

The Box Of Tricks

by Benjamin Kensey

I look back on the sweltering July day my father carried the Leica M3 into the house, with a spring in his step, as the beginning of the rest of our lives, our lives without my mother.

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"Hey John, look at this little box of tricks!" he urged, on returning from the junk store, a package under his arm. I joined him in looking over what seemed to be a pretty beat up camera.

"You know, now I'll be able to do something I've always wanted."

This was generally my father's way of lightly admonishing his family for holding him back from all those absorbing activities he would have otherwise enjoyed were it not for the heavy demands of being head of household. He said it when my mother finally let him get the Winnebago, parked rusting to bits outside while he surveyed his new toy with the bright eyes of a schoolboy.

Frances came into the kitchen to watch us, chin resting on forearms as she leaned precariously forward in her chair, low over the table. (2)_____

As my fathers fingers nimbly traced faded contours on the camera body and explored tiny silver handles and knobs along the top, he glanced up at me for the tiniest of instants.

"You know, when I was your age, John, I wanted to be a photo-journalist.

(3)_____ This camera here, well, it was the Cadillac of its day, you know."

Frances perked up at the mention of a camera.

"Can we take pictures of Oscar?"

Oscar, our fat and gassy spaniel, yawned knowingly in the corner.

"I'm entering a photography competition, Fran," he said.

And that's how we discovered that evening that my father was entering the cut and thrust world of competitive pointing and clicking. Yes, it kept him out of the harrying clutches of Amy and Anne, my mother's two sisters who had taken it upon themselves to look after my father and the rest of us, (4) _____, but if it was, he wasn't telling.

The aunts had soon made it a habit to show up at around ten o'clock and thus my father would be out of the house by nine thirty, beloved Leica in tow. There then began a cold war of wills, with me in the middle as informant, whereby my aunts' arrival and my father's daily photographic tours of duty would get earlier and earlier. Within two weeks, Aunt Amy and Aunt Anne were at the house by eight sharp.

Eventually, a ceasefire was agreed all around and my father would spend ten minutes with my mom's sisters and be out of the house by eight fifteen.

Indeed, my father was spending longer and longer outside the house. What he found to photograph around our dull part of Cleveland is anyone's guess, for he never shared the spoils of his hunts with me or Fran. He had a rudimentary darkroom fashioned under the tiny stairway from black curtains and we'd often see his lumpy movements behind there through the summer evenings that year.

One afternoon, with the aunts chatting in the yard, I stole a peek in there but felt immediately a thief and slunk away having only glimpsed a couple of shots of the imposing bank on Peacock Drive that were still hanging up over the developing trays.

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"Why can't we go into the dark?" she would ask.

"Darkroom, Fran. It's called a darkroom."

"I'm going to stop dad coming into my room," she would then argue with faultless logic and I would await her next outburst.

In early September, over dinner, my father announced that he'd selected his entry for the prestigious Cuyahoga County Photographic Fair, due to be held the following weekend.
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"That's very exciting, Richard," she began, "after that, you can get back to looking after the family. It'll be wonderful to have you around again."

He said nothing, but I could see the words had left their intended mark and we finished the meal in near silence.

After the episode over dinner the week before, he hadn't spoken further of his choice of entry and had resisted all my probing questions. On the Saturday morning of the competition, I found my father's room, his study, the improvised darkroom, indeed the whole house, empty. Fran had gone to Warrensville Park with our aunts for the day.

I passed the day walking barefoot across the sun dappled floorboards, often with Oscar meandering lazily behind. I saw that my father had packed up his darkroom, leaving only the long, black drapes in place. Fran had made her own "dark" under where her dolls house stood, which made me smile.

Just after four, my father's Chevy pulled up outside. He let the screen door bang shut, met me in the hallway, smiled a boyish grin and said, "Let's get you kids some tea, what do you say? Franks and mac? I'll do it like your mom did."

It was the first time he'd mentioned my mother in six weeks. I never saw the Leica again and he uttered not a single word about the competition. (7)_____

"Only eight years later, in the Cleveland Public Library, did I discover my father had finished seventh in the 1991 Cuyahoga County Photographic Fair. I never saw my father's photo, or even asked him about it. Only those that finished first, second and third were shown, but none of them could have compared to the image I gained of him that summer: that of a man in the midst of his greatest triumph."

Choose from the following sentences to fill the spaces in the text. There is one extra.

- A. and that may well have been his chief incentive
- B. Fran, moody and teary in those days, found the whole thing bemusing and voiced her frustration daily.
- C. Aunt Anne stopped eating.
- D. Aunt Amy and Aunt Anne came around less and less often as fall approached.
- E. my father wouldn't let us know, as was his way
- F. My little sister could watch the goings on in that house for hours on end and barely murmur a sound.
- G. It was only three days after her funeral.
- H. I guess I just never had the right guidance.