

Family Photos

by Kevin McHugh

“Time makes us old. Eternity keeps us young.”
– Meister Eckhart



Photo Courtesy of Culver Pictures

They lived back then, in a world of black and white
that seems to awaken only at the turning of the leaves—
the unfolding of the album to the epiphanies of light,
a mystery rife and ripe as the Second Coming.

The spinal pivot of each thick, thumbed page
transports us all, them new arrayed in trim toques,
brimming felt fedoras or flat caps, frocks, ties and tweeds,
to the brink where we meet again and forever anew
in these illuminated manuscripts of our snapshot lives.

Perhaps it is the illusory stasis of the page that draws us in
from the daily disorder and gives us pause in shared reflection.
Or maybe it is the austerity of the antique prints, preserved
against their fading, the unquenchable gravity of the spectrum,
the presence of all colors—and the absence—in whose bright shadows
we stand now in awe at this bound and swinging door.

Here, the white and black define each other—and all of us,
the pictures taking shape in the complementary interplay.
An intimation of the symmetry of some divine design,
like the polar architecture of the mind, the dawn and the dusk.
So, too, the past and future play off, their open ends on end
like a living hourglass, their vortices intersecting here in the now.

The faces rise again, ever and forever in fragile transfiguration,
in the kinetic interface of the spectral bands of light—
where the silent white makes possible the vocal black,

like lovers on the eternal brink of surrender and possibility.
The invisible, illuminating rainbow and the warm, all-absorbing dark.

The faded forms are therefore neither fixed nor gone;
they live on in us and we in them, but witnessed only
intermittently, in the turning to the light as with a strobe—
a sporadic sequence of one-time introspections.
From the wordless within the spectres stare without,
while we, without, gaze within and see—our ghostly selves.

2 The Grandparents



Photo from Kevin McHugh's private collection

As through a haze, the two emerge, arm in arm.
Properly posed. He, in his best and only suit, stands tall—
starched and pressed like Sunday and his photo—lean
against the sometime, somewhere gray of back-garden green.
He furrows his brow in the day's hard revealing light, but
steadily, through the steely glare of spectacles, he stares out.

This is no casual snapshot but a formal undertaking.
He has cocked his right arm purposefully at the thrust of hip
and propped his right leg, reaching out, to tilt him smaller in to her,
his left arm right-angled across his body like Lincoln.
And, peeking from the shadowed crease of elbow, her white fingers.

She wears her smile and looks through lenses, too,
pale and sheltered from the sun and our spying glass
by the shadowed brim of a lank and looming hat.
She is draped in the style of her day, demurely—
a dress that circles unimagined hips, as loose as she is not,
revealing nothing of her own spare and chiseled frame.

She is well grounded, in black, square-heeled shoes—
no slippers, these, but like her, sure-footed, straight-laced.
And, though in outline, from them two legs stand out—
a scant half-foot of stockinged revelation from ankle top to hem.
But then, on close reflection, we notice most the nose,

the birthmark beak of each succeeding generation.

Still, we want more—to labor through the thatching and scraw,
 as if wisdom were like generations of turf, layered—and so dream
 of digging deep into the welcoming dark for the good stuff that burns bright:
 the lessons that were learned—by him, as a coal-town teacher,
 put out by the Boss for permitting the miners to meet in the school;
 her, from the patient, painful, often silent truths a woman learns
 nursing, dressing and repressing her family of wounds.

Like a thin and polished slice of fossil, this photo fixes all,
 exposing much too little and too much in its one-time light:
 their features as sculpted and as handsome in their angularity
 as the rocky coast of distant Donegal that bred their line
 or the limestone bedrock freed by the peeling of the peat.
 They are framed now, shuttered and caught in a flush,
 transfixed in the flickering, the impressionist flash.

We do not know the what they celebrate or the why—
 no doubt a coming or a going, an anniversary perhaps—
 but we commemorate their existence by our very being
 and so extol their stubborn staying, their fated resurrection
 in us and in our own latter-day reincarnations.

3 The Kid



Photo from Kevin McHugh's
 private collection

From beneath the downturned frown of flat-cap bill,
 he smiles still to us in mystery, a grin about to crack,
 fine line stretching end to curling, upturned end
 as if to call us out for stickball in the timeless streets.
 Perhaps to say hello—to admonish or advise?
 We observe that he cocks his head a bit to one side
 like his son who is not yet but someday yet to be.
 It is a hint of boyish bravado that matches the rake of his cap—
 but not his eyes, so innocent and dark, wide-set, not wide open,
 and balanced above the trademark family nose.

We also note that in the pictures even boys back then
 looked like men—studiously attired. Childhood, a luxury.
 And so they suit-coated and tied them every one and (in this case)

tucked him tan and neat into a cut-down woolen overcoat, already winged at its wide, notched lapels. Little adults. As if by precognition someone had foreseen it all—the grown-up scars, the Great Depression and the War.

And yet, under their hair-oiled, plastered parts, we do spy the little boys, the snickering, giveaway clues: the betrayal of knickers and knee-socks, stripes and argyles, and in the very front row of the one class photo he had saved, the brash protrusion of a pair of high-topped sneakers, from the neat boy whose thin family could afford little else—just in front of him in row two, his own shoes hidden from view.



Photo from
Kevin McHugh's
private collection

That life, arranged like these checkered classmates, would change fast at his father's premature passing. And then his mother would begin to shrink and curve into the woman she would become, too-soon frail, arthritic of body but unbent in mind and rigid in creed. She would ask him on his eighteenth birthday what did he want, being then a man, and he asked for—"A whole chicken to eat, all to myself, and a coat no one else has ever worn."

And his two sons-to-be were not even a glint in schoolboy eyes. Nor could those same dark eyes foresee that, in a breath, he would soon be stitching the bodies of soldiers, boys younger than he, and cobbling them back into battle. But we testify to it all, abbreviated within a two-inch proof, developed and developing within this opened book.

4 The Siren



Photo from Kevin McHugh's
private collection

To her belongs the riddle—alighted upon the stool in Sloppy Joe's Bar in Havana, souvenir photograph torn in two—one ragged half of a picture puzzle, open-ended.

We hazard her age, a young woman then, long dead now, on vacation no doubt—but the novelty gleams in girl’s eyes. Her first time. And away from home and Philadelphia and from her first downtown job at Sears and Roebuck: “An *executive secretary*,” she would recount with emphasis in the liberation years that followed for her too late, her edge blunted by an era when only the wealthy women “went on.” In hindsight self-conscious, she thirsted thereafter for all of the books, places and faces that followed—as if the cocktail in her hand had only whetted her appetites.

But here, perched on the rim of her life, she is a looker, a young Maureen O’Hara, as iridescent as her satin gown. “Where is Hemingway”—they say he haunted this place—“to sweep you off your feet?” But it’s clear to us that she is the one doing the haunting—ingenuously, easily: to her right the sundered lady in the flowered dress, upstaged—and us as we attempt to reckon the reasons; to her left, the cipher easing in, insinuating, Jazz-Aged, spread-legged cock-of-the-walk. The same old story. All dressed up for the man with the camera, just getting by.

We see them through his Kodak eye. The *gringa bonita* in the waist-length fur, open-toed shoes and lipstick that, even at night and in the black and white, simmers. So, like him, we wonder: “Are you sleeping with *him*?” And we hope she said, “No!” We pray she escaped the disrobing eyes and the open mouth saying God knows what. Then in the wings we spy the gent who looks like a Gatsby and want it to be him, though we grasp with our hindsight—that she is destined to marry the doctor, the kid just back from the war. The missing, puzzling piece of the bigger picture—as if she knew, even then, the mystery unfolding in the spectral interplay of photographs and possibility.



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5 The Grandson

Relatively speaking, the picture is young, but in silhouette an anachronism in high school yearbook black and white. So its shadows soften the scoring of the classroom years—the elemental exposure for half his life spent manning

the blackboard walls like his father's father a century before.
 He, too, has posed and, upon photographer's request, donned
 his own flat cap like a memory forgotten but imprinted
 homeward like the migrating swallow's unfailing compass.

He is retired now and by mortality's unmoved default
 or Providential hand, he has inherited the buried treasure,
 the archived pictured puzzles and the patriarchy.
 So he gets his bearings by the book and by their light,
 and in the silent night he takes a fix upon undying stars,
 the family Zodiac, their heavenly bodies charting his course.
 He finds some solace in his own old photo, its womblike
 dark inviting him in like the light and thus he arrays it
 with all the others that he delimits in deepest devotion—
 while they continue in their rising as if at his ascension
 to welcome him home to the end of his beginning
 and the beginning of their ends, ever and forever again.

Someday his daughter and his son will turn the leaves
 and thumb these selfsame pages to see him there
 and they will wonder too and work to piece together
 the thousand splinters of their lives with all who came before.
 And even his picture will seem to them like an artifact
 of the bygone age of books and the irony may strike them
 as it did him—of the treason of the things that survive:
 like his father's green felt fedora he could not discard
 or the penny-loafer shoes that looked on shamelessly
 new after the old man's dying and into which
 he dared at last to step—their being the same size.
 Yet most of all the photographs—that at first sight will seem
 but brittle reminders of the lives that have slipped
 like the invisible spectrum beneath the seeming death,
 the superficial surface of night's black light.

Like them I shall live on and on and in more
 than the mere, prayerful metaphor of old family photos.
 I will rise with them in the prismatic interface of seen and unseen,
 those lovers: the black and white, the darkness and the light.