

Picture Day

By Patricia Brost

We gathered at our parents' farm home recently for the day we designated as picture day. Our mission was to divide and disperse the hundreds of pictures in our parents' house: studio pictures of ancestors, parents, grandparents, grandchildren, relatives and friends; albums of snapshots, most of them meticulously organized and labeled in Mom's, familiar loopy handwriting, albums of vacation trips along with the corresponding travel brochures and handwritten lists of expenditures. There were seven of us: three brothers, Michael, Kenny, and Mark; two sisters, Barbie and me (Our oldest sister, Carolyn, couldn't make the drive from Texas); and two nieces, Shannon and Caitlin, the daughters of our sister, Judy, who died of cancer eight months after Mom died. We were all glad she didn't go before Mom. We knew Mom shouldn't have to watch her daughter die as we did, that slow, painful and ugly decline that precipitates an untimely death from cancer.

We devised a system of dispersal: oldest to youngest. We would each pick an album or a picture, recording on a spreadsheet who took what so anyone could get a copy made of a specific picture at a later date. As we perused the pictures, stories abounded, emanating from our individual and shared memories. We marveled at Mom and Gilbert's youthful faces and slim figures as they pose in front of the ranch style house that had become our home after their marriage in 1960.

"Is that Mom?" Kenny asked incredulously. "She looks so young! So does Gilbert!"

"I know. I remember our new Sunday School teacher asking if she was my sister," I replied. I felt my eyes filling with tears. Like Emily in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, I had forgotten how young and beautiful they once were.

My first pick was our childhood album, before Mom and Dad's divorce when there were only the first five of us children. I had spent many hours in my youth and early adulthood poring over these pictures. I hadn't seen them for years, the album having been relegated to the bottom of the stack of decades of albums. There was Mom, always in a dress, trim, with her long, dark hair in two braids, pulled up and pinned to the top of her head in the fashion of the forties; the "Helzer eyes," large and luminous. She is wearing red lipstick. I know it is red because that's the color she wore although these pictures were black and white. She is not radiant in this family of four studio photo. Instead she looks tentative, as if the effort of getting us all dressed, coiffed, and corralled had been a strain. Carolyn, at five, stands in back with her hand resting on Dad's shoulder, a confident smile on her face, always in control of the situation. Dad, also confident and smiling, sits beside Mom. My two-year-old face is serious. I don't remember this event, but perhaps it portends later events- unhappy years and a subsequent divorce.

There were first day of school pictures, first Carolyn, then Carolyn and me in our home sewn clothes, Carolyn, blonde and pretty in skirt and blouse, me, pigeon-toed in my ruffled red and white checked pinafore, both of us holding our Big Chief tablets and pencils. I do remember this occasion, Mom taking at least two shots with her ever present Brownie box camera. I also remember her studying dress patterns, shopping for fabric, and late at night, bending over her Pfaff sewing machine, churning out blouses, skirts, dresses, and even bathing suits for herself and her growing brood. There were brother Mike, mischief all over his face, and Judy, the quiet one, blond, angelic, big blue eyes framed by long lashes, the "Helzer eyes" again. Dad stood tall, dark, brown eyed handsome and proud beside his first born son, Michael, who grew up to very much resemble his father, brown eyed and handsome and almost as tall. After three daughters, Dad finally had a son. There is Dad again, this time standing beside his hauling truck

with three-year-old Michael on the running board beside him. The sign on the side of the truck announces Raymond Evans and Son. Then came Kenny, the baby, to whom I sang incessantly, “Moon River,” “Home on the Range” and “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie.” Fortunately, he does not remember this. Kenny appears in the next picture, cradled in the crook of Dad’s arm, and Michael, age five, stands beside Dad. They are posed now in front of a bigger truck, a forerunner of the semi that Dad would later drive from coast to coast. Eventually he drove out of our lives altogether.

My next pick was Mom’s college album. She clowns with her friends, nicknamed Squeakie, Tush, Spankie, the Ten. She is Allie, short for Alice. She is radiant in these photos, long dark hair cascading onto her shoulders, petite in her pleated pants, collegiate looking, the Katherine Hepburn look. She is always smiling, obviously carefree and happy. Her college career was shortened by the war and hard times, but she always spoke of that time with wistful pleasure.

Next, I chose single studio shots: Mom’s high school graduation picture, lovely in spite of her sad eyed comment that she had not had a pretty dress to wear and no one to fix her hair. Her own mother had tragically died after her appendix burst when Mom was only 12-years-old, necessitating her early lessons in motherhood as she cared for her younger brothers and sister. I also chose my stepfather, Gilbert’s, high school graduation picture, showing his honest eyes, slight smile, aquiline nose, registering his French ancestry, and his smooth youthful face. He became my father when I was thirteen, taking in us five rambunctious youngsters, giving us a hard work, honest ethic to live by.

Mark and Barbie, born in ‘61 and ‘62 appear in later albums- Mark, big eyed and long lashed, and Barbie, cherubic, with her big blue eyes and long wavy blond hair-the Helzer eyes now melded with the Boyer eyes.

What to take next? We all have been choosing for the absent Carolyn, pictures of Mom and Dad, pictures of her own children. Shannon and Caitlin have chosen their mother's dance album, showing Judy, lithe and poised. She was a ballroom dance instructor before her life as a wife and mom. Michael has selected the later albums, those of his junior high and high school days, and he and Kenny, Mark and Barbie have all chosen ancestor pictures, the Helzer, Evans, and Boyer grandparents. I then notice, hanging on the living room wall, a picture of the Helzer ancestral home, a huge white Victorian farmhouse, festooned with the fancy work of the 1800's. It has a fairy tale look with its intricate carvings and turned posts. Outside the wrought iron fence that surrounds the house, Great Grandfather Nicholas Helzer and Great Grandmother Mary pose with five of their children, one on a horse. Two horses are hitched to a buggy, and another buggy sits at the ready. The picture was taken before our Grandfather Clifford was born. This house holds many memories for me. The front porch served as a summertime theatre for our youthful role play and the stately weeping willow in the corner of the yard sheltered us from the hot sun as we played house under its branches.

"Is this fair game?" I ask, uncertainly. "I took it off the wall."

"A bold move," Mark says with a smile. Kenny adds, also with a smile. "She's thinking outside the box." I smile too. I now have my ancestors.

These pictures chronicle our lives, and we savor these moments, captured by the camera lens that rejuvenates the memories of our youth, our joys and achievements. We need to hold onto these memories and although we deplore the idea of dividing up the collection that Mother had so carefully compiled, we pack our treasures. But, we all understand that we are merely the custodians of the memories.