

## Pictures of Father

by Greta von Kirchmann

In a quest to learn more about the story of my parents' wedding day, I quickly find the box I am looking for. It is labeled in thick, black permanent marker, in my own handwriting: 'Photos and Sibs Stuff.' "Sibs" was short for my mother's name, Sibylle. Now, "Stuff" seems like too casual a term for this box containing a photographic record of nearly her entire life, including the five years of it that she spent with my father.

With a careful hand, I cut through the shiny brown packing tape with which I sealed shut this large, heavy cardboard box almost four years ago. At the time, my husband and I were preparing to move back home, across the country from California to Virginia. It was eighteen months after Mom politely dropped dead, without warning, ending her seventy-six years on this earth – no extended suffering, nor work for me in caring for her. "When I die, you must remember that I lived a full life," she used to tell me, her only child, and more and more frequently the older she got, adding an emphatic "I am a happy person!" This, in spite of growing up in Hitler's Germany, and leaving her home country because several years after World War II, "There was nothing left to stay for," she'd explain. Her own high spirit felt out of place there, and the newness and opportunity she craved beckoned from elsewhere – England first, then America.

I remember sifting through the thousands of photos I'd inherited from Mom, all in a single evening, choosing which ones to pack for the move, and which ones to throw away (and most of the discards were duplicates anyway). I remember that a light-hearted documentary about American tourism played on the

television as I sifted. I remember having knots in my stomach, and my heart racing periodically, and I hope that looking at the pictures will be little easier this time around.

Lifting back the cardboard flaps reveals the boxes contents: six fat bundles, each one tightly wrapped in a plastic shopping bag and sealed with more packing tape. The idea had been to minimize the volume of our possessions, so the more I could cram into a single box, the more I could keep and bring with me.

I am filled with anticipation about coming across the pictures of my parents' wedding day. I open the first bundle and begin searching for batches of pictures that would seem to be from the correct time period, right about 1970. As I find them, I put them aside in piles on my living room floor, returning the rest to their envelopes. But, after systematically looking through each bundle, I am left without a single picture of the day my parents got married. I realize at this moment that the vague image of such a photo is a fabrication of my own mind, and that I have never, in reality, seen one. I'm thinking that Mom must have collected the wedding photos and gotten rid of them at some point. Maybe after my father had been M.I.A. from our lives for long enough (he left one day when I was six-months old) that she was certain he wasn't coming back. Maybe after we got the call from his family notifying us that he had been killed, when I was eight years old, and he, a mere forty-six. I am thinking that if she did get the wedding photos out of her life entirely, I can hardly hold it against her.

However, I have managed to assemble a small stack of photos in which my father does appear; they are twelve in total. I now know that I have twelve real images of the man fifty-percent

responsible for bringing me into existence. “He was a good person,” Mom would say. “He was kind, and gentle, and soft-spoken.” I lay the pictures out on the carpet so I can see each of them and begin searching them for clues. I have never before seen this many images of my father all at once, and I let out a deep, gasping sigh of relief. Here he is before me, and I begin to cry. Why did you leave? I wish I could have known you. You are my blood, my history, from whence I come. I miss you. God. Curse this. I *miss* you.

And just now I feel it in my body, as though I’ve been socked in the gut with a really big, heavy ball of lead. It leaves a big, dark, gaping void where knowledge of Father should be.

Now, I take a few deep breaths.

After contemplating over the pictures for a few minutes, I’m compelled to divide them into two different groups: the five in which he has a joyful expression, and the seven in which he appears apprehensive or sad. “He was not a particularly happy person,” Mom used to tell me. “He would say ‘I hate being black.’ And I would say, ‘Andre, you must not hate yourself.’” Mom would sometimes complete the story, “His father was never around, and his mother abandoned him on his Auntie’s doorstep one day when he was twelve and had come down with the flu.” Over time I’ve realized – as I suspect he had – that the certain knowledge of our origins was robbed from us when our ancestors were stolen from somewhere in Africa and brought to the Caribbean, and perhaps specifically to Trinidad, where Father was born and raised.

I am staring at my two groups of pictures of him side by side. Who

were you? What? Why? How? As uncomfortable as it is, it is also so good to see these images, to absorb a sense of the totality of the human this man was. In one photo, he is standing on a beach in striped bathing trunks, looking slightly up at the camera, and directly into it. This angle causes his head to look a little large in proportion to his body, and thus he appears a bit like a young child. Caught in a subtle expression, I see a little sadness, and wondering, and I hear the words from his mind, “Do you love me?” He silently asks whomever is taking the photo. I am learning that this is the real question behind so, so much of what we humans say and do between one another.

After some time, I am mentally exhausted, and I leave the pictures to attend to other more practical matters. Not until the next morning do I return to them and my investigation.

With the pictures laid out on the floor in front of me again, I am thinking about these two souls, my parents, who made themselves into a couple. Two humans from origins that could hardly be more different: the minor aristocracy of Germany and the post-slave population of Trinidad in the Caribbean West Indies. Mom would tell me that she and my father weren't *in love with* each other, but that doesn't preclude love *for* one another. I'm thinking that people come to love one another when they arrive at some level of understanding about each other's souls, about their pasts, and about their dreams for the future. When Father would tell Mom he wanted her to bring us from St. Croix, where they met, up to the States, she'd reply, “Andre, the streets up there aren't paved in gold.” Yet here to the continent we did come.

In these present moments I am allowing to surface the thought that the commitment of partnership, of marriage, is about the understanding that we are all – in some way – broken, bruised, emotionally abandoned children wearing the cloak of adulthood. We are trying to feel a completeness. We are – in some places in our beings – the clueless, helpless infants we emerged as from the relative safety of our mother’s womb. We face the boundless chasm of uncertainty each minute of each day, and in partnership we hope we will not have to do that alone, for however many days, months, or years it might last. Being with these pictures, here on the floor of my apartment, I learn again the lesson of mercy.

I love a man, my father, whom I never knew. He was a single, solitary soul who did the best he could do, and that’s actually what we’re all doing, no matter what it looks like at times. And this compassion for our human frailty and our transgressions I hold onto with an iron grip, as a tool for survival. I have, through the years, learned mercy for myself too.

And now, I am compelled to combine the two groups of pictures of Dad back into one. I slip them all together into an envelope and tuck them away where I can easily find them again. Perhaps, next time, I will learn a little more.

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