

THE DECEPTIVE NATURE OF PHOTOGRAPHS

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his is about pictures really. About pictures we have stashed away. The pictures we don't look at because we can't, and the ones we don't look at because we can. This is about pictures and what you learn from them.

This is about my pictures and what I learned.

If you knew my husband he is always after me. After me to clean my room, to be more organized. Learn to put things away, he says. It is a crime in our house to be disorganized, and the forensics of this crime is a trail of shoes that leads from the garage door to my bedroom. I want to please him, I do. He is mine and like everything that belongs to me, I want him to have a pleasant existence. Because of this, I set out to be organized, spaced my shoes out on shelves, and arranged them by purpose. Hung up every piece of clothing I owned. Washed comforters and quilts. And on one particular afternoon, seated myself on the sofa, prepared to organize every photo I have with labels on the boxes, filed according to date and content. I really had no idea what I would find; months, maybe years, had passed since the last time I looked at any of my pictures, at the rag-tag collection of visual memories in Gucci and Franco Sarto boxes. It had been so long I wondered if I would recognize the faces. It had been so long as I first dug through the series of shoe boxes that I wondered if I would recognize myself.

I found photos of myself before I knew my husband, before I knew myself, when I was brown-eyed potential, clutching a spelling bee trophy in my left hand, fingers splayed to reveal what mattered most—a single digit: **1**. Photos of my best friend and me, smiling hard enough that our faces might break, on a trip to the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival, the one year in which the fields twinkled with the yellow glow of daffodils but tulips were not to be had for bribes nor blood.

In the second box, I found photos of my mother with her hair, red and wavy, hiding her 22-year-old face behind my baby grin. I found photos of my aunt and uncle, when he was alive, when he was heavy with Greek food and a life lived, when she was small and nestled under his arm.

I found photos of my husband when he thought I was just a friend, in the days when I feigned interest in softball and he chipped the bone in my leg with a fast pitch—low, inside. I found the photos of our first house, modest and tucked away, photos of our dog, Red, sunk down in a child's play pool, only his green eyes visible above the still glass surface of the water, a red crocodile with sad eyes. And there were photos of the new house, the big house, the house in a better part of town, the house that cha-chinged with money spent, the house with decorator colors and ceramic tile, stuffed with furniture from Copenhagen that cost as much as my degree did. The house where Red didn't live to see. The house filled with two people who lived together for five years and were starting all over again.

I finished two boxes. I moved on to an old album. And then I found it.

I found that photo—the photo set there for an intentional eternity, stuck between the plastic and the yellowing sheet of the album that once held the photo and now, with age and time, let go. It released it just when I thought if I turned the page fast enough, I wouldn't have to see it.

But I didn't turn fast enough and it tumbled out of the album and onto the floor. Even now, twenty years old and faded—it was the most lovely photograph. It was a picture of my stepfather, a picture of me. I was six years old, and he was forty-six. We were at Newport Beach in California. They tell you that it never rains in Southern California, but it was a gray day then, a stormy day and the beach was empty. I was short and he was tall, and I wore a pair of pink pants rolled up to the knees so I could step through the sand and the water. His pants were long and dark, and he was barefoot. Maybe he didn't care if the legs of his trousers got wet. I don't know. Because I didn't know him then, and I don't really know him now either.

The world is a single color in this photo. The sand is silver and flat and stretches to the right and left of us. Our backs are to the camera, facing the wet, silver sea and facing the silver sky which is very bright, the way a gray sky is bright. The sky reaches down and it meets the sea so that they look like one, only one wet gray mass unless you look a little closer and see the faint division. And there we are just feet apart, each taking a step toward the sea, eyes and heads down, looking, I recall, for seashells.

My mother took it. It was her favorite photo of me, of him, of us.

I began to see things in the picture, things that weren't there. My eyes roved to and fro over all of the pictures spread out in the most disorderly mess all around me, in a method without rules, without purpose. In every one of them I began to see things.

In the photos of my husband and me, I did not see him standing near the door with light reflecting off of his glasses. I saw words, mean words, words I'd shouted at him and words he'd swallowed up. I saw the piles of laundry he hated, I saw the rules he made and the schedules affixed to the refrigerator that I despised.

In the photos of my mother and me, I saw the man who never made it into any photos, the man who refused his name on my birth certificate. I saw the words *she's not mine*. I saw our years alone, just us, in an economy apartment with crickets falling from the vents and roaches climbing up through the clogging toilet.

In the pictures of me—I saw the pages of my unread stories and poetry. The things nobody really had any time for. I saw the eyes brown with potential. I saw the 99th percentile on the Iowa test, and I saw disappointment tattooed upon my face when I heard the words *second place*. I saw pictures of us as a makeshift family, the photos of two people, taller, and me, small and centered between them. I saw the three minute limit on my phone calls, and my step-father's gnarled thumb click the start-stop button of his stopwatch, just to be sure.

I saw an infinity of subjects that the eye of the camera did not catch, that the flash washed out, that the film erased, that disappeared in the processing solution, that vanished into the red light of the darkroom. I heard a cacophony of shouts and telephone calls, of screams on a rollercoaster and tears behind a locked bathroom door. I heard the screech of our broken dryer and the grinding of my breaks just before impact. My eyes returned without pause to that same photograph—

Here was this picture, this picture of my stepfather and I, of the silver sand and sea, of the silver sky. It looks lovely and whole and complete. It looks like a man and a child, with peace touching them just the way the air from the sea touches them, or the light grains of sand touches the spaces between toes. It doesn't look like things in the next year or two will turn horribly wrong. It doesn't look like lives will fork and go and go and go in opposite directions. It doesn't look like the hand in his pocket will make holes in closet doors. And it doesn't look like this girl with the rolled pink pants and the blonde hair tangled and messy in a pony tail will grow taller, will grow up, will grow out, but will never be able to let this moment go, never be able to stop looking back and stop saying *what if*.

We are not frozen, but we are captured, in sand and sea, in sweaters and rolled jeans, looking for the abdicated homes of ocean dwellers. We don't move from this spot and we don't grow. My mother loved the photo for that reason. No one has ever yelled in this photo. My stepfather's hand will not move from his pocket, and my feet will never carry me out of there as fast as they can go.

This is the deceptive nature of photographs; this is the hypnosis in the silence of the locked image. We think we love them because nothing has gone wrong here. We think we love them for the minutes frozen, the outcome unsure. We tell ourselves we love them because they make us believe that back then at the shore, everything was alright. But that's not what we love. That's not what binds us to these pictures.

This is about pictures. My pictures. And what I learned from them.

I never organized them. I gathered them up and tossed them in boxes. There are no labels, and they are not arranged by date. But in my mind I have cataloged them in a new way. In this exercise of memory and method, I have seen them with new eyes, eyes which know that it is not the photographs that deceive: we deceive ourselves.

You do not love the lie of the photo. For what you really love is the captured life. The noise you don't hear anymore, and everything you don't see. You love the imperfection of who we are, you love the spent potential because it is yours. The way you felt at the click and the flash of light. Your face breaking from a smile. Your chin wobbling with tears held back. The image not locked, but immortal.

Your hands in pockets, but your heart revealed.

