things she’d most wanted to remember.

The album has been my goldmine for reconstructing basic facts of my childhood, but as I went through it once more thirty-some years later, I felt a lurch of disappointment that it didn’t include my favorite photo of early-childhood me. That photo, taken when I was a toddler of no more than two, had always resonated for me as

no others had. In it, I sat on the back stoop of our house in a converted army barracks in Brady’s Bend, the one with a flash flood-prone creek running just behind it. I wore dungarees predating Oshkosh. My girly curls had yet to grow in. Splotches of dirt adorned my face. And I glared—like somebody had just taken my red dump truck away and tried to trade it for a doll; like I was being threatened with sunbonnets and stiff organdy dresses; like all I wanted to do was go down to the creek bed and throw stones with my brother Noel the Magnificent and the other big kids; like I just knew that somebody was gonna try to make me dress up and be sweet and speak in a soft voice and *be a good girl*. I was having none of it, and I wanted to come out slugging and yelling and stomping and throwing things and running off into the woods, but I didn’t, and I couldn’t because you had to do what Mommy told you to or God would get mad.

As I now look through what made it into the album, I wonder what my mother intended. A marker for a significant life stage reached? A purge of her ever-overflowing stash? A tribute to what she thought I’d been? I page through the photos of me inching through the years—posing with Noel in a studio, smiling; wearing a snowsuit in a snow-covered yard, smiling; hanging out with Noel and baby Little D with bike or stroller, smiling; sporting a ruffled sun suit and Audrey Hepburn

sunglasses (remember that ski resort scene in *Charade*? Yes... that cool) while playing “golf” with Noel, smiling; wearing my First Communion dress, smiling; lining up with ever-increasing numbers of sibs for the annual Olan Mills Studio photo, smiling.

Other items in the album call for smiles too. Report cards rarely marred by a B or even a minus on the A. Seventh- and eighth-grade compositions breathing sanctimony about Who Or

sure she thought so and dispatched it with a smile. But as I continue to revive my own memories, pictures living only in my mind, looking at that album still brings me to tears. It strikes me as an artifact of my mother’s selection—long after I stopped caring who or what is Christ, or smiling on command—of only those fragments of my childhood that let her construct the perfect daughter she wanted and I wasn’t.

Somehow, even as a child, I must



What Is Christ? and Why Isn’t a Religious Retreat Boring? News clippings about a county-wide academic award with a photo of me accepting the award and smiling, only three weeks before I tried to kill myself—not smiling. But there are no photos of that.

Whom was this album for? I used to think my mother did it for me. I’m



have sensed, without being able to express it, that the camera was there to capture me in a frame very not me, so much not of my making. By the time I got to about age ten, you’d have had to be a velociraptor to catch me if a camera appeared. I could rarely be photographed except in those annual posed official family shots. On the

surface, those just said, “Here are the family members.”

For my mother, though, they represented high stakes, what she’d always wished for—the perfect family. One of those photos has lodged stubbornly in my head. All of us, except as-yet-unborn Maridee, stationed in front of the player piano my mother had painted beige to blend into the living room walls. Mother sits on the piano bench holding the baby (there was always a baby); I stand behind the younger sibs, my hair a cap of frizz in the cut Mother had given me, feeling and looking frumpy at twelve in a hand-me-down jumper and some Peter-Pan-collared blouse, straining to smile. Maybe for her an instant like that was enough—a freeze-frame enclosing an apparently happy family, excluding the jostling, bickering, nagging, shouting chaos that preceded and followed.

Mother omitted from that fortieth birthday album anything that might have undermined her image of the perfect daughter in the perfect family. She’d embraced a quest to show the world what a perfect family could look like, she told me when I was well into adulthood, in reaction to the radical imperfection of her family of birth. On first glance, the few of her natal family photos that have survived seem anodyne. But then you notice a gaping omission—her father never joins the picture. Maybe he was still down at the neighborhood bar when

My mother photographed what she wanted to see, painting an image she longed for rather than the reality she had drawn in the sweepstakes of life.

the camera came out. Maybe he was staggering home, passed out on the front lawn, or maybe he was sleeping off a hangover. He managed to be absent wherever he was—or mean and abusive if he was present.

Of my own family’s photos, my father did show up in an occasional picture, but despite numerous opportunities for catching the moments on camera, there are no photos of him thrashing any of the boys with his thick leather belt. No photo of the holiday meltdowns when one or several of us fled the room sobbing under his storms of castigation. Not a single photo of my mother collapsing in tears as he pelted her with reproaches for her cooking, her housekeeping, her household management (read: lack thereof). Nor, for that matter, had anyone snapped

a shot of her spanking Little D with a hairbrush or a yardstick until it broke, or hitting one or another of us over and over and over again when her temper snapped, as though one more blow might cure her misery.

But what film could have rendered our deeper realities? The morass of desolation that my mother flailed in, the quicksand of PTSD dragging

she wanted to see, painting an image she longed for rather than the reality she had drawn in the sweepstakes of life. Those old photos help explain my usual aversion even now to being photographed, to being entombed like an insect trapped in amber, and used to decorate another's narrative. How must the poor bug have felt, sinking into the sticky mass of a transparent prison that



my father down, the gray cloak of depression suffocating me from my early teens, the crackling alienation that propelled most of us kids out of the household as soon as we passed the legal goalpost of eighteen—those existed on a spectrum beyond the capacity of any lens to detect.

So my mother photographed what

would never in a million years release it? To end up, maybe, in someone's jewelry. Immortalized but immured.

As we reach adulthood, we move beyond our parents into worlds where they cannot follow, beyond their focal length and well outside their frames. I scan my own collection of photos from my early and mid-

adulthood that represent moments of true significance for the true me. One snapped without my knowledge at the time—a *Washington Post* photo of a trio of demonstrators at Dupont Circle during the November 1969 Moratorium: my mother would never have recognized me in a gas mask, supporting a friend overcome by teargas. A voluntary photo taken of me with the handful of other faculty women when our men-only college's professoriate was debating a move to coeducation; we wear t-shirts emblazoned

KEEP
ABREAST
OF
THE
TIMES
VOTE
YES

—ABREAST artistically placed you-know-where.

Or the obligatory Chinese group photo after a February 2006 meeting in the frigid hinterlands of Shaanxi Province, outside a squat brick building echoing the yellow loess soil of the region, a dozen of us huddled on and around a rough wooden bench, bundled up to our chins, with me the redheaded paleface among the close cluster of sun-toughened village women. They'd shared in that meeting their stories about the hardships they'd

Those old photos help explain my usual aversion even now to being photographed, to being entombed like an insect trapped in amber, and used to decorate another's narrative.

faced—including a beating that had put one of them in the hospital—in contending for and winning office in previously male-monopolized village governments. After a heartrending recitation of her own experiences, one of them had concluded, "My one regret, though, is that I waited until I was forty-five to do this."

The photo fits a standard cultural frame, but somehow these gutsy women have transmuted the frame from an enclosure into a stage. Their smiles are electric; they have broken free.

If my smile in that picture looks frozen, it's only because the air was so cold. ❖