

Three Photos

by Heather Fowler

Photo 1: Family Portrait, Sunday:

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The first photo above shows plainly: five children dressed in suits and dresses. There are three girls. Each girl wears a yellow sundress with chiffon ribbons. The boys have been terrorizing them—the girls, not the dresses. Then again. Then again... It is agony.

Can you tell this by the finger of the largest boy poked into the side of the girl on his left? The shorter boy, the one with the pudgy look whose shirttails overhang his slacks, that is my brother Jebediah. In the terrorizing, aside from instigating in his own sly way, he did not participate much.

There are no parents in this photo because my mother lingers behind the lens and my father is back in the shed. The shed, comparably, would be about five inches to the right of what the photo frames. The house would be six inches to the left. This is all imagined perspective. All is ash.

But the shed is where he stores his liquor that works as "hair of the dog." It is actually Jack Daniels. There is no hair involved.

If there were a photograph an hour, or perhaps a photograph of each significant instant that transpires, this day would document as such:

Mother dresses and prepares children, who squirm and snarl.

While she curls her coffee hair, she tells the children to go play in the yard, but, "Don't get dirty or I will tan your asses! Church is in an hour—Jebediah! Come!" She wipes the snot from Jebediah's nose with a kitchen rag. Kitchen rags are the preferred rags, the best of raghood.

The two littlest girls pick wishing wands from the lawn weeds and blow and then the eldest tells them how to be fairies.

The eldest boy says they are all stupid little girls. He pulls the ribbon from the eldest's girl's self-done braid and pinches her right arm. The two fight; he rips the hem of her dress as he stomps on it, but she hides the rent by finding a piece of tape in the study and working quite hard to repair it via pressing the frayed fabric to the tape. When this works imperfectly, she rushes to the bathroom to cry without sound and then stares in the bathroom mirror to rinse her freckled, reddened face before re-emerging into the radiant light that is the impending early afternoon.

In the yard, the two littlest girls play at kissing each other's hands and mouths. There is discussion of prince charming. The pudgy, short boy wants to play, but only if he can be the court tiger. The girls disagree about his role. "We don't need a tiger. We need a prince."

"Yuck, I'm not kissing my sisters."

"You could just pretend."

"No, I would rather be a tiger. RAAAAAAAAAAWWR! You need to run."

The girls do not run. They laugh. A car arrives.

The [our] father [who art not in...] returns to the yard, stinking of booze and "loose women" we might conclude [were we so inclined] as Mother often does, though we do not, at this moment, know what that means. Do we picture these women as sliding, slippery things? So loose they could slip through our fingers? "Motherfucker!" he says, kicking his tire. We do not address him from our fear.

The oldest boy whispers to the oldest girl, "Shhhh. Don't tell him about the dress." Mother appears.

"Where have you been?" Her finger is up, wagging.

"Wherever the fuck I wanted," the man replies.

These adults retreat inside. There is yelling. Mysterious things clang and bang. Maybe a piece of furniture brushes close against a wall. As this happens, the eldest boy says to the eldest girl, "I'm going to punch you in the arm, and you better not cry."

Happily, just before this punch, the girl steps away, and Mother emerges, immaculate, hair curled, make-up heavily done. She winces as she walks, a large black camera in her hand. We line up like bowling pins. "A photo!" she says. "We need a picture before these clothes get ruined."

Father goes to the shed. A picture is taken without her and without him. The younger version of him, her elder son, her eye, through the lens, captures.

We load into the station wagon and go, girlish crinolines rubbing together. Mother gives advice to those outside the church, artificially smiling. "Good thing to plant the hyacinth about this time. Nice day, yes?" Do they pity her?

Some [or all] of them know.

Mother cries through the entire service as though she is enchanted by God or the Good Word. The eldest boy thinks, "Motherfucker is the good word."

"Praise be! Praise be!" Mother intones. She sings loudly in her mezzo-soprano, an angel in chains. In song, her voice attempts to escape the roof. Only I hear, "Hussy," hiss through her teeth as she glances three rows up and two parishioners to the left.

She comes home. Lets us out of the car. Tired, yanks off her shoes and sprawls on the couch then checks on Father and brings him a glass of water and an aspirin. She cuts up chickens for dinner with particular vehemence. She cuts up his shirt, abandoned in the living room, with particular calm. There was a red spot. At first, she cuts out only the spot, but the red bled to pink, and then the hole was so big, right on the collar, that her shears danced to en-ribbon the rest. When she points, Jebediah gathers and carries the pieces out to the garage; they are to be added to the garage rags.

We are on our best behavior, as we always are when she cries all day. In this, fear creates goodness, induces acquiescence. It is always this way. Imagine this photograph repeating (though it never does) with the garments getting more and more worn and the children getting more and more incensed or ill-behaved. One of my sisters will die at age nineteen, of rebellion. For now, Mother adores the word Hussy. It remains forever below her breath like a lingering forbidden sigh.

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Photo 2: Mother and the Vacuum

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See her above, how she holds the handle of the upright so high as if she is holding a prize fish? The vacuum does not touch the ground, except the trailing cord. She stands outside the house. Her lip curls.

Something changes about her. The handle is like a staff. She is mighty. She is also, for the first time, in a long time, relatively happy.

The change comes with the fall wind. With that change, Father stays home more—and then goes to the shed more. It is nothing as drastic as an announcement, may even possibly be the air with which she carries herself, but now, her every word is heard. Quiet, soft, strong—perhaps God-breathed—and Father obeys.

We do not know why.

But only she is visible in the above picture, this one where she stars as queen of the vacuum, though we are watching. She wears a housedress in a lime green color if you cannot tell. She wears pale pink lipstick. She has just finished cutting flowers before the shot. Tulips. For her vases.

Weeks before this day, on the day the tool is purchased, I remember, she walks into the house, addresses Father like she's speaking to a pulled weed left drying on the sofa, and takes his wallet from the table. She pulls bills free, walks to the door, then gives the vacuum man several hundred dollars.

"Work harder," she tells Father afterwards. "I need more than just a vacuum." He does. And, for a while, there are no more red-spots or nights gone. There is only the way a man looks down at his shoes when he has done something so unspeakably wrong, he defends himself from nothing. We do not know what this is.

He works harder and longer until his rage renews, lording over us at nightfall with a swinging, fisted bottle, issuing sharp commands. We linger there like leaves from his tree. She is impervious. But there are days when he is gone, when she is gone, or when they are there but not there, if only because we are out of view. On these days, we four, after school, we roam. We move, unphotographed, in the yard.

The vacuum salesman comes back. Mother no longer needs a vacuum, but she invites him in.

Father works hard. The eldest girl is told to stay outside, as is the eldest boy, to watch the others. The command, "Don't come in," is issued. Standing in the grass, watching windows of nearby houses, the two littlest girls play at biting each other's hands and mouths as their pudgy brother watches. Then a neighbor child comes to play. The short boy Jebediah dislikes him.

This other boy will be charming, no tiger. They could care less about tigers, they say.

The girls are in love. L. O. V. E.

When he has to go to the bathroom, bad, bad, they enchant him to stay with entreaty, but he can't go into our house and doesn't want to go home, so the littlest persuades him to shit behind a tree. She will let him, she says, use her dress to wipe.

The pudgy, short boy wants to watch, but the girls waive him away. "Give him some privacy," they say, though they intend to watch.

"I'm your brother," Jebediah says. "Come on."

The girls disagree about his role. "No, brother. We don't need a brother anymore. We have our prince."

The eldest girl and eldest boy stand behind the house, out of view, under the shade of a tree, listening at Mother's window. There is a moaning. "I would like to see in," the girl says.

"I would, too," the boy agrees.

"You lift me first," the girl says.

A gasp and a low growl. These sounds echo in their ears like sin and pain. The girl puts her tan shoe into her brother's waiting hand and he shoves her upwards, straining to support her as she leans against the house.

Mother is below the man on the bed, pretty head thrown back, hair spilling over a pillow in a circle around her face. The man is kissing Mother's neck. His hands roam Mother's breasts, her beautiful brown nipples.

There is a sheet pulled up to cover their waists, but the shape of the man's ass, even under fabric, is clear. He undulates and thrusts. The boy lets his sister down just as her cheeks start to redden from the view.

The girl tries to lift the boy, but he is steady only for an instant, "Be careful," he hisses down, and they both fall almost soundlessly

to the grass. They roll upon each other. "Did you see anything?" the girl asks.

"Yes," the boy says, lying on top of her where she feels a hardness grow, "but only for a second." He thrusts his hand up under her shirt and pulls down her bra with his dirty fingers, letting his rough touch move over her nipple, circling and pinching on it until she gasps. "These have gotten bigger," he says, meaning her breasts. He lifts her shirt, looks at them, and puts his mouth on one. He suckles and bites until she moves against him.

The [our] father [who art not in...] then returns. In the yard, he finds the neighbor's kid defecating and begins to shout. "Motherfucker! Motherfucker! What are you doing shitting in my yard?"

In the back, the eldest two, flushed, disheveled, stand.

In the bedroom, Mother pushes the man off of her and dresses.

The man dresses, too, for nothing is left in the house when we check later for clues of him. Somehow—we will not know how—she will get him out and away.

It is a fact how only one set of events can be watched with any interest at any time. Everything out of view becomes a story. The eldest girl hears Mother's explanation as the neighbor child's parents are called.

They are effuse in their apology.

"He is charming! He is charming!" the girls protest.

The eldest are called to task for not watching close enough.

The neighbor child's father picks up the boy's feces and they carry it between them to their house, saddled oddly in the pocket of a rag, as they berate him aloud. There was always a garage rag, to be sure. It stank of oil before it reached the pile. They are so mortified, they tell the boy. This will be a story for them later.

"Remember when B_____ was small and he shit in the neighbor's yard?" they will whisper to each other, though not at cocktail parties—for it is not the sort of story one issues in public. I can never again look at them the same, not after what happened with my brother that day--and afterward.

"What the fuck were you doing?" Father asks Mother, later, when it occurs to him that she had a role of some sort.

"Vacuuming," she says, and this is all.

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Photo 3: A Funeral

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This third photo, if you must know, is the last I really remember. It's not like we took many pictures. When we did take them, Mother would develop them, and we would view them, and then she would store them in a box in the shed. This was taken at my Uncle Tom's funeral. Do you see my mother again, in a black suit?

And that's my father! They stand by the hearse.

His hands, in his pockets, tell more of the story than anything. He and she can hardly look at each other, so each stares straight ahead, daring death or anything else to come take them. This photo is shot a week before the shed incident, right before my father begins, again, to stay out late but come home stinking.

After the vacuum salesman leaves, mother invites others nearer to our house. All married. All men. I'll do what I want to as long as he leaves me alone, she can be heard to say among children—but when the fighting recommences, she takes to finding God again, possibly as the plea of the faithless. And perhaps that is the way of

the wicked. Forgive me father, for I have s--... Oh, my child, again. Yes, again.

Fallen angels retain their beauty.

The children are weeds. The children are leather. Toughening. Shoes do not fit.

Pants go high-water.

One night, under the full moon, the eldest boy and the eldest girl experiment beyond what is right. Jebediah, from his bedroom, observes them in the chill and shadows. And then, there is an awakening.

Mother had hers days before the funeral, but we don't hear about it until the day Father comes home from work, tired, ready to slink anywhere, only to discover his woman with a man, one he knows well, as, "Motherfucker!" he shouts, finally paling.

"Get the fuck out of my house."

The man leaves, but Mother is angry. "Why did you stop me?" we hear her shout.

Anymore, she doesn't care what is heard.

In that instant, two little girls play doctor with the neighbor boy who is lain on the lawn like a small white animal under a sheet. They are poking him with a sharp stick and listening to his heart. "You should have been a tiger," Jebediah is saying. "Now, look at you, Charming."

The eldest boy and the eldest girl sway, grind, and pound under the sycamore tree. Close. Finishing. Done.

"I am your husband!" Father shouts.

"But am I your wife?" Mother replies, her voice at equal volume. "I kept your secret," she goes on, "But I can't live this way. Eduardo and his lipstick on the rough-hewn floor of that place... You do what you want!"

"I can't be the laughing-stock," Father says.

"Why not? You made me one," Mother replies. Calm. "Does it matter if they don't know how or with whom?"

Father walks around the shed, past the eldest children seated below a tree pretending to read. He looks toward no one. Inside the shed, he shuts the door.

There is smoke and then a boom. No one is called.

Look at that photo above. See him. This is how he looked, the last time I saw him, before he was ash. I understand that there is only ash before you as I speak of pictures, but that is because on that day, I remember, he lights that shed on fire and locks himself inside.

Photos curl and burn.

He takes his Smith and Wesson before the smoke gets too thick and pulls the barrel up snug under his chin as if it were a fist. One shot takes off the back of his head. So charming. Charming. Prince, what?

And there is a fire: crackling, snapping. Black smoke. Curling. And Mother is screaming and crying and praying for forgiveness. Does she finally hear back from God? We do not know.

Sure, the eldest girl survives. She and the eldest boy give each other up-- eventually. The young girls, for the moment, survive, too. Jebediah become a fat and ineffectual cleric. The mother, our mother, survives by hair of the dog, pickling her liver for years.

We do not move. We are poorer than before. Our dresses and clothes grow bedraggled faster than we blink. It is like time-elapse photography. Regarding photography, that day in the shed, the camera burns as well, hardens and stiffens wherever there was softness or padding. It records no more.

And, later, does it really matter that there are no photos left as I paint their relief in this ash? Isn't it enough that I describe the three I remember as if they exist, as if you could see into my memories to pluck out or embolden those images that remain hardwired in the spaces behind my eyes?

Remember: Energy is neither created nor destroyed. Put this ash on your finger and dab your forehead. Is it Wednesday? If you look close enough, ash can become anything. A mark of Cain. A question mark. A colon. A dash.

Remainders of a burn.

In Pompeii, as the volcano rained soot, fire, and hot air, people turned fossil, pressed cloths to their mouths as they ran, or cried out to the sky that this was the End of the World, that God had abandoned them, yet one hundred miles away all was tranquil and green. My childhood was tranquil and green. Do you believe me? Do you see your childhood, too, in all this ash?

I can, perhaps, and I tell you: It is beautiful--no matter how it was. Look again: Look left. Look right. Look into the whitest, hot spot of the flame. Green, green, green. Here, are some of the most verdant plants you have ever seen, spreading like vines, like weeds, budding, stretching long, flowering. Trust me.

With the right amount of denial and forbearance, about anything, you can feel the same.

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