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Writing Sample

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Excerpt from the story "Today's Modern Spirits"

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Excerpt from the story “Today’s Modern Spirits”

The first time the woman later known to the world as micapon17 revealed her rare gift, she was only two years and ten months old. The day is also worthy of note as the very first day she even held a camera. At the time, digital cameras had not come into widespread use, nor for that matter had cell phones, let alone cell phones with built-in cameras. What her parents handed her, just for the fun of it, was a 36-exposure disposable camera. And since it was a film camera, the first time her parents came into contact with their daughter’s frightening talent was exactly one week later, after they picked up the developed film and prints from the photo developer.

It was her father who showed up at the counter to pick them up. He noticed the developer was acting strangely as he rang up the purchase. The man seemed about to say something over and over again, biting his tongue each time.

“Is anything wrong?” her father asked. The developer abruptly stopped the progress of the paper bag that her father was starting to slide toward himself across the counter, pressing down on it with his fingers, but just as soon made an *aaagh* sound and sprang back with his whole body. *Something’s not quite right with this fellow*, her father thought. But these slightly-off people are to be found everywhere. Even people who panic at the thought of having to talk to others and people who act suspiciously have to leave their houses and work somewhere. Her father decided that in these situations the best thing for both parties was not to get drawn in. He picked up the paper bag as though nothing had happened, and swiftly turned around and walked out. It was only after he arrived home that he realized the developer hadn’t been a weirdo after all. Her father understood exactly what the man had wanted to say. And why the man hadn’t quite found a way to put it into words.

Her father himself had no words for it. Nor did her mother. Her mother was holding micapon17. micapon17 stretched out her arms and furiously tried to grab at the photos that her father was holding. Her mother adjusted her grip on micapon17 over and over again to keep her at a distance from the photos, even while she herself couldn’t stop staring at them. micapon17 ended up in tears. “Those Mika’s!” she said as she sobbed convulsively.

“They are *not* Mika’s ... they are *not* Mika’s!” her mother, alarmed, shouted at her.

This was a lie. Of course, these were photos that micapon17 had taken, two of the 36 exposures. The disposable camera was one that the family of three had used when they took a trip to a nature park that was somewhat far from their home; the other 34 exposures had been snapped by either her mother or her father. These photos showed micapon17 in the hat her parents had put on her, micapon17 slurping on a strawberry from her lunch box, micapon17 running across the grass, micapon17 in high spirits on her father’s lap extending her hands skyward, micapon17 running away from the camera and her mother bent over chasing her ... to us, they are without any particular value, the documentation of a family ordinary in every way. And yet, today, it is impossible for us to apprehend the figure of the girl in these 34 exposures—a girl who seems to hold no particular charm other than that of

being a little girl—without being overcome by deep emotions. After all, this is where it all started.

The negatives of the photos taken that day, including the truly important two, have made their way through certain avenues to those of us who would preserve them. As a precaution against the degradations of time, we have digitized them and even have a solid backup system in place. Considering the fact that her father crumpled up those two prints and buried them in the kitchen garbage, it is nothing short of a miracle that over twenty years later the images saw the light of day again. But, of course, people who have so little interest in photography and cameras that they won't even buy a relatively inexpensive compact camera, let alone a single-lens reflex camera, wouldn't have the foresight to find the two offending negatives on the strip, cut them out, and throw them away. The parents of micapon17 placed the 34 prints of their beloved daughter into one of the plain albums that the photo developer gave away for free (the kind that aren't designed for long-term storage, due to the fact that the clear film that constitutes the pocket into which one slides the photos crinkles at the slightest hint of moisture), left the negatives in the paper envelope, and filed them away in an empty candy box with the rest of their negatives. We are grateful for the general ignorance of the parents of micapon17.

Now, as for the two photos in question, the two photos that are the stuff of legend to us. At the age of two years and ten months micapon17 was unable to look through the finder properly; she simply pressed the camera to the middle of her forehead and pressed the shutter with her chubby little fingers. One of the photos is a mid-range shot of her parents' smiling faces taken from a low angle, and the other is of a butterfly she was chasing—captured with the fixed-focus lens of a disposable camera, the butterfly resembles nothing so much as a blob in mid-air. The frame would probably be filled with mostly sky, had it been anyone other than micapon17 who took the photo.

The first photo is a grainy composition, and the parents' faces and torsos are backlit and extremely dark; they don't resemble humans so much as sand sculptures. The figure that isn't an actual human being is behind them. As though it were timed, it fills up the space between the heads of the two parents in which the sky could otherwise have been seen. There, appearing to peep out at us as it sails through the air, is the severed head of a middle-aged man, hemorrhaging from its nostrils, the left eye dangling from its eye socket, magnificently captured looking directly into the camera. The head is front-lit, so it stands out much more clearly than do the figures of the alive-and-well parents.

The other photo, as we have previously stated, is of the sky and a butterfly. The sky fills the frame, and the butterfly, just about at the center of the shot, looks for all the world like a speck of dirt that has landed on the print that one can conceivably just brush away. In the lower-right-hand corner, the top of the straw hat her mother was wearing makes a blurry appearance. In this photo, the not-really-human figure has entered the frame at a diagonal from the upper left-hand corner. This one is a woman with long hair, falling our way from the sky head first. Her entire body is in the shot, and here again the figure is captured looking directly at the camera and in perfect focus. The rich details of the depiction are, in a word, splendid: the detail in her black, tangled hair, the puffy blue circles under her eyes, the fingertips from which the nails have been torn off.

In these two juvenilia, all of the hallmarks of micapon17's artistic style are already in place. To be sure, even today, as an adult, as a mother of two, micapon17 does not

demonstrate what we would call a mastery of the craft of photography in any conventional sense of the term. The subjects of her photos are often blurry in a way that she didn't intend, and she pays scant attention to lighting. Despite this, the other-than-humans, although part of the same shot, are always photographed exquisitely, so distinctly, in fact, that it is as though a completely different shutter speed and a completely different lighting source were used on them alone.

Well. We should stop dancing around the issue and cut to the chase. Everything under the sun needs a name, and that name should be something that people feel is familiar, and that arouses their interest. And so: micapon17 is the single most fascinating, and only, spirit photographer in the world. What she is capturing in her photographs are, without any doubt, spirits. Without any doubt. We have been known to point to the multiple subjects in one of her photos and joke among ourselves that we can't tell which of them is the spirit, but this is just another way of praising the photographic techniques of micapon17.

We don't wish to be misunderstood, so we should state for the record at this point that we are not necessarily acknowledging the existence of spirits. We are not a group that was originally brought together out of a shared love of spirits. What connects us is photography. For those who love photography, the flesh is more than sufficient. Ghosts that may or may not exist aren't exactly proper subjects for photography. Now, dead bodies, on the other hand, are just fine—they reflect light properly. We have no interest in discussing logic or common sense or social propriety. Yes, these days it is considered taboo to indiscriminately photograph dead bodies, but once upon a time photography and death were intimately related. The reason for this is simple. The daguerreotype, a photographic technology invented in the nineteenth century and the first in the world to be put to practical use, unlike the cameras we use today, required a long exposure time. Naturally, corpses, able to remain perfectly motionless for long periods of time, were a perfect fit for the new technology. In fact, in certain parts of America and Europe, when a beloved family member passed away, before burying him they would take a photo of his earthly remains, place the photo in an expensive glass case, and keep it where they could see it.

We can divide this kind of photo into two main groups: photos in which the deceased is photographed alone, and photos in which the deceased is photographed together with the living. If you only see a photo in the former category, you may not even realize that the subject is dead; you may be tempted to chalk up any incongruousness to the creepiness of old photos in general. If you see one of the latter, however, the difference between the dead and the living is patently obvious. To wit, while the dead, no longer breathing or moving, is recorded with great fidelity, in serene harmony with the furniture and personal effects around him, the living, forced to endure the long exposure time, are blurry. Indeed, the living appear as complete outsiders intruding in a realm of perfection. We can get some sense from this of how intimate an association with death photography had at the dawn of the technology.

Nearly two hundred years have passed since then. If we were to study the history of photography, it might become clear when and where around the world the notion of spirit photography originated, where it caught on, and where it really took hold, as well as how it evolved to become what it is today. And we might determine what individuals and society have sought out in spirit photography. That said, we are not specialists; we are nothing more than a gathering of interested parties. We will leave it to future scholars to determine the true significance of both our efforts and the various works of micapon17. For now, we

simply want to explain the rationale our amateur society has used in labeling micapon17's work as "spirit photography."

We do not have the slightest interest in spirits. Each of us has taken tens of thousands of photographs, and no one has ever come rushing back to the group with news of successfully capturing a spirit on film; we hope it continues this way for the foreseeable future. The reason that despite all this we call micapon17 a spirit photographer, and the reason we strive to defend her work, is that her photographs remind us of the relationship that even now people try to forget between photography and the dead. The figures that can be seen in her two earliest works—the man's decapitated head with the eyeball dangling from it, the woman plummeting to earth head first from the stratosphere—were not observed by anyone in the park at the time the photos were taken. An investigation has made this clear. From their appearances and physical circumstances, one could not possibly mistake them for ordinary human beings. In present usage, the word "spirits" would seem to apply to them. To repeat what we stated earlier, however, this is not to imply that we are acknowledging the existence of spirits. We are using the word "spirits" to indicate those subjects that appear in the photographic works of micapon17 that did not exist in the sense of having been visible to us at the time the photo was taken. Furthermore, these "spirits" are always badly physically injured, or have the appearance of being human even while appearing at angles not in accordance with the laws of natural science; they thus correspond to the general image of spirits that circulates in the world. For this reason, we have designated micapon17's work as "spirit photography."

But parsing terminology isn't going to convey a sense of what draws us to micapon17's photography, let alone give you a sense of the charm of her oeuvre. What we regard as most important, what strike us to the quick more than anything else, are the formal similarities between the aforementioned daguerreotype portraits of the dead and micapon17's snapshots. Yes, without knowing anything of the history of photography, micapon17 has been destined to be the inheritor of that most distinctive characteristic of images taken at the dawn of the photographic era: the shakiness of living subjects, and the fixity of the dead. We find this very thrilling indeed.

We would like you to think about the photos of spirits that are the subject of so much speculation these days on television and books on the occult, or on the Internet. Every one of the spirits that have been caught on film, every last one of them, is blurred, yes? Even those things that are dreadful in how clearly they have been photographed, are they ever more distinct than living humans? More to the point, have they ever been laid bare more clearly than they are in the photos micapon17 spends her days taking? Compared to the vividness of life, death is an enigma, beyond our grasp. And yet, once it is captured on film, death becomes the more brightly reflected part, and life nothing more than the long shadow that death casts upon the earth. For us, in thrall to the development of photographic technology, micapon17 is bravely charging directly at the very essence of photography.

It is regretful in the extreme that micapon17's parents did not grasp the value of their daughter's particular genius. After that first incident, photography became anathema to the family. Every time they were handed a photo of their daughter at nursery school, every time they were asked to smile for someone who wanted to take a shot of them as a family, her parents were beside themselves with dread. Obviously, none of these were photos that micapon17 herself had taken; they were nothing more than the interminably boring photographs that amateurs everywhere take. Her parents breathed a sigh of relief

every time they saw there was nothing amiss with the photographs, but until the birth of micapon17's younger brother two years later, a disposable camera didn't cross the threshold of their home.

micapon17 at last got her hands on a camera again after a gap of two years, but her native talents had not diminished in the interval. micapon17 took a photo of her mother nursing her newborn brother, and the lower half of a body of a female spirit, visibly sliced off at the waist, standing motionless next to them. (This negative, too, has come into our keeping through, you will understand, certain connections.) This time, her parents banned cameras from the house once and for all. The documenting of the young micapon17 and her brother was entrusted *in toto* to sources extrafamilial: the grandparents who knew nothing of the situation, various friends in the area who were connected to the family in one way or another, preschool, elementary school.

micapon17's first encounter with cameras beyond the watchful eyes of her parents happened during junior high. The incident happened in the spring of her second year of junior high. Pursuant to her participation in a certain school event, micapon17, together with a group of her friends, purchased a disposable camera with her allowance money and merrily took photos here and there.

When micapon17 went to pick up the developed negatives and prints, she had the same feeling that something was off that her father had felt so long ago. Nevertheless, she paid it no attention and brought the photos home to her room, where she examined them one by one. She even made a list in a notebook as to how many copies she would need of each photo, and to whom she intended to give them. The shocking truth about micapon17 becomes clear from this: For whatever reason, micapon17 is not able to discern those-that-are-not-human when they appear in the photos she herself takes.

The following day, she arrived at school with grand expectations, photos in hand, and gathered her friends around her desk. It isn't hard to imagine what happened next. In an instant, the air was rife with screaming, and the room was full of the curled-up sobbing that is the domain of susceptible junior-high-school girls everywhere, a few of them even vomiting. Even the boys, who swooped in from all directions in sheer delight at this break from their everyday tedium, let up a howl and went wobbly, and among the faculty who came running to the scene, there were those who would subsequently miss work from an onset of depression. And how did micapon17 respond, caught in the midst of this raging pandemonium? We cannot help but here express our profound admiration for her survival instincts. For micapon17 summoned the will to burst into tears, to scream for someone to help her, to collapse out of her chair, and to clutch at the girls closest at hand and sob together with them, just as her classmates and teachers were doing all around her in all directions.

Of everyone crying and screaming, micapon17 alone had no idea what the cause was. She alone cried and screamed without any knowledge of why she was crying and screaming. She had no time to think. She simply gave herself over to the panic that erupted in the moment. But she managed to protect herself as a result of that decision. To add to her good fortune, one teacher gathered up all of the photos together with the negatives and flung the entire wad into the school's incinerator; when members of the panicking throng were later questioned one by one about what the cause of the scene had been, there was no photographic evidence remaining. Moreover, because what was pictured in the photographs

crossed all boundaries of what is commonly thought of as “photos of ghosts” and was simply impossible to believe in general, nearly all of them clammed up, and were able to convey nothing further than a murky, “Something about the photos was just totally scary.” Among those testifying to this effect? micapon17. Now, micapon17 didn’t have any doubts about herself. She had not been afraid for any particular reason. Fear is nothing more than a feeling, and micapon17 believed only that at the time she had felt fear. Everyone else had been scared by the photographs, so micapon17 had also been scared. That was all—nothing less, nothing more. A number of those present gave more concrete statements, but their interrogators did not take their testimony seriously, and those making such claims were considered to have suffered from a more extreme level of panic than the rest. The case was summarily written off as a textbook example of mass hysteria.

We consider it a tragedy that those 36 irreplaceable negatives of photos taken by micapon17 were forever lost to us, for the simple reason that those photos were the very last that micapon17 would ever shoot on conventional film.

After this incident, micapon17 kept her distance from photography. The classmates of micapon17 did the same. Because micapon17 proceeded together with most of her junior-high classmates to the high school designated for their area, the school faced an abrupt influx of delicate boys and girls who despised photographs. This kind of sensitivity circulates rather easily among adolescent girls. The school was swamped by a flash flood of girls with a neurotic loathing of photographs and cameras; it seemed as though sensitivity itself was all the rage. Thanks to this, the high school was spared any disturbances. That said, at that point in history, it came to pass that girls no longer saw any use for film cameras. This, of course, was owing to the explosive spread of those magical machines perfectly designed to allow one to check one’s appearance and be completely satisfied with the composition of the shot before it is taken—the group photo booths that go by the name Print Club. According to our investigations, micapon17 appears to have enjoyed as much as any other high-school girl the pleasures of Print Club, on a good number of occasions. To be precise, she seems to have enjoyed it even more than other girls for having removed herself from contact with ordinary cameras. No particular incident seems to have emerged from these outings, despite the fact that Print Club lends itself to group photos, and that the entire point is to exchange photos among one’s group of friends. From this, it is clear that the Print Club photos of micapon17 were not Spirit Club photos. It beggars belief that micapon17 would never once have been the one to push the button that takes the photo. But, after one pushes the button on a Print Club machine, a countdown starts, and in the end it is the machine itself that presses the shutter button. Perhaps it was owing to that process that Print Club did not meet the necessary conditions for micapon17 photography and the spirits did not emerge.

We certainly do not mean to dismiss the Print Club experiences of micapon17 as unworthy of our attention. On the contrary, this was a crucial turning point in the formation of the artist we know as micapon17.

During the time that micapon17 was in college, cell phones with built-in cameras became widespread, and the price of digital cameras dropped to the point that they became ordinary mass merchandise. micapon17, as before, was not very interested in touching a camera, but occasionally consented to being photographed with her friends.

The real watershed came when her college years came to an end, and she took a job in an area quite distant from where she grew up. Living far from her family and friends, micapon17 started a blog to distract her from her loneliness. At first, it was wall-to-wall text, but then she had the idea of posting photos taken with her cell phone to accompany the text. Her user name was micapon17. Thus was born the great spirit photographer.

[...]

Translated from the Japanese by Kendall Heitzman