

Conversations with Memory

*You don't talk to the dead;
you just listen to what they say
over and over, then you try
to piece it together — Elizabeth Bowen*

Photographs of my intersection with self and history are images that have a profound impact on the way I remember my past. These images exist thankfully because of the photographs taken by my father (who made a career out of snapping the lives of others on film), and by photographers whose identities have long been erased from the memory of my family members: my elderly mother or my aunts and other uncles, repositories of my family history, some of whom are now frail, in their eighties, early nineties, or dead. Collected and stored by my mother - a woman who never throws anything away - thousands of pictures stuffed in albums, in envelopes, in dressers, and in boxes are now in my possession. The best I could gather over the past two decades line the walls of my home. These images of family members and friends, some long dead, some still alive, intrigue me. I wonder just who all these people and images I grew up with really were and what they were actually doing when the photographs were taken? Often there are no captions to inform the viewer of anything, so I wondered what had occurred just prior to the click of the shutter or just after. Why are the subjects in the snapshots positioned just so? What directions were the subjects receiving from the photographer? What responses were being directed back at the photographer? Were the subjects told to look just off-camera, put on lipstick, smooth a misplaced hair, or simply just told after a 1-2-3 count to "smile"?

What did the photographs so masterfully composed not show or tell about the people or events captured? Was the attention centered on the picture's real subject? What kind of statement was being made as a result? Was the photographer taking a kind of revenge on a particular subject or offering forgiveness?

During this looking and recalling, I had many discussions with my mother about the treasure trove of photographs she so lovingly and caringly saved along with her idealized and/or perceived memories. Mother's descriptions often suffered from an occasional fuzzy memory exacerbated by poor eyesight. It was then that I would discuss these photographs with aunts and uncles who often affirmed or contradicted Mother's (re)memories of the very same images. Especially problematic for Mother were any inquiries I made regarding her maternal grandmother's (my great-grandmother, Petra Rios) Indigenous heritage, a Mestiza heritage Mom denies or avoids, but more on that later. Within the contradictions misconceptions about memory arise, and although photographs evoke memories those memories do not simply spring out of the images themselves; they generate meaning-making, traces, suggestions of something else—disagreements within family culture.

Moreover, any references to my parent's ultimately unhappy marriage, lasting only eight years and ending in divorce, were also cause for conflicting narratives and, at times, distorting the topography of remembrance. Looking back on realities and ideals shared between us, fueled by countless 8x10 glossies, Mother (without realizing it) ended up assisting me in producing narrative complements or image texts, which allowed me to fill in what the pictures left out. After Mother and I had talked one evening well past midnight she started digging down deep into the bottom of one of her old chest of drawers and she pulled out a cache of love letters written to her by my father from the states of Washington and Alaska where he was stationed during the Korean War. The bulging 9x12 envelope holding the letters was yellow and torn from age. There

must have been well over two hundred letters inside. I hugged her and went home to peruse this gift-that of my father's voice from the past. Beginning in 1950 until the end of 1951, Dad wrote Mother daily if not twice a day. Sadly, Mother's response letters are lost. Thankfully, most of Dad's letters were typed and only a few handwritten on US. Navy stationery. My parents divorced in 1956. However, Dad's ardent passion for Mother and his concern over being separated from her and my impending birth is evident in many of his letters to her. At the time they were very much in love. This was a very different man from the nervously remote father whom I learned to know, beginning in 1962, on annual visits to see him and his second wife in San Francisco.

Photography, and the role of my father as photographer and my mother as subject, plays a large part in this act of looking back. All over my home I have photographs displayed in which Mother is neither the only subject in the photographs, nor is Dad the only photographer of record. I am the subject in many of the photographs, but those are not so important as the images that preceded my coming into being.

A year following Dad's death, on a rainy Tuesday morning as I walked down one of the longest hallways in our home, I suddenly realized that living within these images, nailed upon the wall in black, brown, brass and silver frames, are the journals/diaries of my parents. My father's diaries are his photographs so passionately composed and printed; my mother, who makes no formal record of her life, nonetheless narrated it to me from the photographs she has shared by describing, discussing, recalling, storytelling, and reinventing her past, their past and my own. The memory of this narrative constitutes a journal of sorts.

And as I search through and gaze at my ancestral photographs in my mother's presence, what becomes the punctum for me is the intersection of her voice, her narrative audio presence with my father's visual compositions of the past. Mother fills in where my father cannot. He is

dead, yet his pictures remain. His optical voice resonates in black and white in these photographs, gradations of gray living images from a dead man, but Dad is just as present as Mother is standing near me, as she sifts through the memories of their life before me.

Family Pictures: Shapes Memory

Photo. Circa 1947 by Rader

Portrait of a beautiful woman, my mother, composed and caressed, shot and signed by my father, William Rader. The image shows Mother's waist-length upswept hair. She has it done weekly at Elizabeth Arden's salon in Beverly Hills. After working ten to twelve hour days, sometimes sixty hours a week for her pastry chef father-Henri Balague in his French Pastry shop, Balague, on Vine Street between Santa Monica Boulevard and Fountain Avenue in Hollywood, California - Tuesdays, from 9 o'clock to noon, are strictly for a body massage, a manicure, a pedicure, a facial and elegantly coiffed long hair. After which Henriette Balague, born in Mexico, of a French Basque father and a Spanish, Dutch, and Mexican mother (whose indigenous connections Henriette does not yet admit to) lunches with her girlfriends at the Italian restaurant next door. Mom clasps the photo momentarily. It quivers in her grasp.

"The owners of the restaurant were customers of our shop," Mom says. "Let's see, what was the name? Hmm. La Rue's,¹ I think. We had so many customers then, along with most of the major movie studios. We had all the famous nightclubs too, Mocambo, Trocadero, Ciro's, and Clover Club. That's the place they had the illegal gambling."

"Gambling in Hollywood?"

"They usually got a call to warn them when the police were coming. But God, Linda don't tell anyone. I mean, you know..."

"Who called them?"

"I don't know, they probably paid off the police."

"So which girlfriends did you lunch with?"

"Virginia and Eugenia Gastine." Names I have heard all my life. Names we always pronounce in Spanish (Virrrbeenia, Aayuuhenia). We never anglicize the pronunciation of Mom's girlfriends, Mom's party friends, Mom's one-up-each-other friends. Mom's who-looks-prettier, who's-dating-the-richer-man girlfriends. I will meet them both in brief visits over the first twenty years of my life. Eugenia marries the son of Porfirio Diaz, a dictator who ruled Mexico for forty years until revolutionaries ousted him. Eugenia's marriage, however, does not last. Eugenia will remain in Mexico City and never remarry. She will always be the mother of Porfirio Diaz's grandson who I will meet when I turn nineteen on a visit to Puebla, Mexico, Mom's birthplace. Supposedly a rich bachelor and a playboy, but because of his short stature and slight body shape, he will surprise me. What surprises me more is that he takes no notice of me.

Virginia will marry a Spaniard who will become famous for directing the movies of the well-known Mexican movie actor, Mario Moreno, known as Cantinflas.

"Virginia's husband's name was Salvador,² *pero no me acuerdo de su apellido*," Mother comments. As we have done since the day I learned how to talk, we codeswitch, English to Spanish, Spanish to English, wherever the syntactical structure leads us.

"Virginia's marriage did not last either," Mom recalls. Virginia will remain in Mexico City, receiving large alimony payments. She never remarries. Virginia and Eugenia's brother, Eddie (Gastine) LeBaron (using a less ethnic stage name) marries into the family of the Smith-Corona typewriter company, an heiress, Bernice, worth millions. Eddie is an orchestra leader. He and his sisters were raised in Mexico and schooled in France. Originally they were all born in Lebanon, "but the girls might have been born in France, I can't really recall for sure, but they spoke beautiful French, Spanish and Arabic," adds Mother. She reminds me too that there are a total of six Gastine siblings, but I do not recall any of the others.

Why is this group of friend-siblings important? They are Mom's socialite friends. They are cultured, exotic, multi-lingual, and rich, a reminder of the upper-class elitist life Mom left in Mexico during the revolution. A reminder of what could, might, should, and will ultimately not be.

They love to go night-clubbing together. They will go see *Gentlemen's Agreement* with Gregory Peck, whom Mother finds dashing. They are not so concerned about the fact that the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) has recently begun hearings on Communist influence in Hollywood, laying the groundwork for a blacklist of suspected subversives in the movie industry. They are more concerned with *Gentlemen's Agreement* winning the Oscar for Best Picture. But Mom will be very glad that sugar rationing, imposed during WWII, now ends in the U.S. She will no longer have to purchase it on the black market for her father's pastry shop. Costing thousands of dollars, cash only, considering how much sugar she must buy, it has almost put them out of business.

But never mind, Mom can feel rich again with these women and their social world. She can momentarily forget that upon immigrating to Los Angeles, Mom's elegant, aristocratic, and financially successful family status immediately became working class and poor.

This is the year of *Streetcar Named Desire* on Broadway. Blanche DuBois, (Jessica Tandy) will tell Stanley Kowalski (Marlon Brando), "I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers." Mom does not see this play. She has been to New York, but that was a few years earlier than this portrait of a beautiful woman. Mom does not marry a famous movie director, or a famous historical figure's grandson. She marries my father. Usually broke, ever charming.

On occasion, they will dance and sway to the music of Glenn Miller's Masterpiece-Vol. 2 album-but they much prefer listening to opera: a recording of Robert Merrill's live performance in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* will do instead. And "your father was not a very good dancer, at that," Mother says. The year following this portrait of a beautiful woman, the

multi-millionaire couple, Eddie and Bernice LeBaron, will host my parent's wedding reception at their Hancock Park estate, "the third house from Beverly Boulevard and Rossmore," Mom insists.

"I used to go there to a lot of elegant parties and dinners, before I was married. These were parties given by Bernice's mother, Mrs. Cavanaugh-Smith, who came from New York. In her early years, she would attend operas at the Met, dripping in diamonds. The Cavanaugh's were extremely wealthy, and often appeared in the society columns. They had a lot of money. God, I can't remember everything. I wish I had written this all down." Mom's eyes brighten when she tells me this story. "I only met Mrs. Cavanaugh once at Bernice's. The lady was quite drunk at the time, but elegantly dressed."

Twelve years after this portrait of a beautiful woman, Mom and I will visit Bernice and Eddie's eight-acre Brentwood mansion (they'd sold the Hancock Park home) next door to James Garner. Bernice's swimming pool is Olympic-sized. On the far north end of the estate is a waterfall comprised of large boulders jutting out from a cliff near several acres of woods. A regular Sherwood Forest. I am maid Marion and Robin is waiting for me so I will wander the estate, but not unaccompanied. I could get lost "and the servants will have to find you," says Bernice with a sly look, "it might take a few days." And I believe her. She will take me on a tour, personally. She will explain patiently to an astonished eight year-old girl who is sure this is really Cinderella's castle and grounds, that "you know *Brett Maverick*, the TV series, well that actor James Garner keeps offering to buy that waterfall, but I won't part with it." Bernice and Eddie will remind me of Lucy and Desi Arnaz only Bernice isn't as funny as Lucy. Bernice will never smile showing teeth because that might create lines in her perfectly creamed and smoothed skin.

"Bernice did not like wrinkles," Mom says. Eddie is a doting husband or so Mother claims. Dad will swear that Eddie fooled around with women, as always. "He was a famous bandleader, what do you think he did on tour?" Bernice and Eddie LeBaron's jet set marriage lasts over forty years. Thirty-two years longer than my parents' marriage.

"It was in Eddie's best interest," Mom affirms. Bernice will die leaving Eddie the bulk of her estate. By that time they will have "retired to Rancho Santa Fe in a smaller ranch style home, less distinctive," Mom says, only an-acre-and-a-half "They had to cut back," Mom says, "her trust fund was diminishing over time." These close friends Mother always swears by will rarely be a part of our life as I grow.

Photo. Circa 1947. Handsome Man

Portrait of a young handsome debonaire-looking man, William (Bill) James Rader, taken by a photographer friend named Bruce Cox. Bill is an avid reader and enjoys reading history as most of the book buyers do this year. He does sneak in an occasional novel however. He inhales the recent critic's choice, *The Nuremberg Case* by Robert H. Jackson, and *End of A Berlin Diary* by William Shirer, along with *Dr. Faustus* by Thomas Mann. Another Oklahoman, a faith healer named Oral Roberts, starts to appear on radio and television to gain converts and gives to his Healing Waters Inc. ministry. Although Bill Rader is from Oklahoma originally, he prefers not to be associated with such a man or the term Okie, no matter that he is the grandson of a country doctor, no matter that he rode the rails out to California at sixteen by himself (in 1932) to escape the poverty of his hometown in Loco, Oklahoma, no matter that Bill dropped out of Claussen High School in Oklahoma City, in tenth grade. Bill chooses not to be associated with anything that might infer Dust Bowl, poor, or the derogatory term white trash. Mom hands me the photograph.

"He never really discussed his life in Oklahoma with me. I only knew that he had been in the war and that he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen enter our shop. He walked in to pick up some eclairs, and that was it. I fell in love," says Mom. Curious that considering how much Bill loves reading, he will not take advantage of the GI bill and its broad opportunities for education, housing and business as four million other GI's will. Neither Mom nor Aunt Sharon, my father's sister, knows why. Bill will never buy a house, will never complete his education. Commitment, in its broader form, is a word he will always run away from.

Mom remembers little of Bill's friend, Bruce Cox, other than he worked as a photographer for a newspaper, sometimes. Aunt Sharon clarifies that Bruce worked for the *Los Angeles Times*. Aunt Sharon adds that Bill and Bruce were partners in a photographic studio for a short time on Hollywood Boulevard until Dad was drafted for the Korean conflict. Two years after this portrait of a young handsome debonaire-looking man, Bruce will snap a photo of me lying in a bassinet just hours after my birth. Bruce will wire it to Bill in Alaska on active duty during the Korean War. This will give Bill his first view of his newborn baby girl. Occasionally, a job will come out of Bill's portrait sittings like this one—print ads in magazines, promoting books, promoting clothes. He even does extra work, appearing in the films *Dreyfus* with Paul Mum and *Stella Dallas* with Barbara Stanwyck.

"When he was much younger, your father played the best man in the wedding scene at the end of the film," Mom reminds me; actually I think it is Aunt Sharon who reminds me. But never mind, for Bill will not continue extra work for very long. His movie making days occur prior to marrying Henriette. Bill prefers being the one behind the camera rather than in front of it. He learns the craft of photography as an apprentice at a studio on Wilshire Boulevard near Seventh and Westlake, in downtown Los Angeles, "not far from Otis Parsons," says Mom or is it Aunt Sharon? Probably my aunt, as her recall is far more name specific than Mom's.

Fifty-one years later this same portrait of a young handsome debonaire-looking man in 11x14, framed in white wood, hangs in Mother's den. Although the marriage of the young handsome debonaire-looking man and the beautiful woman will not survive, this photograph, this image does.

Photo. Circa 1948 Perfect Couple

"I could have married the son of the Mexican ambassador to France, you know," Mother says. I've heard this off and on most of my life. "His family owned the biggest newspaper in Mexico. they were extremely wealthy. My god, you could dive into their pool from the glassed-dining room, swim underneath "

the glass walls and end up outside swimming laps." Mom loves to tell me this part. I have heard it hundreds of times. She also reminds me for the thousandth time that "We are not Mexican *Dios mio, miya*, remember don't say you're Mexican. You're French descent, Spanish, Holland Dutch, and-

"So why didn't you marry *him*, Mom?" I ask this question every time she tells this story, interjecting anything to interrupt her denial rant over being a *mexicana*. I know it irritates her.

"I couldn't. I had my father, my mother, my sisters and my brother to take care of. And the business. I could never leave my family! What's the matter with you? What kind of question is that?" The photograph slips out of her hands onto the floor.

I still, on occasion, toy with tormenting her as she tormented me when I was little with her insistent pronouncements: "No *eres Mexicana*, always say your Spanish!" Mom would fly into a rage if, while growing up, I ever announced I was Mexican within earshot. After all, I thought, Mom was born in Mexico, so were all her siblings, so was my grandmother, whom I grew up speaking Spanish with at home. In fact, my abuelita's mother, Petra Rios, was an Indian. "*Era una india*" is how my mother described her grandmother. But when Mother spoke this word, *india*, it was always in low hushed tones, her eyes looking around in case someone might hear. I never guessed exactly just who might hear, but Mother always treated this information as damning. Petra married into an upper class family of Spaniards in Mexico. Her husband was a private secretary to one of the interim presidents of Mexico in the late 1800's. Antonio Morales, my great grandfather, was a stately, elegant man with a handlebar mustache and curly beard. In his old age, Mother said, he resembled Henry Edwards Huntington. When I was eight, we visited the Huntington Library and when we came upon a large photograph of Huntington, Aunt Terri, Mom's sister, pointed and said, "*Ya vez, se ve como Papa Tonio*" Papa Tonio was his nickname. Papa Tonio's family never really accepted Petra although she was beautiful enough at fourteen to catch Antonio's eye. However, Petra was ignored, dismissed and denied by his family and by the same token any association with being indigenous in my family

was also ignored. *La india* meant that my *abuela* was part indigenous, and that means that Mother too, is part indigenous.

Shortly before dementia blew a fog into her brain, *Abuelita* used to teach me words in Nahuatl when I was around nine or ten, words I no longer remember. But at the time—I thought—who cares what I am, I'm just a kid. Mother's paranoia made me care. I slowly stopped speaking Spanish outside of our home while in junior high school because if I did my friends would gawk at me and ask "How come you speak Spanish?" I never knew what the right answer was. If Mother even spoke Spanish to me in front of my girlfriends, I wanted to die. They were Caucasians and so am I, at least half of me is. I would pretend I did not understand a word of Spanish, but my face burned red. I scolded Mother for humiliating me. Speaking Spanish, labeling myself as Mexican separated me from my paternal-Caucasian-teenaged half, and that was the half my thirteen year-old self aligned herself with in the early Sixties. So, I identified myself as Spanish, French, English and Gennan, all of them.

Later, in high school, I would occasionally speak Spanish in front of my friends, but only when it was useful-like asking a busboy for extra water. My Hollywood High school chums thought it was quite the novelty. "How cool, Linda, ask that guy over there to bring us extra napkins, and an extra knife and fork while you're at it, bitchin'."

Then one afternoon, in my first apartment, Denise—who had sat behind me in home room all during high school and was now my roommate—and I were sharing a bong.

"Hey, lady, you're Mexican, not Spanish," she announced inhaling.

"True," I remember exhaling, but hearing myself called Mexican was a shock and the sound of it, I was sure, Mother could hear resonating through space directly to her acutely sharp ears even though she was ten miles away, at work. The mind numbing hash was doing its work and in another long inhale-exhale, Denise said, "It's just your mom trippin', sweetie."

"Yeah, that's it," I agreed, trying not to cough up the last longly

held hit. "Just Mom trippin' and nobody cares." At the time we were more concerned about where our next tab of acid was coming from for the weekend ahead, or which guy we were going out with and how he was going to avoid visiting that trouble spot in Southeast Asia called Vietnam. It was not until graduate school, about thirty years later, that I was able to come to terms with the label Mexican, or even what the word *Chicana* meant. As for Mother, *Chicana* was and is always a pejorative term meaning uneducated, lower class.

And Mother still cannot help herself on this subject of ethnic identity, and so her tapes play on. "Your grandfather was French Basque. He was descended from aristocracy... and remember he used to say, just because a dog is born in a barn—"

"Si Si, does that make him a horse? I know, Mom." I have heard this refrain a million times.

"Well what's wrong with that? When we came here Mexicans were treated like dogs, like dogs," she yells.

"Mom, *callate, hombre*. Will you just stop?" She does, for a moment. I take a breath. This is an old battle with no winners. Mother's Latin temper fluctuates between familial history, fantasy, wishes unfulfilled, and a fighting stance in zero to sixty seconds. I've always gained a sick sort of pleasure at this achievement, seeing how fast I can piss her off. Pushing her buttons used to be my favorite pastime as a kid; now, it's a less frequent one, especially since my twenty-something son and daughter enjoy doing it to me in a similar manner. Sometimes I just can't help myself, but I have learned through the years to read my cue to move on. It's time. Find another photograph, ask another question.

"Mom, is the silk dress you're wearing sitting next to Dad in this photo one you made or bought?"

"Which one, ah... I think I made that one. Yes that's the green one. I made most of my dresses then. We had just gotten married. That was taken in Las Vegas. It's early yet." The wedding ring is prominently displayed on her third finger, left hand balled into a fist on top of Dad's thigh. They "bought it at a five and ten store," she says. I am never sure

if she means Woolworth's or a store called Five and Ten, because sometimes she calls it a five and dime store. Anyway the ring is fake, not real gold, but it works, for the moment. "All together both rings were \$3.50. At least it had a stone in it. So I called it my diamond ring." Dad wears a fake gold band on his third finger, left hand, but it's obscured behind Mother's dress.

"What month of the year is it?" Mom stares at me at a loss. "I'm trying to remember." Years ago I asked my father the same question. He could not tell me either.

"Dad looks like a gangster in that pin striped suit," I remark. His salt and pepper hair is accented by the fabric's white stripes on black.

"We were just beginning to have a lot of good times." I notice that Mom has a full set of straight white teeth in her smile, a toothy smile that costs her almost \$4,000.00 fifty-three years later.

Mom and Dad are in full lustful newlywed mode. They will be doing the rounds at parties, traveling up the California coast to Big Sur and San Francisco to see friends. Running off to Vegas is a quick, cheap way to sanctify such a social life of "good times." Mom's sister, Aunt Terri, suggests, during one of our tea-sipping afternoons, that eloping was a way for Mom to get out of the house, get away from the pastry shop, and escape the demands of her family. If they disagreed with the way she ran the business then damn them all. Yes, running off and getting married to Bill Rader, that handsome and sexy photographer, would show them. Mother's version strains the thread of "damn them," just a tweak. And it is far more colorful.

"One day I walked into the pastry shop and heard my sisters and brother criticizing the way I ran the shop. They claimed I was never around and I was good for nothing. So I just threw the keys on the work table and said 'here are the keys to the shop. Since I am no good for any of you and I don't do anything right, *you non il!*' That night your father and I left for Vegas."

But my father was not convinced so easily. He'd given Mom a wild chase, at first. My Aunt Terri stares at this photograph of the perfect couple. "Oh yes, your mother would park outside his apartment spying

on him for hours while he was with another woman. Imagine, she would try to peek through the curtains, for God's sake! I didn't understand it. How she could take that torture. Then she'd confront him. She wanted *him*." Aunt Terri points repeatedly at Dad's image and shakes her head in disgust. "Your mother could have had anyone, men with money, but no, because she couldn't keep your father under her thumb, she was relentless." These are things Mother has never told me.

The perfect couple sits on the love seat in their Las Vegas hotel room, Mom snuggled against Dad's chest. The "green print" on her dress shows grapes. "Purple ones," she says, "sprouting from vines," abundant, rich, and ready to be picked. "Yes, that is another dress I made," she repeats herself. Something she does often. Something I have inherited. Repetition. If it's worth saying at all, in my family, it bears repeating, again and again.

Her nail polish, ("red," she says), looks worn around the tips of her fingers which rest gently and un-hesitantly on top of Dad's right hand. Her left hand is poised to show off that wedding ring, the official seal of the marital bond. She will never get a real gold ring. "He couldn't afford it. I never went to a jewelry shop. I wore the wedding-night ring until it fell off, maybe two or three years, maybe four. Real wealthy, huh! The truth is we left for Vegas rather quickly," she explains. She drops the photograph accidentally on the floor. As I retrieve it, I notice Dad's left hand, with the hidden wedding band, resting upon Mom's left thigh. Plenty of good times await. But not for long.

I want to identify with perfect parents, perfect lives, perfect family, perfect events. That term. Perfect. In 1947, a good meal can be had for the price of \$1.00. Perfect. In 1947, book buyers show a renewed interest in American history. Perfect. In 1947, a Hershey bar costs a nickel and contains 11/8 ounces of chocolate. Perfect. In 1947, my parents are the perfect couple, "Oh Henriette and Bill are such a perfect couple." In reality, I never heard my parents described that way. I did hear "Oh Henriette and Bill are such a beautiful couple." But I don't recall hearing that from anyone in Dad's family.

"We were never more shocked than when we heard your father and mother were married," says Aunt Sharon. "Yes, when your grandmother got the call she was taken by surprise." Mother was too exotic, too Latin, too overbearing, too bossy. Aunt Sharon does not say this, but like a cartoon drawing, I can read the caption inside the box over her head.

Perfect couple. Aunt Terri might have said it, or her younger sister, Angie, might have said it, or her baby brother, Chuck, might have said it. Maybe it was just Mom who said it, or a friend of hers who knew them both might have said it.

Family Pictures: Shapes Memory More

I have a sense of
these buried lives
striving to come
through me to express
themselves
-Marge Piercy

The photographs of these beautiful people, the perfect couple, compel me. The reality of a marriage gone awry does not. I would much rather reinforce the notion of family in my memory, my family with a perfect set of family roles and hierarchies. I would much rather have that perfect familial look portrayed on the 8x10 glossies that string all along the walls of my home, my heart, my mind, than the familial actuality they serve to contradict. Probably it was me, mostly, who said Mom and Dad looked like such a perfect couple, because looks were something they were both blessed with. Looks and their sexual attraction to each other, Dad told me, overpowered them both. "Just like two magnets," he said. They couldn't keep their hands off each other. Perhaps they should have just lived together and never married. Perhaps they should have tried

harder to stay together.

They should have done a lot of things. But they didn't. So I search the past and this quest sends me through many real versions of that past. Along the way I write and rewrite each one. My parents and their photographic textuality give way to many versions of self-mine and theirs. A past, mine and theirs, is recorded in their photographs and my journals. Image. Text. Text. Image. Imagetexts. This dominates both realities, lived and constructed. I keep trying to learn about myself by staring at their portraits, I keep trying to crawl inside the frame to reshape and resize the canvas that encloses the subjects. I want to suture myself into being one of the subjects in that pre-familial gaze of two lovers about to embark on a rocky journey. I want to stop them, warn them, direct them, prevent them, say: Wait, don't rush, don't love each other so much under the covers, there's more to it than that. There's life on top of the covers and outside the covers. There's life outside the frame and off the canvas of celluloid.

My identity, however, remains invisible, unknown, nowhere, a not-yet. I still hover left and right just out of frame. I wait my turn. Many of my cousins will come before me, but no siblings, and if I could refocus the attention of these photographic subjects, redirect their gaze, my turn might never come at all. But by entering the photographs and stepping through the windows they provide into the essence of things, I construe deeper meanings, create imagetextual space, and subsequently affirm the past's existence and my own.

Photo. Circa 1948

A photograph of Henriette Balague and Bill Rader looks out at me. Mother sits in a chair. Louis XVI. It belonged to my grandmother in Mexico. "But it was imported from France, especially for her," Mom says. She wears a strapless gold evening gown. "Gold lame. I made it," she says. Mom reaches for stronger reading glasses. After putting them on, she uses an oversized magnifying glass. It helps, a little. "A green scarf-I made that too," she reminds me—is draped around her and has fallen,

leaving her shoulders bare. It lies in the crook of each bent arm. One hand rests upon the other, as if she is about to applaud someone or something. Her wedding ring is a band set against another with a stone, a diamond, maybe. Large earrings, gold flowers, adorn the elegance of her swept back chignon. Dad is reflected in an elaborately carved wood and gold accented mirror, which now hangs in my bedroom, behind her. His face is right next to the lens of his camera. A scarf is draped over his neck. He squeezes the shutter button. A barrel spot light hovers above my mother, showering light upon her chest and naked shoulders. Smooth, sleek, unequivocally soft.

This image is Dad's self-portrait of their marriage. A photo of himself shooting a portrait of Mother on this Louis XVI Neoclassical French furniture in their apartment on Hollywood Boulevard. It might appear in *Variety Fair* or *Vogue*, but it doesn't. It looks like something out of a film noir still photo, but it isn't. Dad will tell me that it will become their Christmas card photo. They look so refined. They are still very much in love in this still life moment. This is early in their marriage. They often whisper pet names for each other as intimate eroticisms late into the night in French, Spanish, Italian, and English.

"Your dad's French wasn't very good, really, he wrote it better than he spoke it, but even his writing in French had many mistakes. Same with his Italian," Mom declares, forgetting to mention that her own writing in French is just as flawed. She can't write in Italian at all, but I know better than to remind her of this as I hold the envelope containing the cache of more than two hundred of Dad's love letters Mom has preserved chronologically, written to her dutifully by Bill during the Korean War. I will note later when I read them that, in the heat of the universal language, the language of love, grammatical flaws count for little.

But here in 1948, it's post World War II, after Dad spent the war working with the French Resistance and the Italian Partisans. Post Dad's return from Europe and his tenure in the OSS, forerunner of the CIA, as a reconnaissance photographer with (the movie director) John Ford's unit. Post Dad's Citation for the Bronze Star Metal (which hangs in my home) and reads:

William J. Rader. ..Sp(P)lc, United States Naval Reserve, for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations from 16 July 1944 to 10 November 1944. In the battle for Florence. ..Rader displayed unusual courage in actual combat by photographing the activities of the Secured New Zealand Division. Voluntarily attaching himself to the armored unit spearheading the attack was among a small group of [OSS] photographers who obtained the only photographic coverage of the initial entry into the city of Florence. In a further display of superb daring and devotion to duty he went on several missions far behind enemy lines, contacting resistance groups, placing agents, and while under direct enemy fire photographing the operations. The enthusiasm and interest of. ..Rader were further evidenced when he voluntarily remained with the Intelligence Teams, assisting in training, briefing of agents, contacting resistance groups, and running agents through the lines. ... Rader's achievements and brilliant accomplishments were of immense value to the victory of the United Nations in the Mediterranean.

This is the man who will father me, this heroic, brave, honorable, and dashing man. This is the man I will long to know and as I write these words the grief of not knowing this man of unusual courage still gnaws a hole in my heart. The father I will grow up with will contradict the criteria in this citation for immense value to the victory of the United Nations in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately the criteria for fatherhood and bravery under fire are dissimilar. But I am getting ahead of myself.

This is post Mom's first marriage of convenience to a Frenchman who happened to be a baker. Since she is part French and Mexican, it seemed like a workable match. They, too, spoke in several languages to each other. It was war-time and black market prices for flour and sugar were skyrocketing. Mom's family needed to make more money. They needed a good baker to work in the pastry shop in the wee hours of the morning on Vine Street directly across from the Hollywood Ranch Market which never closed. Marrying a baker seemed like a good idea, but the

marriage only lasted a month.

"He was a pig," says Mom, "liked hanging his laundry from our four-poster bed." She held back all details other than that. She has forgotten his name but then says, "Marcel Boyer, maybe." There are no pictures of him. Odd, I wonder, because Aunt Terri says: "I thought she tore them to shreds," after I ask her about the found divorce papers dated March 9, 1945, affirming that Mom was once called Henriette Boyer.

"He looked like Gene Kelly," Mom says.

I wish I had known these two people on this very day of their captured black and white reality indelibly idealized. I especially wish I had known the man in the citation, known the man who could be so valiant, upstanding, daring even, and yet never presented himself as such, at least not to me. To me Dad was comical, self-deprecating, critical, annoyed, short-tempered, spoiled if not given attention he felt due, arrogant, and strangely distant. He never displayed a devotion to duty to me as a father; in fact he never seemed to know just what to do with me. I was a girl and for Dad women were objects of sexual conquest.

Yet, here inside this potential *Photoplay* moment is the possibility of me, of my Self. Though on neither of my parent's minds, I am a mere two years away from conception, three years away from birth, thirty years away from my beginning as a writer.

1

La Rue's menu hangs in an 11x14 inch frame in our den. By the look of it, pastel green checkerboard with a harlequin figure standing next to *ajole de lis*, the restaurant appears to be French cuisine. I do not undo the framed menu from its weathered wood grain frame. When I ask about the restaurant's proper ethnicity Mom explains that the owner was Italia, but that, yes, the cuisine was French. Twenty-five years later I will study acting in Hollywood at the Lee Strasberg Institute in Hollywood where Jack LaRue, one of the heirs to this restaurant owning family, will be my classmate.

2

I look up Cantinflas's filmography and see Miguel M. Delgado listed as his most consistent director, no mention of anyone named Salvador as director, but I check further and discover Jaime Salvador credited with many of the screenplays for the films of Cantinflas. Jaime or Jimmy Salvador directed scores of other Mexican movies.