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Pictures on the wall of my life: photographs to life writing to fiction, an ekphrastic journey. Doctoral thesis, University of Cumbria (awarded by Lancaster University).

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M.A. (California State University, Northridge),  
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Thesis for the degree of Ph.D.  
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‘Pictures on the Wall of My Life’:  
Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey

A thesis submitted for the degree:  
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing  
University of Lancaster

The novel *Pictures on the Wall of My Life* and the accompanying critical commentary are submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I declare that this is my own work and not submitted elsewhere for the award of a higher degree.

Linda Rader Overman

'Pictures on the Wall of My Life': Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction,  
An Ekphrastic Journey

## Abstract

This study investigates the practice of writing a novel with its starting point in family photographs. It consists of the novel itself in latest draft form as well as a theoretical commentary on the writing of it. The particular focus for discussion is how the visual informs the written text and how the visual and verbal together become 'imagetext'.<sup>1</sup>

The novel is narrated in the first person by Lily Adams who learns from the many ancestral portraits in black and white that line the halls of her childhood home that what they embody is not visually representative of a past she has been encouraged to believe in, but rather of one she is now forced to question as the pictures speak to her, in their own voices, of a world re-focused through their own lens.

A critical commentary follows in three chapters: a chapter on 'punctum' discusses motivation and photography as a technical and creative driver for this work, and the following one on 'ekphrasis' makes literary connections between two main drafts, one in third person (see Appendix) and the other (latest) in first person, looking in detail at the way 'ekphrasis' or visual to verbal translation has developed in these two versions. The growth of the idea from earlier beginnings is traced and related to the notion of ekphrasis as it has shaped the later drafts. The concluding chapter on 'ekphrastic realism' draws these strands together by making an attempt to situate my novel within the canonical intersection of ekphrasis and magical realism. These make a contribution to an understanding of the concept of ekphrasis by way of ekphrastic writing, known merely as an obscure literary genre.

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<sup>1</sup> W.J.T Mitchell, 'The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies', In *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1994), p.89

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## Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
List of Images .....	5
Pictures on the Wall of My Life: a novel.....	6
Photographic Interventions in Narrative: a critical commentary.....	206
Introduction.....	207
Chapter One: Punctum is that which pricks, wounds, cuts, bruises Me .....	212
Chapter Two: Ekphrasis—as in painting, so in poetry, so why not photography?.....	240
Chapter Three: Ekphrastic realism .....	292
Conclusion .....	323
Bibliography.....	327
Appendix.....	341

## List of Images

1947 Rader	255
Double exposure	261
A black and white portrait of Dolores	264
Rule of Thirds to Angelita's/Mother's photograph	275
Photographs of my intersection with self and history	325
When Mother died a few years ago	326

**Pictures on the Wall of My Life: a novel**

By Linda Rader Overman

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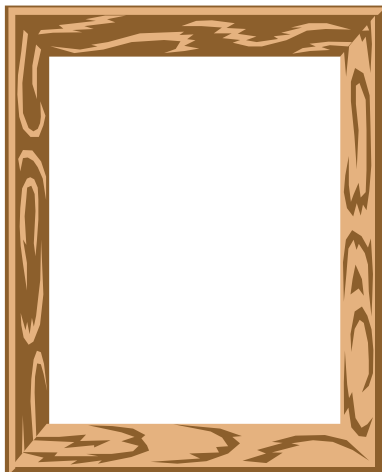
**Granny Flynn**

**Mother of Leonard, mother-in-law of Dolores, grandmother to Lily**



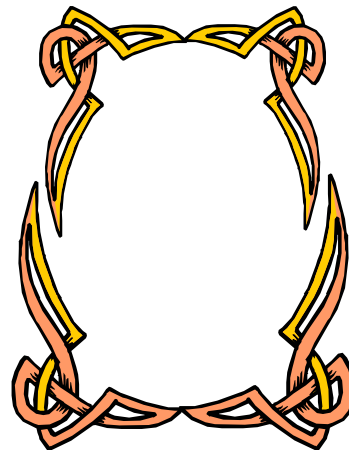
**Lola**

**Mother of Amadita, Grandmother of Angelita, Great Grandmother of Dolores, Great-great Grandmother of Lily**



**Angelita/Angie**

**Granddaughter of Lola, Daughter of Amadita, Aunt of Dolores . . . , great aunt of Lily**



**AMADITA**

**DAUGHTER OF LOLA, MOTHER OF ANGELITA, GRANDMOTHER OF DOLORES, GREAT-GRANDMOTHER OF LILY**



## Table of Contents

Prologue	9
Part One: Death and Deception	11
Part Two: Discovery of Other Voices	53
Part Three: Otherness and Speaking	83
Part Four: Revelation of Past Narratives	119
Part Five: Forgiveness Never Forgets	145
Part Six: They Still Talk To Her	169

## Prologue

2013

Lily Adams had grown up in a house full of women she always said. Some of her earliest memories were listening to conversations of the regular “to don’t-do list” as she played underneath the blue Formica kitchen table laying her dolls upon beds of wrinkled paper napkins spread on the faded white linoleum floor in between the high-heeled feet of the ladies chatting in between sips of coffee and cigarettes.

“Don’t ever trust a man, honey, I mean it.”

“A man has one thing on his mind, lady, and we all know what that is.”

“Their little brains are always in charge of the big brains.”

“Women are the gas, men are the brakes.”

“He’s a man, that’s why.”

Yes, that was all Lily knew: women laughing, crying, screaming and swearing to never trust another man again. Her father, Leonard, had been around, in the early days. He’d even taken some of the first photographs of Lily as a baby since that was his job—shooting photographs of stars and starlets while chasing after them at movie premieres, or hired as an on-set photographer to document those moments before and after a director yelled “Action” and “Cut.” But after one particular argument with Lily’s mother, too soon after, Leonard left, never to return. Lily heard them, late one night, and thought it was the radio at first, but when she heard Daddy say: “Dolores, I will not

and you cannot expect me to. I can't do this anymore."

"What! I trusted you . . . So you just plan to—" Lily heard Dolores say, but since Lily had already pulled the pillow over her head, she never quite caught the end of that sentence and fell asleep forgetting about what Daddy couldn't do anymore. Then Lily noticed a week later that Leonard didn't come home from his photographic studio like he usually did. As the night grew darker, and Lily sat eating her dinner alone with Dolores at the dining table, she suddenly insisted Lily go to bed early. Daddy never came in to say goodnight like he had every night. Even when Lily was sleeping, she knew Daddy had been there because she smelled him—cherry tobacco—and knew he had kissed her on the cheek, because sometimes the smouldering tobacco landed underneath her pillow. Luckily it didn't catch on fire. That next morning, Lily did not smell his pipe tobacco and never did again.

Dolores told Lily after picking her up at the Little Red School House in Hollywood the following day that Daddy had to go on location far away in Mexico, or maybe it was Texas, and she wasn't sure when he would be back. Lily didn't really understand why Daddy would be gone so long for some movie. Leonard had always claimed that he normally preferred accepting jobs closer to home because he didn't like being away from Dolores, but Lily was sure he really missed her the most as she did him.

"Gotta be home to tuck my favourite daughter in," he always assured her drawing on his pipe from the corner of his mouth. Then he'd chuck five year-old Lily under the chin. They had joked this way often because Lily *was* his only child. But somehow reassuring her that indeed if she wasn't, she would be, made her feel special.

A.A.M.

## Part One: Death and Deception

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

The call came late, or perhaps it was just too soon. At four o'clock in the morning the ring felt sharp like a blade skimming my cheek or an ice chip shoved in my mouth when I didn't want it. Why so dark? Damn, forgot to leave the bathroom night light on, shit. I hate waking up in a pitch black apartment. No moon tonight. The ring persisted. Okay, okay. Please let it not be . . .

"Hello," I yawned after picking up the phone, dropping it and then retrieving the stupid receiver from under the bed stand.

"Miss Lily Adams? Uhmm . . . Missus Dolores' breathing very shallow, very irregular, around six respirations per minute," said the night nurse. I hadn't slept much that night so I was not surprised at the call, but still hoped it wouldn't come.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," I said. The nurse said I could wait until another call came to let me know how Mom's dying progressed. She didn't describe it that way, and yet that's the way I heard it. However, I didn't want Mom to die alone. And dying was a process I had had to learn about: denial, anger, bargaining, depression,

acceptance or DABDA as the hospice personnel had prepared me. But none of it had to do with my mother, Dolores, at first, but I don't want to think of that memory just now. She welcomed death, when she remembered what it meant—before Alzheimer's settled a mist of forgetfulness inside her brain.

It had not dissipated as mists generally do, but rather turned from a haze that blurs the vision to a vague obstruction. It prevented any measure of recognition to any who came before the moment-by-moment existence that Mom inhabited. She had been gripped by this blockade of her memories and her ability to speak for over a year now and at what was tragically far too early of an age—that was the only phase Mom knew—a phase between depression and acceptance: one of limbo. Sleeping all day and eating little for months, even that was considered part of a “progression.” I found this word “progression” in relation to dying a little bizarre.

How was it that death and its stages were considered progress? As if along the way the sojourner was sending postcards from some sort of state known as Pending:

*A bit past Denial now, crossing the  
intersection between Anger and Bargaining.  
Wish you were here!*

*Oh look, there's Depression, says the sign...well  
I have to catch a plane for that little hop but  
my flight for Acceptance got delayed. Will let  
you know when I get there.  
Can't wait!*

\*\*\*

Mom was indeed making progress by dictionary definition: “a movement toward a goal or to a further or higher stage”; she was indeed going toward that final step. Things had evolved so quickly that I thought she would have leapt toward death by now. All she used to say, when she could still speak was “Why haven’t I died?” She was not afraid of death, she’d embraced it. It was just one of the many final rungs on the ladder of life. Yet when she entered the nursing home all she did was yell for help. The staff would find her on the floor in front of her wheelchair because she’d inched herself out of it once again. That was when the attendants realized she had to be medicated. She was bothering the other residents and bothering the attendants, which was worse.

But now the medications to calm her down had ceased as they were no longer needed. Mom hadn’t called for “Help!” in months. Earlier, she’d stopped announcing that she wanted to die and stopped insisting that she wanted to “Go Home!” The medications kicked in; a white pill to calm her, a blue pill to soothe her, a green pill to make her sleep. Different doses had to be attempted even if she sat limp all day in her

wheelchair with her head slumped to the side. No matter, at least she was quiet. All those meds to make elderly demented patients shut up for the convenience of others—and ultimately the palliatives had stopped being administered when Mom's Alzheimer's robbed her of not only her memory, but of her voice.

The home had a staff of about a dozen people during the nights; after all it was only a fifty-bed facility. Now, just before an early sunrise, I wanted desperately to hold Mom's hand one last time. It had always been the two of us in those early years after my parents' marriage ended. Now it was just the two of us again—one last time. No need for me to call my daughter . . . no point in waking Alexis just now. She'd be up soon enough.

\*\*\*

I stroked Mom's sunken cheeks. She did not respond at first. She was pallid and her four-foot, ten-inch frame was a mere seventy-five pounds. She appeared like a sleeping child. Only her arthritically boned hands, flaccid skin, and thin greying hair betrayed her mere sixty-one years.

*"M'ija,"* she said. She actually recognized me using the name, daughter, in Spanish, which she'd called me all her life until these last few years.

*"¡Sí mamá!"* I said in shock, but whispered so as not to destroy that unbelievable moment. Mom looked at me through glazed half-opened eyes and said, "The bracelet, *m'ija* . . . Lola in the photog—," then closed her eyes, and exhaled "You're not who you think you are," and was gone. That fast. What did she mean? My God . . . what? Silence. Nothing met my surprise, but silence.

It was not quite dawn and the other patients slept, as did Mom's roommate behind the curtain on the opposite side of the room. This elderly wheelchair-bound diabetic roommate who at first disliked Mom because of her middle-of-the-night

calling out for God to “take me, please take me,” or for someone to “get me out of here,” later became a comfort to me when I visited my mother who no longer recognized me.

Dolores was an apt name for Mom, meaning “sorrows” derived from the Spanish title for the Virgin Mary *María de los Dolores*. Mom was named after her great grandmother who went by the name of Lola, a nickname for Dolores, but I found the idea of sorrows a persistent undercurrent throughout Mom’s life. I never really understood why, not really, but today I felt its profound pang in my heart.

Tears ran down my face. I wanted to run to find that photograph of Lola, Dolores’s great grandmother, my great great-grandmother wearing that bracelet, but that would have to wait. What story did Mom not tell me this time? She had told me so many different versions of our family stories while I was growing up. These contradictions created fissures in my own memory. Our family, our past, Mom’s past, I needed a new map of negotiation to discover the truth. Where was that bracelet? I needed a legend, a direction, someone to guide me. I had to go to them, as much as I didn’t want to, I had to because they would know. They had to. Would they speak to me again? It had been so long ago. But that, too, would have to wait as there was much to be done.





**Granny Flynn**  
**Mother of Leonard, mother-in-law of Dolores, grandmother to Lily**

**1958**

“Granny Flynn, how come?” my little baby doll always asked me in those early days.

“Just to help out yer mama, Dolores, honey darlin’ ,” I would always tell her. I was goin’ to make sure soon after Leonard moved out (I was so mad at him) that Lily didn’t miss him as much, so I moved in. That way I could take care of her the way I should have taken care of him.

My Lily was happy to have me in the house and I was so pleased to spend my last years (turned out to be less, but no matter) with that precious little girl. Poor Dolores just couldn’t get up at 5 o’clock in the mornin’ all the time to be at work by 6 for the breakfast service and get our little baby dressed, fed and ready for school, never

mind that her girlfriend did her that favour puttin' her back to work so soon after Leonard left. Dolores couldn't even sleep through the night much anymore. She was so troubled. She said that her life felt like it had one too many gaps in it, especially after Leonard left. And she didn't want Lily to suffer neither. So I tried my durndest to fill at least one of those gaps that darn boy of mine created. I was determined to make it invisible.

I loved drivin' my baby doll in my big black Buick Roadmaster Riviera, top of the line when it came off the factory floor.

"Granny Flynn, it's like we're ridin' inside the tummy of that big whale, like in Pinocchio," Lily'd giggle with joy when we rode together in that car of mine to her school each day.

"Sugar plum, you're top of the line, just like this car," I said. I wanted to comfort her since my son wasn't around any longer. Well, she was my favourite grandbaby now, a poor substitute for not hearin' whose favourite daughter she was anymore, but I loved her all the same.

Besides that darn breast cancer was getting a hold of me, slowly in the beginnin', but finally, there wasn't much I could do about it. The less said about that the better, nicer to think of the pretty memories.

Before the cancer took me, Lily loved my tellin's. I even talk to her now and then when she stops to say goodbye to my portrait on her way to school. The one of me at 58 years-old, of course. It's my favourite. Makes me look like an elegant lady sittin' on that horsehair filled French Louis XVI divan Dolores' family brought with them from Mexico. Leonard just took out his Leica one Saturday afternoon when I was visitin'. He asked me to sit still as I was holdin' a hanky I had just dabbed my lipstick with. Thank goodness I had just come from the beauty parlour so my hair was properly

coifed and permed. In this black and white photograph it looks soft ‘n silvery like. I have never put an ounce of colour on my head, never, I swear.

But never mind about livin’ in this portrait as there are others hangin’ right across from me in Dolores’ hallway . . . but, where was I? Oh, yes, well . . . I was tellin’ Lily all standin’ there in front me balancin’ her school books on her hip and tuckin’ in her crisp white uniform shirt how I was born in Maysville, Arkansas near its border with Indian Territory, which later became Oklahoma. She loved to hear my tellin’ about swingin’ on our front gate as a child—a swing to the left pushed me into Arkansas, and a swing to the right found me in Indian Territory. . .

“Young lady, *vámanos*, let’s go, now!” I could hear Dolores callin’ for Lily from the front porch.

“Granny Flynn, why does Mom sound so mad all the time?”

“Oh honey, she doesn’t mean it, it’s just that—”

“*Ándale* Lily,” her voice growin’ louder “we have to go, we’re late, I have to get to work!” Oh my, Dolores does have that mad sound in her voice today, goodness.

“Granny Flynn, can you finish the story after I get home from school?” Lily asked as she pulled on her navy V neck sweater, “puhhlease?” She whined as she smoothed back her sable coloured pony tail high on her precious head.

“Of course Lily, oh dear, get goin’, shhhhh, be a good girl.” Lily was only about seven, or was it eight years-old then? . . . anyhow . . . and run out the door she did. And she kept our secrets. I mean, she knew that she couldn’t tell anyone about all of us talkin’ to her from our portrait sittin’ here on this wall—each of us in our proper frames.

“Bye Granny Flynn, I love you,” said Lily. And as she threw us all kisses the rest of us girls, or should I say ladies, said in unison, “I love you more.”

*Lily Adams*

**1989**

The pictures spoke to me. As far back as I could remember . . . and . . . I never said a word about it. Not to anyone. Why would I? It was my secret, and yet so many secrets were to follow. At first they began small, but over time they became bigger, and later, larger than life. As a kid, I always felt those photographs in black and white had one purpose, to be my guardian angels on the promise that I must never reveal our conversations to anyone. Once I almost did and it took some years for them to talk to me again.

Those faces in gradations of grey comforted me. They whispered that there was nothing to fear in the dark when a nightmare sent my five-year-old self running toward my parents' bedroom.

Usually, a dark figure of someone I couldn't make sense of was trying to reach out to me. No perceptible face just what looked to be a large hand attached to an even larger arm pulling me toward him, her, or it? I was never sure. Then I'd scream, but no sound exited my mouth. Awake and shaking in my bed, I would run like hell to the opposite end of the long hall.

I think I must have been six and a half, but maybe more like five and a half, yes, it had to be, because it was in kindergarten where I met my first crush, Jeff, with the blonde hair and white teeth that sparkled like sunlight when he smiled. He kissed me on the cheek one day when we were both hanging upside down on the jungle gym. Luckily none of the teachers saw us because most of the kids were playing hopscotch on the opposite side of the play yard and the adult eyes were distracted when Jeff made his move. That was my first secret. I like keeping secrets. After all, if I told anyone about them, I wouldn't have a collection of secrets to keep.

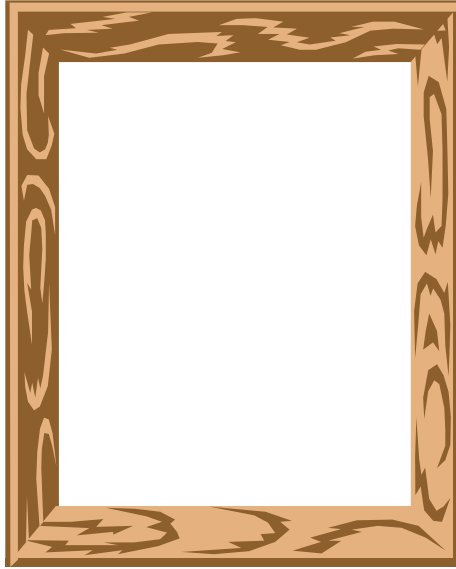
The collection had started about three months before Daddy walked out on Mom; that was when the pictures on the wall started talking to me.

Thinking back on those bad dreams, I finally decided that the someone chasing me in them was not an *it*, not a creature. That was just too terrifying, like in the frightening films Mom wouldn't allow me to see—*Creature from the Black Lagoon* or *Them*. Daddy used to like to see those movies with Mom, but she refused to go any more because she said they were *estúpidas*. So he would retell me a watered-down version of the stupid movie plotlines until she made him stop. I guess my waking up three nights in a row screaming and crawling into their bed was an incentive. Something about that kind of fear terrified and tantalized me and I really missed Daddy's fables of film land terror once he'd left.

It was the sound of running, like footsteps on stairs that got my attention that one night. Our house, an unassuming 1920s revival style bungalow in bad need of a paint job even then, didn't have any steps to speak of, not a second story, anyway. The stepping sounds started slowly, like the noise of Mom's heels on the wood floor in her bedroom when she was walking around trying on different dresses in front of her full length mirror before going out for dinner with Daddy. But then the pace picked up and

the noises accelerated as did a voice:

“Lily . . . Lily . . . Lilyyyyyy.” Someone was calling my name as if from a long ways away. It was spoken so quietly that I thought it was part of one of my dreams, but when I woke up, I could still hear it. Even when I ran to my parent’s bedroom, I must have assumed they would protect me, plus, I had to let them know someone was trying to get me. Yet, the voice flowed in a pleasant sort of way and it had an accent similar to Mom’s. It sort of reminded me of the sweet and yummy molasses that dripped down my finger after I’d poke it into my warm bowl of oatmeal on cold mornings. Mom always said blackstrap molasses was better than honey because of its iron and other curative properties. “It’s even known to cure cancer” she’d announced. Sadly, a short time after moving in, it didn’t cure Granny Flynn’s.



Angelita/Angie  
Granddaughter of Lola, Daughter of Amadita,  
Aunt of Dolores, great aunt of Lily

1955

*“Hola Lily, don’t be afraid, niña,”* I called out ever so gently to Lily that first time. I needed the little one to stop and stare, just for a moment. I needed Lily to know that some comfort could be gained, that something good was happening on this wall of Dolores’s . . . our . . . family photographs. And *gracias a Dios*, stop she did.

Lily’s night terrors were happening too often for such a little bitty girl. I couldn’t bear to hear her crying in the middle of the night. So I waited, and waited, until one night the crying came again and then as she was running down the hall to her mother’s bedroom in such fear—I spoke. The effect, however, was not my first intention. She gaped at me in the moment between one exhale of teary crying and an inhale of the next flood of tears. Her eyes broadened. Her mouth opened wide with dread, nonetheless she heard me.

“Mommy, Mommy, Mommeeee!” Her small, but piercing, voice arrived before

her delicate night-gowned body did, scrambling after her cries straight toward her mother's bedroom interrupting yet another night of Dolores's sleep.

"¿Oye qué pasa, m'ija?" Dolores said as I watched her lift Lily up in her arms. Lily's crying had startled Dolores right out of her room.

"She . . . she said something," Lily mumbled between sobs and pointed in my direction. *Pobrecita*. I did not intend this. I did not intend for Lily to be frightened of me . . . her flesh and blood. So I kept quiet.

"Who said something?" Dolores patted Lily's head tenderly as she whimpered. My Dolores is such a good *mamá*. Then our Lily pointed at my photograph . . . *Dios mío*. It is my favourite, after all, and the only surviving one. I reside in an eleven-by-fourteen black and white print in an old hand made oak frame: A profile of me as a sixteen-year-old girl when my long black hair was rich and thick. The only perceptible makeup I wear appears to be on my lips because they look black also. Truth was I did put some colour on my lips that day away from *mamá's* meddling eyes, but that's not important just now.

"Ay, m'ija, you're having a bad dream, *mi amor*." Dolores comforted her. I could make out Lily assenting with an up and down movement of her precious little head.

"*Tía* Angie can't talk to you now." Dolores assured Lily. That's what she calls me in front of our Lily and everyone else. She is not ready to call me by my right name. Not yet.

"Uhh... huh," Lily insisted, "she did, I heard her." Of course she did, but her mother does not need to know this at this moment.

"Let's go back to bed," Dolores said. That's right, *querida*.

"Mommy, no, she wants to say—"



“Hush, *mi cielo*, you have school in the morning.” Ay, *gracias a Dios* Dolores tucked Lily back into bed and sat with her until she fell silent. Dolores returned and stopped to gaze at one photograph then another. So many of us hanging here had touched her life directly or indirectly in ways that she still was not completely aware of. Dolores’s chestnut shoulder length hair was dishevelled and she couldn’t stop yawning, poor thing. She was still a petite, but a well-endowed beauty just like my *mamá*, Amadita, and several of us women in this family. *Mamá*’s picture hangs slightly above me enabling her to look down on me, no differently than she did in real life.

“It was a dream, just a scary dream,” Dolores said out loud to no one in particular as if she needed to comfort herself that Lily was having just another of her nightmares. I wish I could have assured Dolores differently. I’d heard her talking on the phone with others about Lily and her overactive imagination. My Lily had so much more than that.

Dolores stopped short for a moment in front of my photograph taken over fifty years ago and looked right at me.

“Angie, you were so young, so beautiful, so high-strung, so inflexible.” I had to stifle an impulse to move any part of my face. Fortunately, I was in profile. I know Dolores wondered what Lily could possibly have thought she heard. More important, however, Lily heard me. I may be dead, but I’m not dumb for goodness sake. And I will speak again when the time is right. But for the present I remained motionless. A thousand nights long, that’s how lengthy holding my breath and stopping my eyes from fluttering felt just then. Dolores kept on, then glancing to my left she scrutinised *mi abuela* Lola’s portrait and yawned once more.

“Ay *mi familia*,” Dolores said scratching her head and continued back to her room. “So much drama. What was I thinking, hanging all these photographs together

on the walls like this?”

*De verdad*, I almost said—*Indeed!*—with a snicker, but knew I couldn’t. So I continued frozen in time as all of us in the hall had to . . . that night and many others, *pero no por mucho tiempo* . . . no, not for long.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

Yes, much to be done, but suddenly all I could think about was that slight voice calling out to me when I came home from primary school one afternoon. The school bus stopped around the corner and Mom told me to walk home fast, eat the snack she left me in the fridge, a chicken tamal (my favourite from the restaurant) and chocolate milk. Then I was to start my homework and she'd be home before dinner. She hated leaving me alone, but work always pulled her more than I did. Besides, I loved being alone with them. Not in the early days, but once *tía* Angie had finally spoken to me again as I rushed by and forgot to have the staring contest. Early one morning I was forced to look into her fairy princess face. She reminded me a bit of Snow White. So I listened to the sound of her fresh and captivating voice, like dewdrops sliding off Mom's beloved hydrangeas. It was then I knew *tía* was important to me as were all the other pictures over time.

After all they were/are my family, and family doesn't just hang together, we love each other indisputably through eternity. At least that is what they all told me. Mom never told me that, but the ladies in the frames on the wall did. And from that

connection came power grounded in tradition and birth right, but that took years for me to comprehend. The idea of no interference, no sneaking around, just us in that hallway lined with rustic oak beaded wainscoting delighted me. I used to try to count all the tongue and groove boards for fun, but each time they added up to a different number.

Eventually, I grew taller than those four foot high panels and by then I was counting the many different stories coming out of the mouths of the inhabitants of several different women on the wall.

That one afternoon my *tatarabuela* Lola said only a few words to me, but I still feel their subtle tug as I do my mother's last words.

"*Acuérdate de mí, hija, no me olvides.*" The smallest picture on the wall of the little old lady trapped inside of it standing in front of a staircase wanted me to stop and take notice. At nine or ten years-old, I simply wanted to down my snack.

"Remember me, don't forget me," Lola said from her picture frame. Lola, a short form of the name Dolores, was my maternal great-great grandmother. Mom was named after her, or so she said. And following her death, Mom had left me with a similar charge. That bracelet, remember it. Don't forget it. *It* had been lost for a while...and then Mom called me years earlier out of the blue saying, "I found it, I found it!"

"Mom, what are you talking about?" I had said.

"The bangle from Lola, you know, in the photograph."

"Oh yes, the gold one with the Greek key design carving?" In fact, the entire bracelet had that distinctive engraving all over it mimicking the Meander River heralding back to ancient Greece. Mom said the river had many twists and doubled back upon itself creating a pattern known as meander or that of a Greek fret or Greek key design. This meander decoration, she said supposedly symbolized infinity and the

eternal flow of things.

I used to think of it as nothing more than a dress up play toy which only lasted a short time until the weekend it fell off my wrist rolled down the hall resting in the doorway of Mom's room. I forgot about it as she beckoned me to the kitchen for a breakfast of hot chocolate and a butter croissant with strawberries on the side. The bracelet wasn't damaged, but later, Mom made sure I could never find it again. And if I asked about it, she managed to distract me with suggestions of play dates, or treats, or watching my favourite television shows *Howdy Doody*, *Cartoon Express with Engineer Bill* or *Romper Room*.

"Yes, it belonged to Lola and it had been given to Aunt Angie," she answered. As time went on I knew I must find it and discover why its connection to all these women mattered so much to her in the end.

"Yes, I remember that photograph. Where is it now? Didn't the glass break a long time ago?"

"Yes, dear, it did, I had the glass replaced and left the picture in the hall closet for your father to hang up, of course you probably don't recall, you were quite little then."

Actually, I did recall. There was much I did not want to recall, but this was not the time.

"Mom, where are they now?"

"What, dear?"

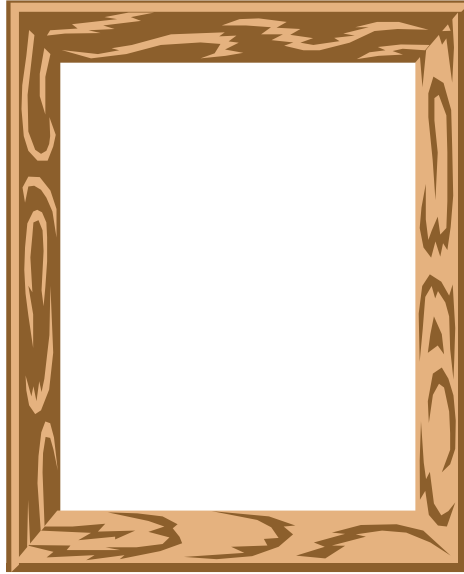
"The photo and the bracelet."

"Oh, don't worry, dear, the photo is here in my den behind some boxes, but the bracelet turned up in that special flat plastic box, you know, with a bunch of family letters I've saved for years."

“Okay, Mom. Shoot, I have to go, Alexis is calling. Can I call you back?”

“Yes, dear.” But I didn’t, at least not that day, and then the subject was forgotten. Whenever my daughter called, I always cut Mom short. I wish she’d cut off some of her many phone calls in the past for me that way. But no matter, I had spent so much time in my childhood with my ancestors and they had contradicted Mom so often that as I grew I only wanted to focus on my life in the now. I avoided going over to Mom’s because I wanted a break from seeing the pictures and all that talking. Actually, we hadn’t spoken for many years . . . not since that one horrid day, the day I lost the love of my life. Alexis’s father, my Scott—he was the very breath that gave me and his baby daughter life. So much talking in the hall about him, about us, but when it mattered most . . . all that talking did nothing to prevent such pain that day. A day I prefer not to recall just now.

I just wanted silence. Well, now I’ve got it, I thought to myself.



*Angelita/Angie*

1959

“*Tla’s* portrait *is* speaking to me” Lily swore that night to her mother. My Lily was just as determined to be heard as all of us. She was not to be brushed aside at the tender age of five, or in the ensuing years. Not my beloved Lily! *Desafortunadamente*, a long time passed before I or any of the others could speak to her again as the little one learned. The privilege of being heard must often evolve over time and maturity. Weeks, months, then some years passed during which Lily would stop and play a staring game with my portrait. Sometimes one minute elapsed, then two, then five minutes—an eternity for a girl of seven, eight, then nine, but I had to keep frozen in profile. I did not, could not, turn to look at her. Once or twice, I know she thought there had been a wisp of movement because a few strands of my hair looked out of place in the photograph, but rules are rules. We pictures can speak and move within the print we inhabit. Sometimes, we can even emit sounds from the settings we occupy in our portraits. And sometimes, not often, we release a slight scent, but only when the occasion or the need calls for it. Yet never, never can we breach the in-between: that

dimension between second and third. This is not allowed and all of us know better than to attempt it. We have spent our lives observing the many rules and boundaries burdening the women of our generations, and so often we just obeyed what was without question. Some of us paid for it too, but not our *preciosa* Lily, no indeed. We all agreed when she was born that such feminine complacency was not going to happen her.

And so, once in a great moment, I have been enraged to such a degree at something *mi mamá*, or *abuela* Lola has said (or not said to Lily), my fury agitated the air around me with such force that it blew their photographs, at different times, off the wall and onto the pale green carpet. My power can crack or shatter the glass that cages them in, nonetheless the edicts of the hall demoted me back to a merely hanging two dimensional likeness. Unable to speak, or move, Lily could not hear me for days, weeks. The laws of the hall are the laws of the hall. We portraits do not ask who, or what made us. We only live within the confines of the length of the passageway's capacity, content when we successfully guide our Lily in the right direction.

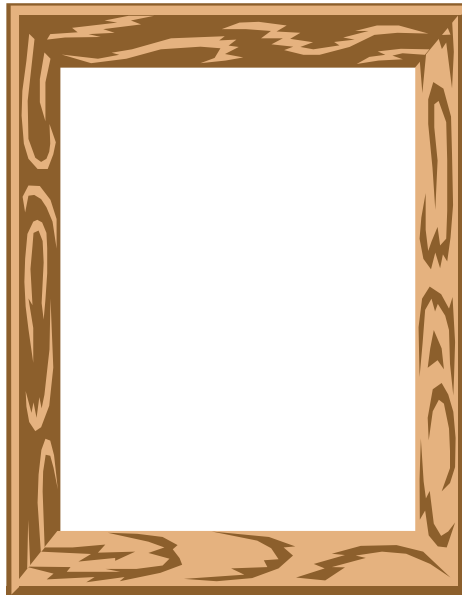


*Lily Adams*

*1989*

I've lost count how long it has been since *tía* Angelita called to me that first time. It frightened me so, but I wanted to hear *tía* call my name again. I wanted to hear what she had to say. Mom usually referred to the many portraits on the wall with interchangeable names, *tía*, *tío*, aunt, uncle, great aunt, great uncle; or she just called them by their first names. It should have been confusing to me, but it wasn't. I understood who all the *tíos*, *tías*, *abuelas*, *bisabuelas*, great and great greats were, but my most-loved picture was that of Aunt Angie, or as she was often lovingly called—Angelita—little angel, a typical diminutive of the word angel in Spanish, something Angelita certainly was not.

The family history maintained that she had died young, right after she'd birthed an adorable baby girl. The two of them had been in heaven for many years, Mom had always said. Angelita had been known for her long and wiry locks of unruly hair, until she'd chopped it off in a revolt against being shut inside her room. At least that is what Mom always claimed about her dead aunt whom she had never met. And Mom said that she had been raised hearing cautionary tales about Angie's comportment not becoming that of a lady of her station. But that's what I loved about her . . . that and her exotic beauty.



*Angelita/Angie*

1958

Many said I was a beauty, yes, but first and foremost I was a rebel. Mamá called it unladylike behaviour; I preferred *ser una rebelde* and my rebellious side could not be suppressed. I'd sneak out just before dawn on my favourite horse, a mustang named *Macho* (because of his oversized cock). His power coursed through my veins while riding at full gallop with my hair flying in the wind all undone. Tucked into my brother Arturo's trousers, my night-time chemise when windblown exposed my bosoms—a scandal for my well-to-do *papá*, Julián, and a terrible upset *para mi abuelita* Lola. This and other out-of-hand infractions aggravated *papá*'s fragile heart condition, in addition to exacerbating *mi mamá* Amadita's regular fainting spells. I was not the first to do so as she, too, was to blame for his heart condition in the early years of their courtship. She was his *amada*, his lady-love, and at four-and-a-half feet in height she became his Amadita, unequivocally.

A few days after Lily rushed by and forgot to have the staring contest I had so grown used to, I finally spoke to her again. I could not let the opportunity slip by any longer.

“¿A dónde vas Lily?” Where are you going, I asked simply. Lily stopped and turned. I am positive she thought it was Dolores, at first. But no, it was me yet in profile, but this time my long hair fluttered as if by someone’s gentle breath. I did not look at Lily directly, but she noticed my darkened lips moving. The photographer had called them luscious. Make no mistake about that. “Tía Angelita, where have you been?” asked Lily.

“Aquí, hija.”

“But . . .but why haven’t you talked to me? I’ve been right here too.”

“You were too frightened, *hija*, and that is not our purpose. And only you can hear us, not your *mamá*. ¿Me entiendes?”

Lily was about to answer, but Dolores was calling her from outside. “Lily, *dónde estás, vámanos, m’ijita*, it’s time for school.” It seems as if that is all Dolores ever says to her. What about telling her how much she loves her? What about—

“Corre, go, go!” I insisted. So Lily did. Better not to invite Dolores to come looking for the child. Yet, as Lily dashed off I’m positive she heard other voices, of other long-dead family members, as I did talking about something Lily didn’t quite understand. Not yet anyway.



Lola  
Mother of Amadita, Grandmother of Angelita, Great Grandmother of  
Dolores, Great-great Grandmother of Lily

1958

“Lily looks so much like her *mamá*, Dolores, and like her *abuela* and *abuelo*—” I announced to the others as Lily hurried off to her mother’s entreaties to *apúrate*, hurry.

“Ay sí, *tienes razón*,” Yes, of course, assented Amadita proudly.

“Shhhh . . . *oye cállate, estúpida, qué dices*” hissed Angelita. “Not yet . . . she’s too young, *pobrecita*.” My granddaughter, Angelita, was always ordering us to *guarder silencio*, keep silent, whenever we admired our Lily and spoke of who she resembled the most . . . .

When I was alive no granddaughter would be allowed to speak to an *abuela* in such a manner. Well now that I think on it, Angelita probably would have. *M’ija* Amadita never would have dared. But now I am just a 2x3 inch peeling portrait on the wall placed next to my daughter and granddaughter. Ay ay ay. It wasn’t anyone’s

fault, though—my peeling, not my placement. I liked it this way because my white hair, wrinkled face, plain skirt, and simple blouse that I am wearing are all hidden. Honestly, that is not so important for the time being.

It was true that our Lily was too young to know the truth just yet. However, she was also too young to play with that bracelet. Her mother should never have allowed her to do so. I always said so, privately, calmly, but no one ever liked hearing what I had to say. And, of course, the day after Lily was running down the hallway and dropped the gold bangle bearing its enigmatic Greek fret design. After that, Dolores hid it so well that I feared she might forget where. And of course I was correct, but this story can't be rushed.

As I was saying . . . oh yes, dear me, the bracelet, my bracelet—created for me when I was with child, my only child, Amadita. The Greek key design had always intrigued me. I had seen it before as an illustration in a book left on the counter at our neighbourhood jeweller's. Luis, the proprietor, had been consulting the text for ideas in crafting his exquisite gold pieces for his many customers. Some of them were my girlfriends, so very hopeful that one of his elegant gold rings would end up being pledged to them by one of their beaux, but only after receiving parental permission, of course. Some of them were sadly disappointed, but never mind.

Luis patiently explained to me that day how the double spiral pattern was connected to a complicated labyrinth in ancient Crete where a Minotaur lived killing and eating all who dared enter. In an ancient sculptured bowl, as shown in the book, the dead Minotaur is being dragged out of his deadly labyrinth by the victorious Theseus. Hence many a maze is still embedded with the pattern of a Greek key.

I had stopped in so Luis could replace a stone that had fallen out of my earring earlier on my walk. I wanted him to do it quickly as no one knew I had even left the

hacienda. At this point, I knew Amadita was growing within me. I was already some four months gone, when my governess announced that since I was carrying high we might as well accept that the baby was a she. I was not at all convinced at first. My husband Antonio, disapproved of such outings, but I couldn't help myself. Besides he need not know about it. When I put my earrings on that morning, I felt a strong desire to walk, to move, to set my life in some kind of new motion as my body was already doing. Luis's superb bracelet was to become my talisman for this new direction.

That day I put on my woollen coat and silk taffeta hat with silk crape trim and hastened out my balcony door, down the iron steps and stepped, carefully, into the chill morning air. The sun rising in the sky slowly warmed my delicate condition, but I never felt delicate even though I had to act like it.

As a virgin and a naive young woman I came to my marriage with a proper dowry, which automatically became my husband's property, but this bracelet ingrained with its spirals and turns only my daughter and hopefully her daughter would inherit. Their property would be more than just physical assets; the bracelet would possess the power of each generation's life-giving force and the energy of their stories to go with it. The bracelet would be their birth right and each of my progeny would add another twist to the meander of its life. But above all it would symbolize the unbroken bonds of eternal love. And above all Antonio would have nothing to say about it.

*Mi querida* granddaughter, Angelita, tested the strength of these bonds more than any of us. She was the wild child insurrectionist in contrast to our family's overly restrictive rules. These were initiated by her Mexican General grandfather and my illustrious husband Antonio Escárraga. His father had married a Zacapoaxtla Indian beauty who died giving birth to him. No one ever referred to her *mestizo* heritage as his father had remarried within a year to a Spaniard who'd brought a large dowry with her

when she'd landed in Veracruz. Antonio became a local hero at twenty, who supported Benito Juarez and had distinguished himself in the Battle of Puebla in 1862.

On the fifth of May, Antonio held the passages to Puebla against the French invaders from two stone-walled forts with a force of *indios* only using machetes who fought fiercely for their land. With help from bad weather and poor strategizing by French commanders, Antonio repelled them. He was heard rallying his men forward: "*Nuestros enemigos han querido arrebatarnos nuestro país, pero somos los primeros hijos de México!*" Our enemies have come to take this country away from us, but we are the first sons of Mexico! And the battle ended shortly after it started, with many dead on both sides and Antonio and his men the victors. He allowed his doctors to treat the wounded without discriminating as to French or Mexican, and so the people of Puebla followed suit by inviting the defeated French who wished to remain to do so and live with them in peace.

Antonio's wealth was based on riches in gold and silver mines that he had inherited, collected, and hoarded through means that were never really explained even to me. Rumours of treachery, bribery, and murder had been whispered, but never proven as those who tried had a curious habit of *desapareciendo*. And when they did disappear, no one tried to look for them. I pretended not to notice, what else could I do? *Que Dios me perdone*.

Nonetheless, *mi* Antonio was later honoured for his vicious bravery as a fighter and commander and the fact that he always had enough money and food to provide for his men. No matter that his loyalty blew in whatever direction was convenient; whether government soldiers or rebels, it merely depended upon which side was in charge on any given month of mayhem. His orders were neither questioned by them, and certainly not me. When Antonio proposed marriage to me, I was a wraith of a virgin

with my dowry of 4,000 acres. I could say nothing but *sí* as everyone else said yes to him in those days, but, of course, power always has a price.

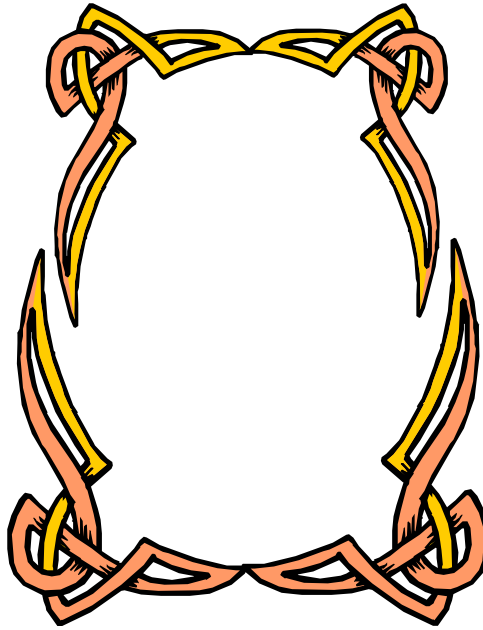
On our wedding night, Antonio ordered me to put on his trousers. Imagine me lying there naked, and shivering from a bad bout of nerves under the bridal bed covers. I had been instructed by my governess to await my groom's every command. I was flushed red with shock and shame at such a request. Throwing off my modesty momentarily, I protested, "*Pero no son míos!*" But they are not mine!

"*Y no lo olvides, mujer.*" And don't you forget it, woman, he demanded.

And when Antonio insisted his firstborn would be a boy because only the second could be a girl, I was already budding and broadening and concurred with my usual *sí*, pretending never to question my ability to deliver anything but.

It was not until decades later, when his little angel of a granddaughter Angelita could utter her first words, and she was put into *papá Toño's* arms, as he was called by our family then, during a visit one day, that he heard the word—*No!* The shock from it caused his heart to stop.





AMADITA  
DAUGHTER OF LOLA, MOTHER OF ANGELITA,  
GRANDMOTHER OF DOLORES, GREAT-GRANDMOTHER OF LILY

1960

“It means devotion, continuation of life and symbolizes the bonds of love between the wearer and the giver. I should know it was given to me by *mi mamá* and when Angelita was about to become a mother, I gave it to her and then—” I was about to tell Lily a bit more about the bracelet one night, but Dolores came home from work so Lily had to dash back quickly into her room to avoid a scolding for not completing her homework before bed time.

“Why . . . she was just a little baby, *apenas ayer*,” I marvelled to Angelita whose portrait hung below mine. I was just thinking that yesterday was really just yesterday rather than almost a decade earlier. But I never did like seeing life in its raw reality, only in its formalities and obligations. Life could be a far better well-ordered garden that way as *mi mamá* Lola contended. I was thinking aloud, I suppose, and then *m’ija* Angelita started in on me again.

“Shhhh . . . *oye cállate, estúpida, qué dices*” whispered Angelita. “Not yet . . .

she's too young, pobrecita."

"*No me hables así*, I am still your mother, so don't take that tone with—"

"*¡A callarse!*" Angelita shushed. As in real life, I had tried to control my little wayward angel. Nevertheless, I couldn't then and I couldn't now because if Angelita was angry enough she would, somehow, *que Dios la perdone*, vibrate my portrait right off the wall, but it usually took something profound for this event to repeat.

*M'ija* had the same ability in life to create upset for her father, *Julían*, as she did for the rest of us. My boy Arturo always protected her, they protected each other. Such a stab at my heart they both were with their *mal comportamiento*. So much naughtiness, honestly it's a wonder I didn't die of a stroke sooner. Glad that I didn't, but following Arturo's death I thought I would and that is when his sister's rage took over. I must be careful now because if she hears even my whisperings about these particular memories my portrait will—no Angelita NO!

*¡Ay caramba! hija* enough. I hate being on the floor face down. It's dark. Very dark. I hate seeing nothing but dark. It feels too much like being in a tomb.

"What happened Amadita? Why is your portrait always on the floor?" Lily discovered me on the floor later in the day. "Always" was only about three, four or five times. Why do young girls exaggerate so? Anyway, what was I supposed to say? Once in a great while one other framed photograph would be found on the floor. At least Lily picked me up swiftly and rehung me with the help of a chair. . . except for that broken portrait of *mamá* Lola. Her glass pane actually broke once.

Dolores picked it up and put Lola out of sight for a time. She did pick me up another time, said nothing, and just hung me back on the hook. No other portrait in the hall had been able to replicate such an outrage. None of the other portraits had Angelita's temper, which even death could not still.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

When I was a child, I knew there was something extraordinary about Angelita and the baby story that wasn't right. But Mom always insisted that Angelita and her baby had simply died in childbirth, which as she reminded me was not so uncommon in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I grew to love that special photograph of Angelita taken at sixteen, about two years before her death. I loved the way the shadows of light outlining Angelita's profile duplicated the outline from the top of her head to just under her obviously rouged lips in repeats of two and three silhouettes on the white wall behind her.

Her hair brandished its waves and fully engulfed the sides of her neck and shoulders. There was just a hint of a silver cross positioned below the hollow at the base of her throat.

"Actually, it was gold *m'ijita*"—Angelita later informed me one afternoon—"he gave it to me. He took such a long time to take this picture, I kept giggling, but he told me I mustn't . . ." I constantly wondered who *he* was, but Angelita would just clam up and pretend that she could not speak any longer. Then I would have to wait a week or longer before Angelita continued, and it was from this photograph that Angelita always

promised my ten-year-old-traipsing-off-to-grammar-school self with my book bag slung over my shoulder—that when I was older and more mature, she, Angelita, would explain about the baby and who *he* was. Until that time she would continually call from the wall.

“*Lily, ¿a dónde vas?*” Where are you going?

“*A la escuela, tía,*” off to school, I’d answer.

“*¡Ay niña, pórtate bien!*” Behave yourself, child—something I sensed Angelita had readily avoided.

This family of photographs of my dead relatives brought comfort, questions, consolation, and sometimes confusion, because I was bound to silence about my special bond with all of them. If I ever again divulged any of the tales shared, the voices might again stop. Testing this notion further was something I promised them and myself I would never try. And I couldn’t have borne missing out on those occasional afternoons or late evenings when Granny Flynn held me captive with tales of her childhood. You see, before she died we never got around to the fine details as she’d promised. And knowing Granny Flynn, well, dying was not going to interrupt her.



## Granny Flynn

1961

“Oh why can’t y’all just talk in English like some of the rest of us? If you ladies are goin’ to keep hangin’ around this wall, how do you expect our little one to know what you are sayin’?” Lily often had to remind me that she did, in fact, understand Spanish, though later, as an adult, Lily admitted she had forgotten much of it.

And I understood, I did, when the ladies’ excitement or quick to comment interaction in the language they were born speakin’ was not uncommon. But, and I do mean but, I was so sick of Spanish words sounding like flying insults between Amadita and Angelita and, on occasion Lola. I swear I thought they were all going to kill each other, but that was a silly notion. I mean they were already dead, but at times Angelita sounded positively homicidal and then the spat would end abruptly with Amadita’s or even Lola’s portrait airborne. Luckily, our little girl would be off at school durin’ these more lively deliberations, and that’s puttin’ it mildly.

“Granny Flynn! You promised,” she whined one day. But I had indeed promised another tellin’ earlier that week.

“As promised my little sweetie.” Lily settled herself in front of me while peelin’ her afterschool banana snack. She was such a good girl. Her mama had taken to leavin’ her in the house alone for a short time when she had to dash back to the restaurant for a quick errand. Lily never shied from asking me to pause just long enough to run back to the kitchen to properly dispense with her trash. My little girl was a gem.

“Back?” I inquired. She nodded and sat down on the short pile rug, leanin’ her back against the wainscotin’. “All right then . . . well . . . when I was just a small thang one of the Indians on a nearby reservation, Charlie Squirrel, crippled from birth and walkin on his knees, would bring me pets to play with: a pair of crows who loved to swoop into the house and eat everythin’ in the kitchen, much to the unhappiness of my mother. And there was Ricky the flying squirrel, but my absolute favourite was a raccoon named Tommy. We’d run and he always outran me. I didn’t mind because Tommy would roll over on his back and let me scratch his belly, and how many raccoons do you know that let you do that?”

My photograph couldn’t tolerate any dampness whatsoever; none of the pictures on the wall could. So I tried like the dickens never to let tears flow, but my voice usually choked up recountin’ my girlhood with Charlie Squirrel and the array of pets he’d brought for me. We portraits of the hall had to be careful as we never wanted to start crackin’ or flakin’.

“And then where would we be?” wondered a distant boy cousin in a frame down the hallway aloud, whose connection to the family Dolores had glossed over and Lily had had a hard time rememberin’.

“Oh yes, Dick, a cousin of your grandfather’s sister’s son’s wife,” I reminded Lily who remained confused as ever about Dick who hardly said much. One day Dick appeared to smile, and then another he looked angry. In the black and white picture, Lily guessed he was about fourteen, with penetratin’ saucer-shaped eyes that seemed to follow her every move.

“Oh honey, those eyes of his were big, a potent amber, and green,” I said, but Lily still couldn’t figure him out. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, Dick was never one for much talkin’, so don’t take much notice of him for now.” So Lily didn’t, this time at least.

“My father, William Stanley, was a Vanderbilt University-trained country doctor who took me at ten years-old along on his horse and buggy while he tended to the many patients neighbourin’ far and wide. He delivered many of the babies in the county. My job was to hold a lantern high to help find our way in the dark in the days before streetlights.

“I learned early in life that in order not to let women die of childbed fever, my father scrubbed himself clean and made sure that all birthin’ beds and anythin’ around them were as spotless and germ-free as possible, but he never taught me just where babies came from, only how they arrived. This lapse in my education would brang many surprises in my adult life (*cough, cough*). Sorry, have a frog in my throat . . . ahem, ahem.”

“Granny Flynn,” Lily once asked when I mentioned the frog, “what does that mean?”

“Now, honey,” I told her “that will have to wait till after Angelita across the hall has had her say, she’s been promisin’ you longer than I have.” Dolores had arranged us across the hall from each other based on our paternal or maternal relations. It was easier

that way she used to say.

“But Granny Flynn,” Lily went on “I’m almost ten and three quarters now, pretty *please?*” Then Lily heard her mother callin’ from the back door “*M’ija*, help me with the groceries. Where are you? ” Suddenly, there was a loud crashin’ sound, like a number of cans fallin’ onto the floor. “Damn it!” Dolores was mad, again. I wish she wouldn’t talk like that. I know the poor dear carries many burdens and honestly, Lily, should not have been one of them, but, in fact, she was.

“You go now sweetie,” I told her. “Granny will be waitin’ right here.” I did not want Lily to be scolded again. Dolores found fault with her far too often. I know she didn’t mean it; poor dear has had much to deal with in her life. And I must keep things as calm as I can in this portal that we all inhabit. I gave my word to Amadita when Dolores first hung me here. And watchin’ her relate to her daughter and then her mother I had no choice.

“Granny Flynn, I wish you had waited to die till I was a big girl,” Lily said.

“I know my little love but the cancer decided things differently.” Lily started to say something but promptly sneezed instead.

“I love you Granny,” Lily whispered, skippin’ down the hall and wipin’ her nose with her uniform skirt, “I love you Angelita, Amadita, Lola.” Assurances of their love echoed back, but my baby girl and I had our special farewell.

“I love you more,” we always said in unison.



*Lily Adams*

*1989*

Why so many voices of contradiction? Mom always insisted her stories were the absolute truth, those about her grandmother, when she was young and those about and her great-great grandmother, aunts, and even a few uncles when the men could get a word in edgewise.

Mom's version of these tales always made the ladies in the pictures laugh and snicker. Dolores, the pictures said, was only repeating a reality that some of them had told her in person when she was a child, but that reality wasn't necessarily the truth of the real past. It was only after death that they themselves comprehended the complete truth about their own lives and that of each other's. And now—over a half a century later—I wanted the truth.

As a girl I was so confused about what to believe, although later I discovered more than I wanted to. But one thing I always knew—my talks in the hallway in the hours before Mom came home from work, or in the early hours of the morning when I couldn't sleep or when I sought advice beyond what Mom was capable of discussing, I treasured.

Oddly, unlike the moms of my school friends, Mom was sometimes quite capable of being perfectly open with me. When I was a teenager, she had always insisted that I keep myself pure for the right man. He should be an older man, she contended, preferably one who could love, cherish, and teach me “things” that only maturity and wisdom could provide. This resulted after sharing some tales my friends told in high school about losing their virginity. To her credit, I could always ask Mom questions other girls couldn’t ask their mothers. Mom was never angry about queries presented involving sex or the personal hygiene issues that hormonal girls encounter in adolescence. She always did her best to answer any of my inquiries even when the topics were considered awkward. It was unconventional, I think, that she could be so forthcoming in that way—but not so where family history was concerned.

So one night when Mom came in to kiss me good night, I asked her about a particular act the girls at school had snickered over earlier that day in the school bathroom while sharing a cigarette during nutrition break. The bell had rung in the middle of a conversation between Debbie, fifteen, and Denise, fifteen and-a-half. I knew them only slightly, but enjoyed sharing an occasional puff of a Marlboro with them—one of a few of the list of secrets I added to my collection. I only caught a portion of the conversation as they all rushed to next period and different classes in different buildings on campus, but it had to do with the words “blow” and “did you swallow or not?” A coughing fit from my last quick inhale prevented me from hearing anything else about this weird question. Reminding me to keep myself “untainted” was one of the ways Mom had responded. She was not shocked by my curiosity, only patient and insistent.

“*M’ija*, these young ladies, are certainly far from ready for such behaviour. These are things not to be pursued until much later in a woman’s married life. As a

couple grows more intimate . . . well . . . that's part of a marvellous discovery they embark upon together. Bodies, my dear, and the wonders they provide, when a couple is deeply in love and share a bed, bring a unique geography of joy and ecstasy." I was about to ask her if she and my father had attempted such "geography," but thought better of it.

"So just concern yourself with waiting for that right gentleman, who will instruct you properly," said Mom as she turned out the light and closed the bedroom door.

It was not until my freshman year in college that I would discover such geography. His name was Scott.

...

In 1968 I was finishing up a dry cheese melt sandwich and weak iced tea from the cafeteria on the centre lawn of small community college campus. My grades had prevented me from going straight to a four-year. I didn't mind. I hadn't a clue what I wanted from life, not yet at least. It was a Thursday afternoon, one of those stunning spring Los Angeles days: high seventies, smashing blue sky, a caressing light wind, the air scintillating with promise. A protest was gathering in the quad—SDS (Students for a Democratic Society)—sponsored. Probably more draft card-burning about to start. Some of my friends, especially the ones who were still furious about the abolishment of student deferments, had already left to join. Not me.

Mostly they all just smoked grass out in the open and shouted "Make Love, Not War!" Someone in the crowd had a loud speaker and he was about to stand on a stoop to begin the anti-Vietnam rhetoric that permeated the air and the voices of the many students against the war. I was too, but mostly because many of my friends from high school had been drafted and I never heard from them again.

So I stood up and it happened. He hit me so hard that my hair fell from its knot. He didn't mean to, of course. But he had been sprinting away from the protest so fast that he had not expected this skinny brunette with upswept hair piled casually on her head looking like a just-got-out-of-bed-refreshed girl gathering herself and her things, to pop up so quickly and be his most interesting speed bump of the day (or so he later admitted).

"My God, are you okay?" he stammered while picking up the sheets of paper scattered about under our feet.

"No, yes, well, not really, why didn't you—?"

"Look where I was going?" he prompted as he handed back my class notes taken earlier that day in English 101. He was reading some of my comments and seemed about to say how much he too had liked *Johnny Got His Gun* when I snatched everything out of his hands.

"Of course, look where you were going; I mean . . ." I said hastily stuffing them back into my twisted three-ring binder thinking this guy was a complete idiot for bending it, not to mention, squashing my grilled cheese.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to—" he later said when he took a good look at me in Twiggy-like beanpole hip huggers, curls of raven hair, falling over my tight midriff shirt. What filled that out wasn't a pair of twigs for sure! And yet he stared straight into my eyes as he begged further forgiveness. "Please let me make it up to you. Can I buy you a coffee and we can have a—"

"It's, fine, it's fine, really, it is." I just wanted to get out of there.

"Are you sure you're all right? Oh gosh I'm a—"

"I'm late, okay, I've got to go." I saw this flash of amber in deep blue eyes of a foot-taller-than-I-was guy with straw blonde hair that trailed almost down to his

shoulders. As we stared at each other for a silent moment, I felt something pierce me—penetrating and fervid pulling me toward him.

“Wait,” he called out to me as I pushed past him. “What’s your name?”

“Does it matter? Really, I’ve got to run.” But I couldn’t, almost as if some invisible heat coming off his tanned and muscular body refused to release me.

“It might,” he said, reaching out to hand me one last sheet of notes that had blown up against his leg. He noticed my name in the upper right corner with the date of the class underneath. “Lily Adams, April 18, hmm. . . I think I like it.”

“Uhhh, yeah, me too . . . nice, I mean, thanks, I mean . . . bye” I rattled, trying to break free of his gaze. I felt so silly, so hyper-aware of myself and this stranger who seemed uncannily familiar. The space we occupied had too much oxygen, suddenly. I felt giddy.

“It will,” he said.

“What will?” I asked, trying not to look back at those eyes one last time.

“You will matter, most definitely,” he said. “By the way, my name is Scott.” *Jerk*, is more likely, I thought, finally breaking free. Dizziness be damned, a puff or two off a Marlboro would take care of that. I stopped to light one and wound my hair back up in its convenient knot held together by a number two pencil. Shit, I was already 15 minutes late to Geography class.

What was it Mom had said once about bodies and geography? I couldn’t help thinking. I laughed to myself slipping into my seat in the back of the classroom and quietly arranged college-lined notepaper on the desk while flicking the ash off of my cigarette. What will Granny Flynn say, I wondered, or Angelita, or Lola, for that matter, taking my last drag of the day.

## Part Two: Discovery of Other Voices



Lola

1968

“*Pues, mi cielo*, how much do you like him, really?” I had to ask our Lily. She stood before me still a young skinny thing, but a woman nevertheless. What happened to my little one? Where did all those years go? Like her *mamá*, Lily, too, is exotic, with thick dark hair worn long past her shoulders, significant bosoms, a tiny waist, and long sculptural legs. Her skin emanates that same bronze, tan electricity that her mother’s did, and her mother’s mother did in her own youth.

“I don’t . . . not at all,” asserted Lily twisting her hair in a knot as she often did, then letting it fall down and repeating the motion. She was lying, and I knew it. She

wore that rosy flush on her face that, on occasion, presented itself when she was fibbing to us, or to herself; curiously, Dolores never took much note of it. That poor girl had so much on her mind, always, but enough said about her at the moment. This is about our lovely Lily. So as I was saying to her.

“Ay *m’ija*, it looks like you do.” I kept after her, because, of course, there was something about this young man. When she talked about him that flush continued down her neck, reaching across her entire décolletage. ¡Ay ay!

“Well. He is awfully handsome, but so are a lot of the guys on campus, *tatarabuela* Lola.” I still can’t get over how grown up she is.

“Honey darlin’,” interjected Granny Flynn quite abruptly “he sounds almost as handsome as your grandpa Paul was that day we finally kissed and—.”

“*Pero* this one is not just another, *cómo se dice*, ‘guy’, is he Lily?” I’ve never had a problem interrupting Granny Flynn when I felt a point needed to be driven home. Lily and I could hear a “Well, I *never!*” being drowned out by my question, a comment really.

“Is he Lily, *querida*”?

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

No he wasn't, I couldn't lie about that. And later after much coaxing from Scott and many evenings spent talking and smoking his precisely rolled joints in his lava-lamp lit studio apartment, I fell completely. I tried to pretend that feeling of being possessed by . . . by . . . I didn't know what to call it. I just knew that kissing Scott was like drowning in a pool of exquisitely amorous perfume. He didn't use cologne. His body made its own brand of essence of Scott: lemon, lime and cucumbers—fresh, clean and with a zest all his own. Scott said he fell too as he had that first day of bodies colliding on that grassy patch of campus casual life.

Later, another collision would have a more deleterious effect. While walking point, one foggy morning, in the jungles of Vietnam, he stumbled or so the report said. Unfortunately, the Saint Christopher medal that I sent him to ward against evil was powerless that day, unlike the country itself. Stumbling seemed so harmless and yet when a stumble activates a trip wire, a pin is usually pulled. Subsequently, a grenade wired to a nearby tree stump tends to explode. The report said it more officiously but I somehow knew that it happened the way I pictured it.



I couldn't help wondering if Scott felt the precision of the fragments tear him to shreds before he heard the explosion. I couldn't help wondering if the last thing he thought he heard was our baby crying, because she did, all day, the day he was killed and often afterwards for a long time, but I'll never know. And this is what kills me the most.

Lance Corporal Scott Madison had held his daughter in wonderment for a short but loving time, and he'd been awed by the snapshot he carried. I still have his last letter to me dated a week before he died:

*Vietnam 1969 - in this stinking dump of a country . . .  
Lily baby,  
That photo of our little droplet, as you always call her, of a five month-old baby girl embraced by her hot babe of a mother, with her smouldering looks, even in this picture, still knocks me unsteady, just as our first meeting did . . .*

The blast had knocked the Christopher medal from his body, the report said. I wear it now, even to bed. Just thinking about him this way makes me wish I could forget . . .

As time passed, whenever I was anxious about my golden locked baby Alexis running too far in front of me on a street, or Alexis not paying attention when I warned my toddler not to touch a hot stove, or when Alexis ignored me while I explained the consequences to a rebellious teenager who liked staying out past midnight, or when I warned my young nubile of a girl that a particular young man might break her heart, Scott's silver medallion's warmth created a blush over my neck and chest. The same rosiness Scott evoked in me whenever he held me close during those early days of our dating.

I was always amazed how it was that Lola knew that Scott would be the one, before I did. Yet Lola never hinted that there would be any termination to our union. After all, little Alexis—named after Scott's mother—held such promise for our future. And I never expected the ladies in the hall to be fortune tellers, for it soon became real

to me that they were actually guardians of the family's collective consciousness of a (mis)remembered past so that I, and later, even Alexis could know the future in all its sunlit brilliance. But, sadly, war makes heroes and Scott would always be a hero for Alexis and me, or at least that is how I chose to remember the day the Casualty Notification Officer arrived and the words that streamed out of his mouth, "killed in action . . . help to coordinate the arrival of your husband's remains." Just then, I didn't want to think about that moment. I preferred to think about a series of earlier moments.

Sometimes, I ran them in my head in fast forward, often, coming across a particular moment of memory that was so infused with the sound of Scott's voice, mellow, soothing—like the sound amber honey makes when its poured over fresh strawberries—that I would pause the visual stream and let the scene play in slow motion. Savouring each minute detail enabled even the re-creation of his touch: hot fingers, long and slender, sliding up and down my naked thigh.

"Your skin has its own electricity—I love the way it gives me so many little shocks," Scott cooed. I marvelled so at the beauty of his hands, they manipulated my flesh like an artist sculpting clay. Each set of veins on each of his hands marked their place in my recall. I carefully memorized the maps imprinted by those blue thoroughfares that had marked their territory under the strength of his caresses in the dark.

"I love the way you shock me back into craving every crevice of your body," I would respond. Then lips pressed against lips, against neck, against breast, against cunt, against cock, and back up to a cheek, a finger and there I would freeze frame. It was then that I wanted to cry out as I had in the act of coitus, but now this particular cry came from a cavernous depth of loss: more like a coyote howling for that one and only lifelong companion. I would then fast forward beyond that moment because no matter

how much joy this act of remembering might give, such moments often drowned me for days in the sorrowful depths of Scott's absence.

In the early days, emptiness pervaded my being like the negative space that lived in the hundreds of pictures that stared back at me in the hall of the family home. Over time (and after some nameless encounters), I learned to edit scenes of those younger, innocent, headstrong, idyllic, passionate, and then painful years. At other times just reliving the moment that Scott's hands wandered over my tummy, swollen with the union of our bliss, helped me to get out of bed in the middle of the night when our daughter's cries claimed lips to my breast.

But I couldn't always dwell on such things for too long. I only wanted to remember how that baby girl had made such a good match. Scott would have been so proud of his daughter . . . if he'd only known that, eventually, Alexis would have an adorable toddler girl of her own to chase after. . . . but even that thought hurts too much to dwell on. Tomorrow, I'll think about that tomorrow as memories of the oak panelled hallway beckon.

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As long as I can recall great-great grandmother Lola's 2 x 3 inch photograph had been peeling. Mom noticed it when I was a teenager, but did nothing about it.

"It's so small. Who would even notice?" she'd say and walk off.

I always thought it was about the process of degeneration brought on by age (Lola was in her 60s when it was taken, but she looked more like an ancient 90 year-old to my elementary school self) and possible lack of fixing when the original print was made. Later, I learned it was just the way *tatarbuela* Lola wanted it—that way in this particular photograph she could hide her white hair, wrinkled face, plain skirt, and simple blouse that she wore. This breakdown was a fabrication of Lola's will, I was

certain, rather than any specific chemical process. Funny, how the glass from this small seemingly insignificant photograph had also broken, just like the one of Amadita once had. Mom usually said best to leave the little photograph of Lola that way so as to slow down the peeling process. I thought it would have been better to put the glass back on it to protect the photograph from further degeneration, but I couldn't be sure and I never asked.

Later, Mom promised she was going to replace the broken glass after the larger portrait of Lola wearing that bracelet had fallen off the wall. I was sure that Angelita had something to do with breaking the glass, even though Mom claimed she had bumped into it and knocked it down. Yet the hallway had a thick wall-to-wall carpet, so how did the glass break?

I tried asking Angelita about it late one night, but both Amadita and Lola responded with an immediate admonishment of “*¡Cállate, hija!*” shut up, before I could complete my “*¿Qué pasó?*” What happened? Again I thought better of insisting on an answer. I'd learned that if any of the inhabitants in the portrait gallery did not wish to answer my questions, even when I pressed, the ladies would just stop talking for a period of days, weeks even. And they refused to be rushed about it.



## Lola

1964

“Things are just the way they are,” I’ve told Lily so often. “Don’t ask too many questions *niña*, the answers are not always what we would wish them to be.”

I lived—well that’s funny, if I do say so myself—or should I say existed, before I fell off or rather was pushed off the wall . . . in my younger and favourite photograph (it too had been tiny, but Leonard, that unfortunate man—as a favour to Dolores—had blown it up to an 8 x 10), at seventeen, when my hair hung down past my waist. I favoured having it artfully arranged, as in that portrait, by my maid in layers of braids that looked sculpted directly into my head. Two combs carved out of silver and bone placed at right angles from each other into the swept up braids at the back of my neck topped off the effect of my upper class young status, of course. My husband always felt that that portrait affirmed my place in society as one from a family of wealthy *hacendados* who ended up in Puebla City, Mexico, and that is why he loved it. It hung in his office in the hacienda.

I recall that it took a rather long exposure, as many did in those young days of photography, because I did begin to smile but thought better of holding it for . . . well . . . over two to three minutes. Antonio said it gave me more of a Mona Lisa aura.

“You look like a sacred Madonna, *tatarbuela* or even like an angel with your long jet earrings and that gold bracelet with that Greek Key engraving,” Lily had commented on the portrait prior to its terribly rude (ahem, ahem do you hear me Angelita, of course she won’t answer) disappearance while pulling up her white socks about to go off to school wearing those rather uncomfortable looking . . . what are they called, oh yes, loafers. I still don’t understand why she sticks those pennies in the shoe. One would think she was a poor orphan with just a penny, why not a nickel, or a dime? *Dios mío.*

“Lola, all of us girls put pennies in our loafers at school, dimes are old fashioned!” Never mind, I am just so proud of our Lily, she is a year ahead and already in *escuela secundaria*, I mean . . . what do they call it . . . oh yes, high school. Smart one she is, like all the women in our family. She was waiting for her ride that morning, Dolores having left early for the restaurant again. So we had a few more precious moments.

“I was told, *niñita*, that my likeness was similar to one of Goya’s paintings of the *majas*. *La maja vestida*, of course, not *la maja desnuda*, *ay Dios mío, no!*” I made sure to clarify this fact because the latter painting of the *maja* or very pretty naked woman at that time had practically ruined Goya’s career depicting as it did a nude body showing actual pubic hair. He then painted a duplicate of the *maja* with clothes on, but where was I . . . ah yes *mentirosa*, Dolores. So many fibs . . .

Dolores had told Lily the colour of my hair was more of a carrot ginger. I’d heard her say this many times over the years. Actually, it was not entirely her fault for this assumption because the photograph did appear as if it had been hand tinted. And it was what Dolores believed. But the other night I couldn’t stand this mischaracterization any longer.

“*No es verdad, chiquita, ella no sabe nada*”—it’s not true, little one, she knows nothing. “It was closer to the mealy blonde *de mi caballo*, similar to the colour of my palomino,” I muttered when Dolores was out of hearing range.

Another reason Antonio adored that portrait of me was he felt I appeared more alive in that pose than in our more private moments—I can’t possibly go into that, however, as it would be too unlady-like. There was something reckless about it, he said, and considering it had been taken almost a hundred years ago give or take a decade here and there, that bracelet and the way I held one hand over it was striking, he’d said. Now that is quite enough as I will say no more about that, of course! I still wonder when Dolores will rehang that far better portrait of my younger self. In the meantime, I remain as I am in this 2x3 frame. *Dios mío, Dios mío.*

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

For some reason the photographers of the ancestors in my family home found the many images worth contemplating. I remember reading somewhere that just to show something, anything, in the photographic view is to show that it is hidden. I remember, too, how back in one of my college lit. courses, my professor had quoted Emile Zola: “You cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it.” So wasn’t it through the photographs that I could actually see and reconcile my family’s past, and that of myself?

I knew that the pictures represented a reality for me in such a way that the people in my life didn’t. I also knew that the portraits of these women were pointing me toward evidence of a past that bore further scrutiny. Coupled with Mom’s final words, I was obsessed by what I still had not uncovered. But one thing was certain, I found a world of beauty and security in the images and movements of this dynasty of women I had grown to hold dear—dearer to me than to those who had known them during their own lifetime—I was sure.





## Lola

1965

Oh go ahead, Dolores continue to tell your fabrications, but I will not stand for it. Just listen to her *mentiras*. Honestly! They were standing right in front of me so it's hard to not notice, of course.

“Lola was rather chubby and short, I think, but her marriage was arranged by contract. *Mi abuelo* was taller, of course, but he was hoping for someone a bit more petite, shall we say. She was tutored by a private governess. *Mi abuela* spoke fluent French and Latin and played the piano and sang like a nightingale. Her father worked as the private secretary to the president of Mexico. So he made sure that Lola had a privileged education. All proper ladies had dowries and my great grandfather knew that she and her dowry were right for him,” Dolores told Lily.

“*¡Éso sí que no!* Not on any account, she is wrong, Lily! I am telling you I was neither fat nor fluent in Latin. *Mamá* was always forced the cook to make me extra tortillas as I was quite skinny, and I spoke some French, *sí sí*, but Italian not Latin. *Mi padre* worked in the government, not for the President directly, but he was in his confidence as a loyal advisor as they had known each other as children. The only thing

she has right is that I was short. But my husband was only an inch taller.” I had to clarify for my beloved *tataranieta*, great-great granddaughter, later that night.

Lily was yawning as it was just too late for her to be up. She had such a difficult time sleeping sometimes so she wanted to keep talking. So I tried to explain how it was true that I died not too long after Dolores was born, and how her stories about me always differed slightly from those that I told Lily. The same way this little photo of the older me had differed from the large portrait of the precious and alluring me in my teens which is still nowhere to be seen, ahem. The two of us, uhmm, elderly me and teenaged me . . . I mean . . . in the photographs couldn’t have appeared more unlike.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

I was just beginning to understand this notion. Difference—how stories about the past and the past itself were often at variance with one another because every scene in each photograph on the wall told its own version.

“It is very dangerous to draw from memory. We remember inaccurately and rarely retain the details,” Mom continually said. So her tales about the past were like generic outlines, or lists of some general occurrences. However, when I compared Mom’s chronicles of family history against those told by the photographs on the wall, it set in motion a quest for my own identity. What truth had been represented to me by Mom for so many years that now held such uncertainty? What lies did she tell me? What didn’t she want me to know? Many inconsistencies continued: Mom told me that Granny Flynn lived in Oklahoma and that her father was a doctor and not a very good one if poor Granny Flynn was saddled with six babies.

“I mean, what in the world was that man thinking not telling his little girl the facts of life, *qué hombre tan tonto*.” What a stupid man, Mom would quip.

Only from Granny Flynn did I learn the details about the swing and helping her father deliver babies. Only from Granny Flynn did I learn about where babies came

from. This was after Granny Flynn had passed away, mind you. She wouldn't have thought of telling me any such details until I turned eleven at least! And when that day came, Granny did.



## Granny Flynn

1961

“I will not let you be surprised and tricked like I was darlin’!” I assured Lily one afternoon.

“Your grandpa Paul and I had grown up together, his father bein’ a merchant. He owned a general store in our hometown of Loco, Oklahoma where we’d moved. Mother and Dad opened a small apothecary after Dad had a fall. His horse stumbled and he got thrown off, broke his leg. He set the bone himself. He recovered, but Mother refused to let him ride too far out in his buggy anymore. Many of his patients came to him. And they had to pay real money not in hogs or pounds of potatoes. Besides there was a younger doctor in town by then and he took care of birthin’ the babies and makin’ most of the house calls. Paul Adams and I played hide and seek together sometimes, with my friends Betsey and Rhoda. He was handsome even then.

He must have been fourteen when I was twelve.”

“Did you love him right away, Granny?”

“Not really, honey, he was just fun and made me laugh so.”

“How?”

“Well . . . he told me that if he hid well enough that if I found him, he would buy me a soda, but if he found me, I would have to give him a kiss.”

“What kind of a kiss?” I see Lily’s eyes widenin’.

“One that I wasn’t ready to give, I’m sure.” Lola smiled from across the hall at this and the others who usually kept silent, giggled.

“Why was that funny?”

“Because he ended up havin’ to buy me four sodas before he could win a kiss from me. Granny Flynn is smart, baby doll and so are you, aren’t you?” As I spoke, Lily stood back to look at the other photographs hangin’ higher up on the wall. She set her gaze on the one of Grandpa Paul and me when we were still courtin’.

“Yes, Grandpa Paul was quite handsome in his single breasted suit with a fat tie,” I told her. He had movie star good looks, a bit like Douglas Fairbanks actually, or everyone in town said so.” Paul’s distinctively dark eyebrows grew unwaverin’ly across his brow accentin’ the depth of his eyes, hazel and haunted. That’s what made me melt when he looked at me.

“In that photograph, Lily love, my amber hair—flamed, like clover honey—Paul would say the first time he saw me diggin’ potatoes in our garden. It was a hot day after and he just returnin’ from a trip to Oklahoma City with his father to purchase more goods for their store, but in reality my hair was piled high on my head underneath a straw hat.

“I never liked that hat, but Mother insisted I hide my hair as it was still wet, that

particular picnic day.”

“Your waist looks tiny, Granny Flynn,” the sweet child announced.

“All of eighteen inches, darlin’, before all those babies! This was a year before World War One when thangs seemed so simple, my lans.”

“What do you mean, Granny, what’s a lans?”

“Not a lans, honey pie . . . we say my lans when . . . when we are surprised or in awe of somethin’, always did in our family.” I forgot that and when Lily asked me I had to remember where it came from. Funny about family sayin’s. Funny thang about this family on the opposite wall and all their shushin’s and cay-a-tes or *callates* or however you say it. Where was I?

“Granny Flynn you look so serious in that picture, the way you’re staring straight at the camera as if you were going to, I don’t know—” Lily said, scratchin’ her head.

“Take the world head on with both hands?” Lily nodded her head. “Yes, I thought I loved him and had no idea what was goin’ to happen.” There is no sign of affection between us at all. We don’t even look like we’re in love. Grandpa Paul stares away from me off in the distance as if he wishes he could be somewhere else, just like he always did.

“I didn’t know what I wanted then, but my father insisted I marry, insisted, I have children, insisted I do what he—” Lily gasped as Grandpa Paul was actually speakin’!

“Grandpa Paul, is that you, I can’t believe it, you never say anything” said Lily in shock, and that was the last time he ever did.

“Typical,” I couldn’t help smirkin’. “And he never said much to any of us, *hmpf*. He certainly did not want those children. Nor would he do anythin’ about tryin’ to stop makin’ them. Heavens, I didn’t even know what was causin’ my tummy to swell for nine months until the second time it happened. It never occurred to me when I was awakened in the middle of night by penetration of his . . . his . . . member, that my babies were the end result. Well, I most certainly told him no more after number—”

“Granny, what’s a member?”

“Why, his penis, dear.”



*Lily Adams*

*1989*

“Ewww.” That’s what I said when I first heard Granny Flynn say the word—penis. I remembered seeing one once when my favourite cousin Christopher came over to spend the night. We were both four and shared a bath together. I found his “cute little pecker,” as Mom referred to it, interesting and sad looking all shrivelled up. In the morning when we both ran to use the potty his pyjama bottom had fallen a bit and his penis stood out straight like a pencil. Pencils always reminded me of that protuberance as a result, however in those days I assumed a penis was strictly for peeing.

I recall how one of my friends on the play yard once had told me to “fuck” myself as I tried to take a ball back from him that he had swiped right out from under my nose. As a consequence, I came home to ask Mom what fuck meant and without blinking an eye she said, as if she were reciting a recipe from memory, “Lily, that’s just a bad word for *intercourse* between human beings, one might say sexual discourse is even a better phrase. That young man at your school is just ignorant of the word’s meaning, dear. You may look it up in the dictionary, if you wish for more detail, however.” I meant to, but forgot about it. Besides the dictionary was awfully heavy and I was too embarrassed to ask Mom for help.



## Granny Flynn

1961

“Now, darlin’, you might as well understand that a penis placed inside a vagina makes a baby.” My naïve Lily, only eleven years-old, still felt quite stunned over my revelation that a penis had such multiple uses.

“Ewww ewww ewww, no, Granny,” Lily said puttin’ her hand to her mouth as if to fend off the meanin’ of the word, “my girlfriend in school last year, Ana Maria, told me that when you kiss on the lips and use your tongue that sharing your saliva causes your germs to mix and then that germ lodges in your tummy and the baby grows from that little germ, at least that is what her mother told her.” All Lily could hear was raucous laughter from most of the people in the photographs on the wall. Some of them guffawed, some of them just snickered. Thankfully, Dolores snored. It was only when the snorin’ stopped that Lily would dash back to bed.

“Maybe that’s what the dictionary meant by ‘intercourse’? Something about

‘sexual relations’?. But, Granny Flynn, how come there were no details after it said something else about sexual positions required?” Oh dear, oh dear, this is pushin’ me quite out of my depth, really, and I am sure Lily doesn’t need to think about that, not yet.

“Lily, I understand the confusion dear, but please understand, that little friend of yours was purposely misguided, just as my parents misguided me. And I won’t have it, my dear, not at all. Blast you Paul!” I made sure it was loud enough for his portrait to hear me even if he showed no emotion.

“Granny, why are you so mad at him?”

“He didn’t do his job, darlin’, he could not keep a job, and when he’d drink, he would get so sick that he’d throw up for days and then he was useless—useless as a father and as a husband. God forgive him.”

Lily said that she noticed that Grandpa Paul’s eyes actually moved momentarily lookin’ over at me in the picture when I said “God forgive him.” That’s the picture where I’m sittin’ next to him, but then when Lily looked away for a moment and looked back, Paul did not appear to have moved. Perhaps she imagined it, she said. And that picture wasn’t the one I talked from anyhow.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

The portrait of Granny Flynn that usually talked to me was the one where Granny was sitting on Mom's antique French sofa, the one she said was in the style of a king named Louis the XVI (I always confused King Louis XIV with XVI). I only knew that this settee, as Mom called it, was stuffed with horsehair and itchy. I wasn't allowed to sit on it or the side chairs unless guests came to visit. That was also the time that Mom would turn on the elaborately decorated crystal lamps that sat on the inlay side tables on each side of the settee. Mom usually bragged how these antiques came with her to Los Angeles when her family left Mexico to escape the revolution. I usually forgot which one, there were so many.

In this portrait, those lamps are lit and Granny looks like a Southern belle in the early eve of an accomplished life.

"Your grandpa had married some silly, much younger, and naive waitress by this time—thank my lucky stars—of course, he died shortly after that . . . *hmpf*."

Granny Flynn always expelled extra air from pursed lips when she was upset or frustrated. I loved the sound it made when Granny Flynn was still alive and that sound became even more distinctive after she died. If I was standing right in front of her

photograph when she made that *hmpf* sound, I could feel her breath right on my chin.

Later as I grew taller I'd feel it on my neck and then my chest.

Granny's face tilts up slightly looking camera left. Her eyes gaze beyond a light source that washes her skin with a youthful glow. Her salt and pepper short hair frames her face with curls that are swept away high off her forehead and tucked behind her ears. She wears a gold necklace with a clasp that resembles fingers grasping the other end of it, and matching earrings. Her ample bosom is draped by a soft knit blouse with a draped neckline. She wears a gold bangle on her left arm and a gold watch on the right. Her hands rest on a lace handkerchief decorated with roses.

"It took me many weeks to sew that hanky and embroider the roses. Your daddy insisted I pose with it. He wanted me to look like a lady who never worked a day in her life. I think he was tryin' to provide me with a fantasy portrait—what my life might have been . . .," said Granny Flynn letting her voice trail off.

Mom had always claimed that Granny Flynn never knew what hit her when she got married and all those children came, but that she'd really wanted all six of those beautiful babies she'd had. And that she was a very modest woman. Granny clarified that she'd actually lost a baby in between one and two and then she attempted to rid herself of number six.



## Granny Flynn

1962

“When I found out that your great uncle Jerry was on the way, I begged one of the pharmacists workin’ for my father to please give me somethin’, anythin’, an elixir of some sort to help me miscarry. He did and then promised to keep my confidence. He felt so sorry for me and knew Paul couldn’t ever keep a job for very long.”

“But Granny, great uncle Jerry lives in New Mexico, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, honey, all that disgustin’ drink did was give me diarrhoea. In fact, I was sick for several days after ingestin’ that nasty brown stuff, and then, of course, I felt so guilty that I might have harmed my baby. I prayed on my knees every night so that God would forgive me.”

“Granny, didn’t Mom tell me that Uncle Jerry is the highway commissioner of

New Mexico?” Yes, that boy added up to somethin’ special. He did. But not Leonard, oh drat, I better not tear up, no moisture, no, no tears, darn it . . . stop. Dag nabbit! Just breathe. Hmppf....

“Granny, I like it when you do that!” The loose hairs around Lily’s face moved just a bit in response. Okay, okay. I’m fine now. Inhale, exhale. Continuin’. Let’s see, oh yes, dear me, it’s late, poor little sweetie just yawned a big one.

“Leonard was boy number one after his sister Virginia May. Her middle name for the month she was born, her first name for the state her grandmother had grown up in.

“Well, truth is, your daddy, Leonard, was a little dickens,” I would tell Lily as she stood there sweet and innocent in her white nylon nighty with red stitchin’ and her hair in braids. Lily figured out that “little dickens” or sometimes I’d say “Your daddy scared the dickens out of me” was a nice way of callin’ him a little devil, as Lily recalled his habit of tellin’ her those scary stories at bedtime. Darn him, always tryin’ to frighten her.

“But, Granny, it was fun . . . ” she would say and then just stop and look away for a moment too long. I knew that stories about my little Leonard would cheer her up.

“That little baby boy disappeared out of his bed at 1 o’clock in the mornin’ when he was barely two years-old. We were visitin’ my brother in the town of Duncan. We’d gone there by train and your daddy was fascinated by the ride and the sound of the engine. He would imitate the sound, *choo choo*, one of his first words. Anyway, I was frantic! When I found out he was missin’, I ran thirteen blocks toward the train station because I knew he liked watchin’ them so much.

“Turned out that a coloured boy saw Leonard wanderin’ alone on the main road in his night gown and scooped him up to comfort the baby from his cryin’. That boy

left Leonard with some neighbours askin' them to 'Puhlease Missuhs, take care this little one for me'. So they bathed him and put him to sleep certain he was from a good family because of all the hand embroidery on his cotton nightshirt. Then they told the station master if anyone came lookin' for the little one, they had him safe and sound. What I didn't realize was that I only had on a very thin nightgown myself and that caused quite a sensation in Duncan that next day, I can tell you darlin, a practically almost naked mother breakin' into a dead run down the main street, late at night, imagine!" Poor baby girl was yawnin' a bit too much now... if only she could sleep properly. I best hurry up.

“Apparently, little Leonard had actually stepped onto a train when it began to pull out of the station and he had fallen out just as abruptly. He was quite a dirty mess and that's why this couple had to bathe him even though he cried his eyes out. His love of trains never ceased.” If only my son's love for Dolores and Lily hadn't! But let's not get ahead of ourselves.



*Lily Adams*

*1989*

I have faint memories of Leonard driving me over to the Glendale train station where we would watch the 4.25 arrive and the 5.05 depart. What excited us both were the deafening noise and the clanging of the bell as the announcement of the train's arrival and departure destinations.

I also have memories of visits to Griffith Park and Travel Town not far from our home in Hollywood. Nine acres displaying antique trains enabling hundreds of kids to get close enough to view a pilot's cockpit with all its gadgets and gauges. I ceased calling him Daddy years ago since he abandoned us. He lost the right to any such label, and Mom always agreed. However, a memory that has stood the test of time was how he allowed me to climb over each train car to my heart's content. Mom preferred that I didn't dirty the meticulously detailed organza dresses Granny Flynn sewed and embroidered with tiny flowers for me, but Leonard didn't care. He wanted me to run freely around the park and if I wanted to climb and get dirty, it was just fine with him. Mom told me, it wasn't about the dress; it was about not curtailing my passion to roam, but encouraging it just as he had done as teenager in the 1930's when he'd hopped a freight train from Oklahoma City to Hollywood to find a better life.

And he did—sneaking on to movie sets as a runner for the different photographers who needed someone to carry their equipment, get them coffee, help

them when printing their contact sheets. Of course his good looks didn't hurt. He did double work a few times for a famous movie actor named Tyrone Power, but Leonard much preferred being behind the camera than in front of it.

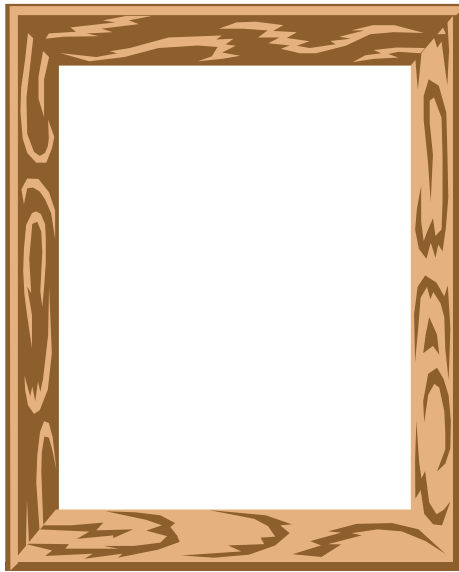
Following Leonard's departure, Mom pretended like he'd never existed, but I knew that he had. There were very few photographs of him left hanging or on table tops, and there was an outline of one that used to be visible on the wall near Granny Flynn. I recalled that it was what Leonard called a double exposure and it had been her favourite. It captured Mom and Leonard standing on either side of a fence with hills in the background. Each looks in opposite directions. He grasps a chain linked fence that sits on top of a concrete barrier with his right hand as he puffs on his signature pipe. His shirt with flap pockets on either side is unbuttoned exposing a bit of his t-shirt. Mom is wearing a light soft linen dress with Juliette sleeves bolstered by small shoulder pads making her shoulders seem broader than they are. The folds of fresh-pressed linen soften the outlines of her breasts. Around her neck is a large gold choker of squared chain links intertwined with coral. I remembered that coral necklace as salmon in colour, because once when I played with it as a child and the strand broke, I had to scurry to gather all the pieces up from the floor before our cat Pancho thought they were play toys. Then I put the necklace parts back in Mom's drawer and pretended ignorance when she asked about it.

Mom is resting her right arm against the concrete barrier portion of the fence. Leonard's face appears hauntingly inside of Mom's face. Or perhaps he lives within hers, but what is unusual is that Mom's face is twice the size of Leonard's. Did he plan it that way? He must have as he was far too professional for this photograph, unlike their marriage, to be a mistake. Taking this photograph must have been Leonard's way of accepting the world as his camera recorded it. And yet their marriage proved that

they, or perhaps just he, could not accept it as it looks in this romantic moment: each inhabiting the other's thoughts as if one could not live without the other. So where in this snap of the shutter moment does the truth lie? Then again what is the truth? I considered all the voices in our home that provided a map for me to manoeuvre through my younger years—weren't they then part of this elusive truth?

Weeks after Mom's death, I found this photo again rumpled in an oversized old yellowed envelope. But Lola's bracelet still eludes me.

### Part Three: Otherness and Speaking



*Angelita/Angie*

1966

“Angelita?” sixteen-year-old Lily called out to me one night when she couldn’t sleep. Sixteen . . . her breasts were more than small rosebuds now. Her hair looked so much like my own, even hair spray cannot tame her tresses. My little one . . . a woman with those eyes so much like her father’s, *Dios mío*. Why not a baby for a little bit longer?!

We hadn't spoken in a while, as Lola and Amadita usually talked all the time, well . . . most of it anyway. Sometimes my dear Granny Flynn bit back telling them to "Hush!" But they paid her no attention as those ladies loved to talk over each other and me just as they did in life. I speak only when I have something important to say and when I do others will listen. *¡Sí, señor!* And I will again, *lo juro por Dios*, so help me.

On these nights when my hormonal Lily couldn't sleep, or her legs itched, a red rash would appear all over her shins, calves, and thighs—a skin condition, a type of allergy, I'd hear Dolores repeating what the doctor had told her. She simply dismissed this like many other issues in her life assuming that by reminding Lily it was just an allergy meant it had to be borne until it calmed for a time, during which strength was to be gained for the next bout. This was how Dolores had chosen to live her life. I just didn't want *mí* Lily to have to do the same.

La *pobrecita* scratched and scratched herself while standing in front of me as we chatted. Sometimes she ran her large natural bristle brush in up and down strokes on her legs to relieve the discomfort. I objected though.

"Stop it, you're ruining your skin, *mí amor*," I protested. Often she had to excuse herself, she said, to sit down in the bathtub to let the needle shower render some relief. Sometimes I'd hear Dolores reprimand her that such heat would only make it worse, but Lily did not listen, just like her *mama* never did. The doctor had apparently prescribed creams and ointments, merely palliatives, never remedies. Stress, he purportedly claimed, could bring it on.

Dolores often wondered aloud what her teenaged daughter had to be stressed about. "What does she have to worry about, for goodness sakes? She just has homework and her part time work after school in the small bakery," I'd hear her say to someone on the other end of the telephone. Lily worked at the bakery that was attached

to the restaurant Dolores managed. But it was not the job and not school, I knew what it was—it was boys. Again, just like her *mamá*.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

Keeping myself unstained created such nervousness in me as an adolescent because I so did not want to disappoint my mother. All through high school, she had never approved of my being home alone after school even once in a while. So when she opened the bakery in the small vacant space next door to the restaurant she wanted me to work the cash register there just for a few hours since that way she could keep an eye on me. She was loved by her customers because for them Mom would turn on the charm. I had to have the same big smile and magnetism to manipulate them into buying more baked goods than they needed along with trying to do some of my homework.

Occasionally my classmates, a few boys and some of my gossipy girlfriends, liked to stop by for a danish, and a cup of coffee or tea. It made them feel grown up and special that I worked there and would give them a small discount. That way it was easy to coax them into buying more snacks to take back home to their family. So needless to say their moms usually came in to shop as well.

Some of those same boys tried their hardest to coax their way into my pants on

the infrequent date I was allowed to go on. After all, in high school, if you weren't a virgin, those same gossipy girls who followed me from middle school would grab the usual illegal smokes in the bathroom and quickly spread the word as to whose hymen was intact and whose wasn't. Although mine still was, unlike some of the other girls whose were not and who were often called whores behind their backs—the gossips very much liked to perpetuate rumors that mine was missing also. Teenage girls enjoy being mean to each other, who knows why, they just do. Perhaps it was my sultry appearance, Angelita contended and the way boys were drawn to me, but at the time I never figured it out. Mom suggested jealousy.

“But Mom, they all treat me so nicely, to my face.”

“Yes, dear, to your face, but behind it? *Ay m'ija*, beauty is a curse and a blessing, we should know,” Mom would say with hands thrown up in the air. Many of the pretty ladies inhabiting the picture frames in the hall all nodded their assent at Mom's comment. She couldn't see them as she had her back to them, but I could. I tried not to laugh. But I did chuckle to myself thinking about how some of the boys I occasionally dated discovered rather quickly how chaste I was.

When wandering hands tried to travel up my blouse, or down the waistband of my skirt or bellbottoms, I had no problem slugging the offender. Word quickly spread around the boys' bathrooms to watch my right hook. Boys knew to keep their hands to themselves, unless otherwise invited. This was another of many secrets I kept from Mom. And remembering such scenes would upset me creating more obsessive scratching on itchy nights.

I remember one uncomfortable night, I was drawn to Angelita to hear her talk about her brother—the one no one ever talked about. Mom had engrossed me a few times over the years with some stories about Arturo as young boy, when I first



understood that an Arturo had existed at all other than as a dusty image hidden in the upper corner of the hallway. Arturo was the father she never knew, she'd said. He had died shortly after she was born. Her mother, Petra, a young girl employed to do all the family sewing had died in childbirth. God, I recall thinking, didn't everyone die young back in the Stone Age?

But I did love hearing about Arturo. I'd heard different parts about his life through the years and when I pieced together what I knew it was terribly elaborate but unfinished:

He was the first-born son of Julián Soler and Amadita Escárraga Morales. (Although she was Mom's grandmother, she ended up raising Mom.) Thirteen months later Angelita was born. She was the perfect baby at home; her brother Arturo created all the havoc in the house.

Angelita slept through the night at six months old. As a toddler, Arturo loved scaring Isabella, his governess. Arturo disliked being put down to bed for the night, when there was just still too much exploring to do and too many games to make up, so getting Arturo to bed was punctuated by tantrums. Then he'd pretend to sleep and once the exhausted governess was snoring by his bed, he would drag his sheet off of his bed and cloak himself for a wander around the cavernous halls of the hacienda. Arturo was sure that he was invisible. He would hoot like an owl when the moon was out and explore the passageways in the west wing, and continue to hoot as he circled back to his own proper hallway.

My great-grandfather Julián and my great-grandmother Amadita slept on the opposite side of the house and never heard him. Only poor Isabella, awakened out of a blissful sleep, heard the moaning sounds. A peek in the hall revealed to her a small ghostly figure backlit by the few night-burning candles Julián insisted be kept lit.

Julián hated a dark house, even at night. Why submit to the dark when all was revealed in the light, he would say? The house would erupt from Isabella's screams as she thought it was the ghost of her own dead baby come back to fetch her. The baby had died long ago in childbirth. Arturo took great pride in making her dash up the hall making the sign of the cross and screaming, "*Jesús, José y María . . . Jesús, José y María!*" Usually it was Julián who found poor Isabella crumpled on the floor in a dead faint. And it was only then that little Arturo would sleep curled up in a ball next to her.

This was a regular occurring event, until a priest was called to exorcise the little man, as Isabella had convinced Amadita that Arturo was a minion of the devil trying to cause her early demise. While sprinkling holy water on him, the priest ended up simply bribing Arturo with candies wrapped in muslin that he tucked under his bed, and the priest promised to provide them often if Arturo agreed to stop his late-night wanderings and let everyone get a full night's sleep. Arturo loved *jamoncillo* and Father Martín was all too happy to oblige. The family was at peace, especially Isabella. She fell in love with Father Martín and secretly kept the Catholic priest obliged, regularly. But that's another story.

Later, Mom claimed that, as Arturo grew into early adolescence, he imagined himself to be a pirate much like the ones he had read about in *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson. So Arturo loved to have his playmate Carlitos and a few of the other schoolboys tie him to a tree in the centre of a small park near the middle of downtown Puebla City. There he felt as if he was the captain on a grand pirate ship imagining how he would plunder the next port of call. His playmates, wearing eye patches and scarves wrapped around their heads (for they had read the same novel), never tied him tightly enough, so Arturo complained they must stop pretending so poorly. Arturo would command them to tighten the grip of the rope and then to run off as if to look for

plunder to bring back for his inspection.

One day they ran into a little problem, where the three others decided they wanted to have some *pan dulce* and *champurrado* at the shop owned by Carlitos's aunt who loved having them visit, so they left Arturo tied happily to the ancient sycamore to ponder longer than he bargained for. As it grew darker Arturo yelled out to be released. His *compañeros* had forgotten all about him and were safely tucked at home into their beds. No one noticed Arturo was missing until Isabella came to lay out his nightclothes. The silence in the house from Arturo's absence was all too cherished by its inhabitants because with Arturo silence was never golden, it was intolerable. So Amadita and Julián had assumed Arturo had not arrived home from his outing with his friends.

Isabella searched frantically in the kitchen under the table where the cook prepared the family meals, thinking she would be readily dismissed for misplacing *pobre Arturito*. He loved to hide under the preparation table if only to snatch bits of chicken or pieces of chocolate being diced up for *mole poblano*. No, not there.

Isabella ran to Carlitos's home and banged on the door. His mother woke him from his slumber and pulled him by the ear—and all three ran to the park and found Arturo tied to the tree sleeping with his makeshift sword by his side and his eye patch and scarf still on. Isabella had to carry him home and tuck him in, stealthily removing his pirate attire . . . but not the eye patch. He whimpered every time she tried to slip it off. She knelt down after the deed was done and prayed to *Jesucristo* not to let any more demons enter his body again. If so, she might have to oblige Father Martín more than twice a week. And she was getting tired of it, *un poco* and then some.

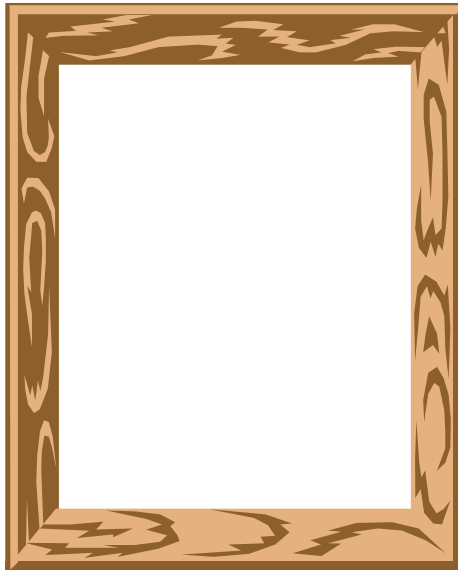
During these days, Angelita was the perfect little angel. She completed all of her studies at the private school, where she learned English to perfection. Arturo hated

sitting at a desk and often was nowhere to be found during English class; he was too busy playing out his imaginary scenarios on fantasy islands. Angelita had not crossed over into early womanhood yet, but her time would come.

When I pleaded with Mom for more she'd just say that the siblings' paths eventually developed into parallel and sad scenarios.

"What does that mean?" I said. She promised me someday she would write, or scribble down notes on this story and some others. All the while, denying that she knew the specifics about Arturo dying shortly after Angelita's early death. Scribbling she said might help rekindle her memory about details she believed she had either forgotten or was not certain of. But I always wanted more. And I found it odd that she wouldn't provide more.

Then during the following months, I noticed, on occasion, Mom jotting away in a small red notebook, nothing fancy, more like one of my school spirals. She was unaware that I saw her. I hoped she was fulfilling her promise to me, but writing was not her forte, she alleged rather she was dashing off a list. When I walked into her bedroom one Sunday morning her pen was moving so intently across the pages that she didn't notice me standing for several minutes. I was about to ask her if she wanted me to make breakfast since she'd been sleeping late on Sundays, recently. I was starving. She hurriedly shoved the notebook into an end table, stood up, stretched her back, and hugged me announcing that we were, "going out for breakfast, for once." I checked her room after school the next day while she was still working at the restaurant, but the notebook was gone. Perhaps, I remember thinking, I could bring this up again with Angelita.



*Angelita/Angie*

1966

“*Mamá*, enough, stop saying that word, stop it!”

“*Arturo* era un *sinvergüenza*.” I hated it when *mamá* called my beloved *hermano* a scoundrel. When Lily was younger she didn’t understand what that meant so these bossy ladies hanging around me on the wall kept saying he was a bad boy, which made me furious. Then, however, Lily being so young didn’t seem to care enough to bother looking it up in the dictionary. But now, this inquisitive teen keeps pressing for answers.

“*Tía Angie*, why does the mere mention of *Arturo*’s name bring you such sadness . . . and such long pauses?”

I looked up in his direction. *Arturo*’s portrait is high up in the corner, with spider webs covering it. So unfair . . . not his fault.

“Why does it look as if it has a fog over it?” asked Lily craning her long neck back to focus on *Arturo*’s portrait. I know it bothered her that Dolores never cleaned

around that corner of the hallway so one day Miss Determined Lily reached up with a broom and batted all the tiny particles hanging in the air away. We both heard several of the nearby portraits take a cleansing breath when that happened. It was a subtle in-and-out sound. I felt such gratification at this sweet act on her part. Lily looked up at the gallery thinking she saw some movement also, but when she did, all was motionless as it should be in that moment.

“Why do you never speak about Arturo, *tía* Angie?” Lily pressed on. There is only that one photograph of him. As a little girl it was hard for Lily to see, but now that she is five foot-six, and the dust bunnies are gone, she can take a better look. During the wee hours of this particular night of itchiness, she said, she wasn’t sure why but she kept focusing on Arturo

“Are those props at the suggestion of the photographer, or did Arturo really wear those wire rim glasses and handlebar moustache?” Those props, as Lily called them, enhanced his boyish features rather than present the sombre and mature appearance of a typical full-face photograph taken in the previous . . . in my century.

“He died too young, *niña*, too young,” I said.

“What happened, *tía*?” Lily asked calmly, for she knew if she pushed me too hard I would not respond.

“After the kidnapping he was never the same again, and then the drinking—”

“Kidnapping, what kidnapping? Who, I mean, why would—”

“Too many questions.” I always said this when I didn’t want to answer. If my portrait returned to its two-dimensional nature, then Lily knew a long hiatus of quiet would follow. And Lily hated that because, as she always said, she especially appreciated my stories. As I spoke, sometimes Lily could watch them unfold before her as if the portrait were a projector and I the projectionist. The images presented

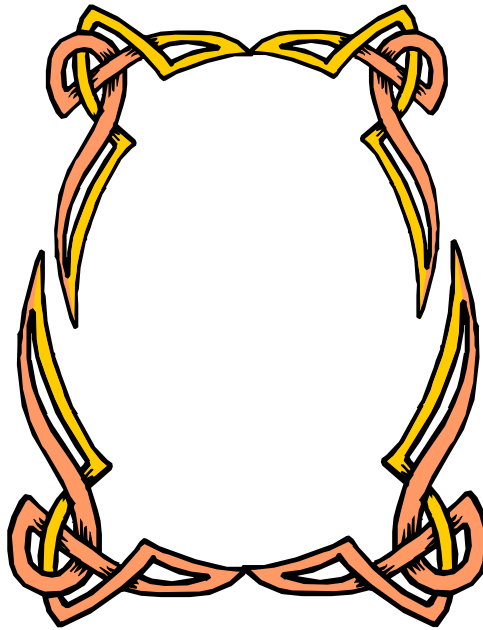
lived and breathed before her.

“Who kidnapped him?” Lily asked again.

“Bad men, *m’ija*. They were called *Los Dorados* because they only stole gold.

*Papá* called them *hijos de puta*—”

“*Tía* Angie!” Lily gasped because she knew that motherfuckers was not a word Dolores would ever tolerate, much less anyone else on this wall.



## AMADITA

1966

“*Hija*,” I shouted at Angelita, “what are you saying, ladies do not say such things and remember that you are—”

“*¡Déjela!*” leave her be, commanded Lola, but I would not allow *mi mamá* to silence me this time. I was going to explain properly.

“They had heard about *papá* having chests of gold coins buried in our family cemetery. But they didn’t know that he had many chests buried all over the hacienda, but not in the cemetery. So when they found Arturo passed out drunk on top of *papá Toño’s* grave—” I ignored *mamá’s* command to stop interrupting Angelita. And then Lola interrupted me again. *¡Maldita sea!* I can’t believe I used a curse word. *Que Dios me perdone*. Please, dear lord. And I made the sign of the cross for good measure.

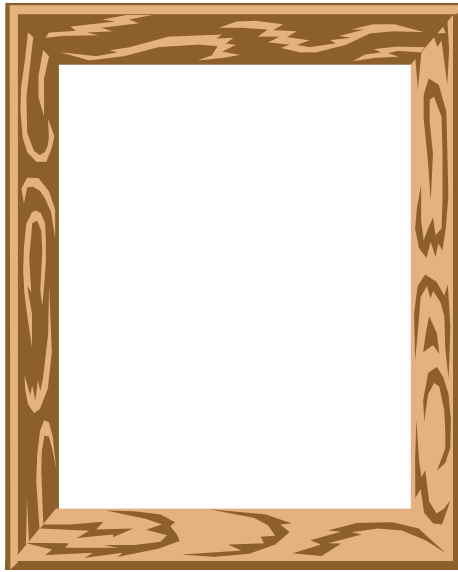




Lola

1966

“He adored his *abuelo*, who spoiled him to death. Arturo was going to accomplish greatness, *papá Toño* always said when Arturo was a baby. His father, Julián, was going to pass down the running of the hacienda, the grazing land for the 600 head of cattle, the family distillery in Atlixco along with the two grocery stores, a rental home on the corner nearby, and an alley where there was our pasta factory. But Julián did not want to believe that Arturo could never— . . .” I stopped for a moment as both Amadita and even Angelita all sucked in a deep breath. Lily stood there staring at each of us, hands on hips transfixed. For once her questions stopped. So unusual for our curious child. She too sucked in her breath and waited.



Angelita/Angie

1966

“Arturo was never the same,” I continued after so rudely being interrupted, “after *papá*’s men rescued him from their cave, their *cueva de ladrones*. After forcing Arturo to write a letter to *papá* in order to ransom his life—valued at 4,000 pesos worth of gold—those *ladrones* stripped him naked, buried him up to his neck, and threatened to leave him in the forest for the wolves that prowled there, until *papá*’s men found them, ambushed them, and cut all of their throats in the dead of night.”

Lily watched, her eyes glued to the images I projected of the grisly-looking *bandidos* unshaven, chewing *puros* sticking out of the sides of their sleazy mouths. The two of them, flashing knives, were laughing and gashing poor Arturo’s face and neck, as he cried and pleaded to be set free. They were sure that *papá* would pay as others had in the past. Arturo’s head was bleeding and his blackened and purple left eye was swollen shut from being punched repeatedly. In the dim torchlight, Lily could see Julián’s rancheros slice two necks swiftly and silently. The picture fell away. I was

feeling ill, drained.

“*No más m’ija*, I can’t . . . it is too much, they did more damage to his body and his spirit than I can bear to remember.” I stopped to take a deep breath, .” . . you know, I cannot cry.” I was resolute in holding back my tears.

Lily knew this was true, that neither myself, nor any of the portraits could afford a drop of moisture, for fear of picture deterioration and, even worse, loss of voice. And on the rare occasion I made images move, well . . . at times, almost accelerated this process by dredging up such pain. I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. Not yet at least.

“Please Angelita, please don’t stop.” Lily hated it when I clammed up. She just wanted a little more especially when I made movies for her. “Why did he die so young, and why . . . ?”

“*Drogas* and gambling debts, and when that girl died—”

“Girl, you mean my official *abuela*, what do you mean, girl?” Lily asked impatiently.

“Ask your mother, *m’ija*!” interrupted Amadita. Immediately I stopped speaking.

“I *have* asked Mom and she tells me the same story every time, you’ve heard it! I am asking *tía* and I want to know more, pleeeassse, Angelita?” Lily begged. I needed to pause for a minute. “Angelita?” Just for a minute more.

“¡*Todavía NO!*” howled *mamá* Amadita. She just couldn’t stand it.

“He loved her, *mamá*” I spat back at her. “What is wrong with sharing that with Lily, just like I loved—”

“¡*Cállate inmediatamente, hija! ¿Me entiendes?*” Amadita’s voice was louder than I ever recalled it being. But she was not going to stop me any longer.

“No!” I said with the same force I once used with *papá Toño*. But no one died this time, since all of us already had.

*Lily Adams*

**1989**

Stopping everything during these conversations in the wee hours of the night was Mom, unexpectedly, admonishing me from her room because it was way past one o'clock in the morning.

“Lily, what the heck are you doing standing there in the middle of the night, get to bed! You know you’re not supposed to watch TV this late. Off to bed,” Mom was at her doorway now motioning with her hands while stifling a yawn. I hesitated for a moment, then dashed back to my room. I thought, just for an instant, that Arturo was yawning out of the corner of my eye, and I looked back to check until the order “¡Ándale!” from Mom sent me scurrying.

Often, when Mom claimed she’d heard me talking to someone late at night, I’d say I’d been watching the *Million Dollar Movie* in our den. The same movie repeated nightly for a whole week and three or four times more on the weekends. This was a way of distracting myself from “the itchies” and ultimately put me to asleep. Mom didn’t like it, but was often too tired to dispute it because I was never late for school in the morning no matter how late I had stayed up at night. Even as a little girl, I would pre-dress for school prior to falling asleep. When I was in grade school, Mom said

she'd walk into my bedroom late at night to check on me and there I'd be, stretched out on top of the covers fast asleep in my school uniform—socks and tennis shoes on, laced up, and ready to go. I was always prepared, Mom said, smiling proudly as she'd kiss me goodnight.

\*\*\*

I had never felt so unprepared in my life. Being anywhere near my childhood home always created conflict for me. When Mom first had to be moved, I had considered selling it. But that only lasted for about a minute. Mom wouldn't hear of it. Even when her mind wandered, lost in the canyons of its own dimming memory, she remembered owning a home that provided shelter to her life, its past, and its treasures.

“Where is my house?” she would call out. “Why aren't I in it?”

“Mom, it's fine. The house is there. Don't worry,” I assured her.

“Leave it alone. Leave them alone!” Mom would repeat over and over. I didn't have to ask who “them” was, for I knew. Yet Mom's comment surprised me, because never during my nascent years in the house did Mom or I discuss what the portraits had shared. I just assumed that Mom had no knowledge that those late-night talks in the hall ever happened. I also assumed that the portraits never spoke directly to her. So how was it that Mom referred to them as a recognizable collective noun? I simply excused the ramblings as those of a demented old woman; perhaps “them” to Mom was just her catchall phrase for everything in the house. Although the money from a house sale would have helped, Mom's objections and hysteria could not be ignored so I had no choice but to wait. I had waited for more than a year and a half while Mom hovered in a world of was and is. Then she was gone. And there was the house and the

hall and so many possible voices waiting.

Walking back into the old house, which had been closed up for some time, and inhaling its musty smell of disuse made me cry. It was wrenching to see Mom cry so hard at being forced to leave. She had retreated into her world in that house so deeply that all the various caretakers I'd hired through the final five years of Mom's life could not withstand the old woman's consistently erratic behaviour. She refused to wear any clothes or wash, and caretakers had to cajole her to climb down off the kitchen counter where she would sit nude, eating a tortilla dripping with butter that she had warmed on the stove. For a short time, I had the stove handles removed because Mom would leave them on and gas escaped throughout the house. Caretakers had to use pliers to turn the flame on and off until the last one complained about the inconvenience. Thankfully, Mom was not a smoker, but she always scared the caretakers away. So I had no choice but to move her to a nursing home.

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6234 Fountain Avenue was not a large house, and the rooms even smaller than I remembered: only one story, a bungalow-style revival with two bedrooms and two and a half baths, a formal dining room, hardwood floors except in the hallway, a spacious living room and an unadorned kitchen with the same leaky faucet, I remembered, that could never be fixed properly. Mom resented it when I attempted any repairs, as if I was insulting her for not keeping up the house the way it should have been.

As I closed the door behind me I could see that on every inch of wall space, in every corner, at every turn, and along the great hall between Mom's bedroom and my childhood bedroom—the portraits hung. Funny, I could never figure out why the builders created such a long hallway between the two bedrooms. More like a world

apart than some twelve feet apart. The third bedroom that served as Granny Flynn's for too short a time had actually been a den. This became the room Mom mostly inhabited in her later years. She endlessly watched TV (news, telenovelas, and any show about animals) and ate her meals in there, and slept on the sofa. Too much trouble she said to walk back to her own room, or to the bathroom as her balance became more impaired with arthritis and Alzheimer's.

First, I opened the windows in the kitchen. One latch was broken, but I was able to push up the old double-hung window by the breakfast table. Then I opened the sliding glass doors to the patio in the back and walked outside. The gardener kept the lawn cut, and I could smell the freshly mowed grass, but most of Mom's flower garden had died. Only a few gazanias survived. The trimmed Cyprus trees still lined the back fence affording privacy from the neighbours on the other side of the alley that ran behind the house. But the old swing set left over from the days when Alexis, and I, lived there temporarily, had rusted over. Mom would never let me have it dismantled.

"She might want to come back and use it," she had said in one of her few vivid moments.

"Mom, she is twenty-five years-old and married with her own family. I doubt it."

"Leave well enough alone, *m'ija, ándale*," Mom hissed. She was still trying to rush me off. And soon enough Alzheimer's robbed her of a voice and any memory that Alexis, or her great-grandbaby, Lola, or me were connected to her in any way. But never mind that, I thought, trying to force the window open in my old bedroom. It had been painted shut a long time ago, but after some budging, banging, and shoving, it gave way. As the dust on the sill flew in my face, I sneezed.

"*¡Salud!*" said a voice I had not heard in some time.



I froze. I turned toward the hall. I had purposely run through it so as not to have to see them. I had refused to hear them after Scott's death. I'd imposed muteness upon them that day while in a rage and they had not spoken since.

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I had arrived at the house that day so long ago shouting through blinding tears after the officers had dropped the bomb shattering my newly married, new-mother world.

"You should have warned me . . . all of you!"

"*Hija*," said Amadita, "how could we?"

"What do you mean '*how could we*'? You have the power to tell me—"

"Honey darlin', we don't have the power to—" Granny Flynn began.

"*Yes* . . . you do!" I collapsed on the floor, tears engulfing me like a waterfall of anguish. "You're the ones who told me it . . . we . . . would be all right!" I was shrieking now.

Scott's absence and the hole it opened up within me was just beginning to cut itself deep into my being, coupled with the reality that he was never coming home again. I pushed it away and continued wailing. Mom was at work as I hadn't alerted her yet. I just wanted to slash at the portraits, but a gripping agony paralyzed me. All I could do was collapse into a pile of sobs on the carpet as the portraits looked down on me.

"You knew . . . you all knew . . . God damn you all . . ." I pounded the rug.

"We know the past, *ángel*, our past, your past, not necessarily the—," Lola tried to continue.

"Noooo. . . stop talking . . . I should have never listened to you—"

“*Niña*, the pain will recede one day, we promise you. Alexis needs you,” said Angelita.

“You know what . . . I want you all to do . . . is shut up, just shut up!” I demanded as I stumbled over myself to get up and wipe my now red and very puffy eyes.

A collective intake of breath came fast from the portraits and then . . . nothing further. I hurried out of the house as it was time to pick up Alexis from the sitter. And to call Mom and unload the devastating news.

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That terrible day was a memory that had never quite faded, although the numbness that it acquired over the decades made it possible for me now to stand in the hallway and inquire.

“Who was that?” I thought it sounded like Lola but it had been so long.

Dead silence. I walked up and down the long hall. A walk I had made thousands of times on my lifelong journey down this corridor of time. And now it seemed an eternity had elapsed as I stood there. All quiet still. The dust was thick on some of the frames. Perhaps if I clean them off, I thought. Perhaps. Or has it been too long? Might as well, I figured. In the laundry room, I found some tattered rags and spray bottles of glass cleaner and furniture polish, so many in fact that I finally realized that the different caretakers had never really cleaned the place, and certainly not the pictures in the hall.

Methodically, I wiped away the years of dirt and decay. First, I carefully wiped off the frame and the glass on Granny Flynn’s portrait. Then came Amadita’s, then Angelita’s teenaged one, and then a palpable sigh escaped from Lola’s older miniature

portrait, the one that looked as if it still was peeling, but it wasn't. It had always been small and insignificant in size, but the sound coming from it at the moment was not.



## Lola

1989

“*¡Niña, cómo estás?*” I asked softly.

“Lola, my God, uhm...I’m fine, I guess . . . I mean—” Lily stammered.

“Your *mamá* is with God now, *querida*.” I assured her. The others chimed in, “*¡gracias a Dios!*” making the sign of the cross as they said it, touching their foreheads and their hearts.

“We have missed you, baby girl,” said Granny Flynn. Lily smiled faintly amused by this as she was well into middle age and no one’s baby girl any more, with the exception of us: the stalwart women *de su familia, su sangre*, her family, her blood.

“I have missed you, but I couldn’t help it—”

“No explanations needed, nor required,” said Granny Flynn in her perennial Southern belle tone.

“No, all that matters is that we are here now *juntas*,” agreed Amadita.

“Together again,” I said. All of the voices concurred in assent.

Lily stood there staring at all of our portraits while twisting her hair up in a bun nervously and letting it fall back down as if reaching for something more to say following such a prolonged speechlessness.

“Curious, how none of you have aged or contain even one added crinkle, not even any added yellowing. After so many years, I expected some sign of age or change in your pictures, but other than the dust I’ve removed there is none.” She spoke as if seeing us for the first time in ages, which was true, of course. Considering her outburst over two decades ago coupled with her total snubbing of us as well. I was sure she just felt awkward.

“No doubt you have questions, Lily, don’t you, *mi amor*?” I said. *Mi querida niña* did not show her age either. Over forty now, Lily with her slim figure that showed little sign of ever having carried a child was still the picture of youth. Her hair a bit lighter in shade, with little streaks of grey. Her loveliness unaltered, her womanliness enhanced. But no doubt, much was on her grieving mind.

“Yes, I do. Mom said something about the bracelet, Lola . . . .” She paused struggling after the word, Mom.

“I’m sure she did, *m’ija*.”

“I’m wondering about the bracelet, Lola, and the photograph of you wearing it?”

“What about it?”

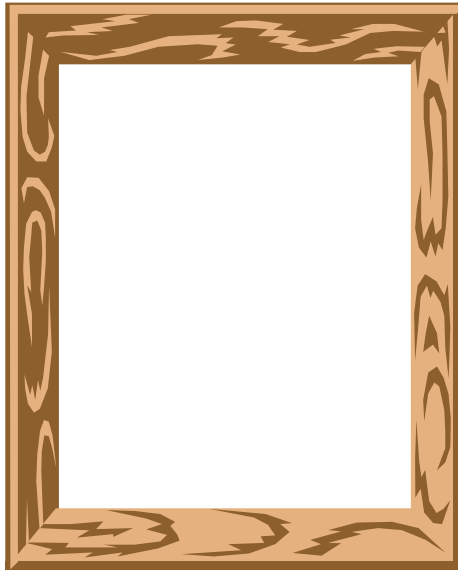
“Where is it?”

“That depends, *hija*, on how much you are prepared to learn to find it,” I said using my same enigmatic smile enticed out of me by the photographer at the time.

“Why does your voice sound so calm and sedate, more so than in the old days

when I was a child?” Lily pushed on.

I was about to answer but my thoughts were disturbed quite suddenly.



*Angelita/Angie*

1989

“It is now my turn,” I pronounced.

“Are you sure, Angelita?” asked Amadita. Almost all of the voices, almost all of our relations on the wall had spoken by this time. Lily was about to say something, but I could see she thought better of it and closed her lips as she saw how intent I was that no one would prevent me from speaking out any longer. So she stood there arms folded across her chest and waited. She had waited long enough as far as I was concerned. No more!

“*Mamá*, the time has come” I insisted to *mi mamá* Amadita.

“What do you mean, *tía* Angie?” Lily looked quite perplexed.

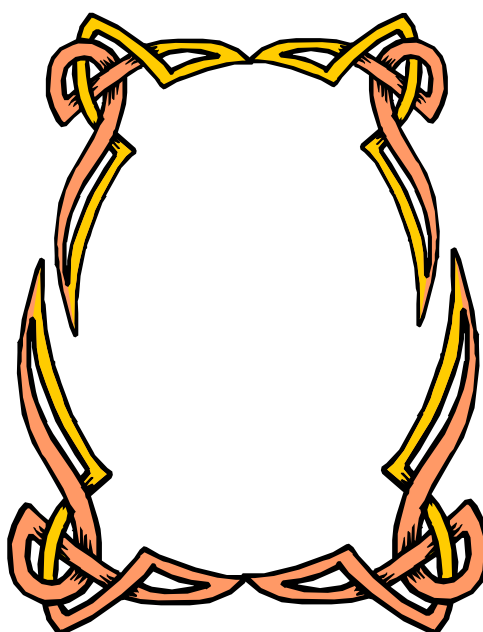
“That bracelet you refer to was given to me by—”

“I gave it to her mother and she passed it down to Angelita, and—” interjected *mi abuela* Lola as always.

“Yes, I remember you telling me that when I was a child, but where—” Lily stopped short because I glared at her and she could see that I wanted no more interruptions by God and all the heavens above!

“He took it with him. *Papá* made sure of it,” I continued choosing not to hear anyone else for that matter. “There was nothing anyone could have done to keep us apart, especially after Arturo died, except God himself—” *¡Maldita sea!* I will curse if I want to.





## AMADITA

1989

“Angelita, *¿entiendes lo que estás diciendo?*” I interjected. “Ay *m’ija*, Dolores has barely left us and it will be some time before she can speak through her portrait.”

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

Walking into Mom's room, there it was, again that black and white portrait of my beautiful mother, Dolores, sitting on the same antique sofa Granny Flynn had been photographed sitting on, photographed by Leonard when I was still a baby.

In the picture, Mom sits in the foreground in a strapless evening gown.

"It was gold lame and I made it," she had announced proudly when I was much younger. A green scarf—"I made that too," she would remind me—is draped around her midriff, having fallen, leaving her shoulders bare. It lies in the crook of each bent arm. One hand rests upon the other, as if she is about to applaud someone or something. Her wedding ring is a band set against another with a stone, a diamond, maybe. Large earrings, gold flowers, adorn the elegance of her swept-back chignon. Leonard is reflected in an elaborately carved wood and gold accented mirror (which now hangs in my apartment bedroom) behind her. His face is right next to the lens of his view camera. A scarf is draped over his neck. He squeezes the shutter button. A barrel spot light hovers above Mom, showering light upon her chest and naked shoulders. Smooth, sleek, unequivocally soft. This image is Leonard's self-portrait of their marriage. A photo of himself shooting a portrait of Dolores on this Louis XVI

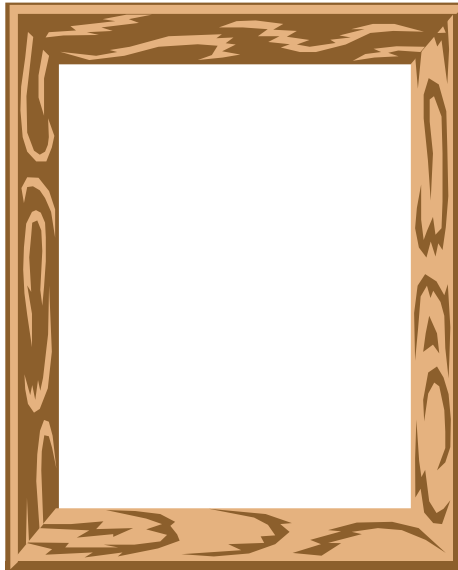
Neoclassical French furniture. It might appear in *Vanity Fair* or *Vogue*, but it doesn't. It looks like something out of a film noir still photo, but it isn't. Mom had told me long ago that it was their Christmas card photo. They look so refined. They are still very much in love in this still-life moment. This is early in their marriage. Since the portrait hung in Mom's bedroom right next to her dressing table, I had not looked at it for a long time. I could barely bring myself to enter that room or look at the picture even now . . . especially now, so soon after her death. At this time, however, I was far more interested in how much time must pass before Mom might be able to speak to me, or if she ever would be able to.

"How long?" I asked not just one of the portraits but of every one hanging in the hallway.

"Honey pie, sometimes it's just best to wait and see. Do you understand?" said Granny Flynn.

"Sí, she is right Lily. *Sólo Dios sabe*. Each departed soul takes the time God gives it to find a voice. And only after that God-given time are we allowed to speak to our existence, and then only to those worthy," said Lola. I never wondered why I had been considered worthy; even now, it had not occurred to me. I had just accepted that these women, as they had presented themselves, and as they were doing now, simply were part of the world that I inhabited, a world that never offered rational reasons for the magical aspects of such a gift. I had been so grateful, for their early presence. But as with all things supernatural, their existence in my life brought its prescient joys—and unprepared heartbreak. No matter. I must hasten with my questions, because I felt sure that now they would speak without as in the past the old hesitations.

"Mom's last words were something about Lola's portrait and the bracelet, what did she mean?"



*Angelita/Angie*

1989

“Let me begin,” I said, “*mi amor*, by telling you about the man whom I loved, the man who swept me away. The force of him was stronger than I could resist. Arturo also fell in love with a girl who *papá* did not approve of. This all happened at about the same time and well that made *papá furioso* . . . ”

“Angelita, “ interrupted mamá Amadita, “your *papá* wanted the best for you and for Arturo, even though he was already lost to us . . . how could he have known that—”

“*Basta mamá*, not another word!” I screamed.



## Granny Flynn

1989

“That’s tellin’ her, darlin’, ” I urged Angelita. That woman, Amadita, and I had always been a bit testy with each other on that wall. I knew Lily, who was stiflin’ a laugh, had always found it more amusin’ than anythin’ else. She loved the way I just spoke up in Angelita’s defence when I felt like it.

“Listen sweetie doll, I suggest you grab a seat and maybe a coffee or somethin’.” I always was the sensible one.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

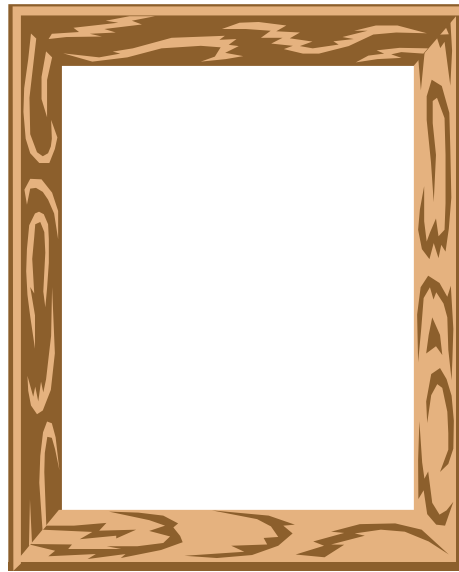
Feeling a bit lost, I wandered back into my room to find a chair, and there it was: the old swivel oak chair on screw pedestal roller wheels that Leonard had abandoned just as he' abandoned Mom and me. It had been in his portrait studio and he'd brought it home one night, Mom said, when one of our kitchen chairs had broken. I guess she thought it would fit nicely in my room when I was in high school and in need of a chair for the desk one of her customers no longer wanted. I used it mainly to roll around my room, away from my desk, and my homework since I'd mostly completed it at the bakery in between customers. All I could think of in this moment was what was I in for?

Then I walked into the kitchen to see if there was any coffee. Instant, ugh, only instant. Mom liked it, probably because it didn't take any time to prepare. She had always been in such a hurry to get to work at that restaurant and never had time for breakfast. She had run a food service establishment, but had hardly eaten proper meals herself. She was too busy making my breakfast before school and later making Alexis's breakfast when she babysat. So long ago.

I boiled some water and stirred a couple of teaspoons of old Nescafe into it. At

least there weren't any cobwebs in it. Sugar should help stave off the bitterness. Yes, there was sugar in the cupboard still, cubes of it. I walked back into the hall, positioned a chair right in front of Angelita, just like the old days, and thought, taking a sip of the instant brew, looking up at my *tía*, this is going to take a while.

## Part Four: Revelation of Past Narratives



Angelita/Angie

1989

“He came in search of buried treasure, and instead, he found me,” I began my story that could wait no longer.

“What do you mean treas—” Lily started.

“*¡Cállate!* . . . hush,” shushed Amadita, Lola, and even Granny Flynn, each of them with index fingers positioned at their lips signalling *silencio*.

“*Es su turno, no la interrumpas*” said Lola, showing me some support, finally. Once I was ready to tell my truth, the ladies on the wall knew there would be no stopping me—it was my time—no interruptions allowed. Lily sat perfectly still sipping



her coffee and listened as my voice continued with purpose.

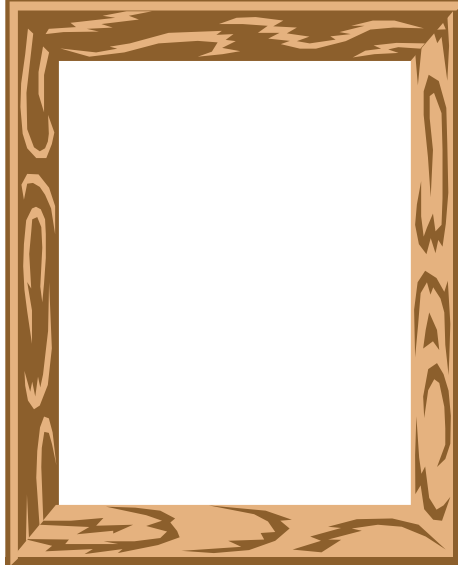
“His name was Tom Willis, at other times just Tommy, but to me, especially in those more private and intimate moments he was *mi Tomás* . . .” I paused to swallow back an emotion that I had long put aside and now stood to overtake me in a wave of repressed memory. No tears mind you, no tears possible.

Lily felt it, too, and both she and I took in the breath of it simultaneously. I was finally sharing this memory, or rather a re-memory, not of a parallel reality, but of an original event and together all the most vocal ladies on the wall were remembering it also. And more importantly some of them had actually lived it with me.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

What will this act of remembering bring? I wondered sipping my disgusting coffee. At least it was hot. What is so frightening? These women whose voices, for as long as I could recall, had told Angelita to keep silent, or to wait, or to *cállate*, simply, just shut up. At long last I felt, for the first time, that I was considered ready to be privy to the truth of the past not as Mom had always recalled it, or wanted it recalled, but as Angelita lived, and inhaled it. And so I waited to exhale just a second or two so as not to disturb the air in the room that was at a standstill until *tía* Angie continued.



Angelita/Angie

1989

I had to slow down as the words, the images poured out of me like a broken dam. I could see the quizzical look on Lily's face. She had no clue why I was talking about him. All right then . . . *más lentamente*, slow down, Angelita. No one will dare interrupt me now.

"His green eyes with amber centres pierced into me like the swords he collected. He saw the beauty in things representing the past and the hands that created them. He prized old things, things that others might discard or throw away.

"*Tomás's* family owned an interior design business back in Los Angeles that sold furniture along with antiques so he was always looking for old weapons of war, rusted or damaged, swords mostly, but sometimes old books, or musical instruments like old horns in particular, and old Spanish scales in many different sizes, even

pharmaceutical bottles . . . anything he could trade for something even more valuable or make into a piece of art. They even specialized in making table lamps with shades that could match wallpaper . . . so many of the finds *Tomás* traded for or purchased were considered for their potential as lamps.

“No matter if something was damaged or needed restoring, he loved finding objects that had stories attached to them, if not, *Tomás* created stories about them: the search for them, who he encountered in the journey, something about the former owner or owners. The stories gave more value to the objects, he said. Potential buyers, who may not have wanted to purchase something, usually bought these things when the backstory drew them in.

“Often, *Tomás* took photographs of his finds and after developing the prints which came out as postcards, he mailed them back to the family store where they were framed and sold to some of their many wealthy clients as works of art. Of course, in those days he told me, that his father thought *que es ridículo* to think that customers would look at photographs as works of art, but his mother believed in his talent and when selling to some of her favourite clients the very antiques *Tomás* provided from his travels, she would include one of his elaborately framed small photographs for free. Apparently the ladies loved them.”

Lily laughed at that one. At least I was holding her interest because she had not quite finished her cup of coffee and had not gone for another.

“When word got around the city that this *gringo* who set up a photographic studio would take a photograph for free if something of value was brought along for him to inspect, purchase, or trade for, there would often be a line of people out the door. Many of them wondered how such a small box camera could create anything worth looking at. And when *Tomás* unfolded it like a small book, his subjects were

completely mystified. And they couldn't wait to see how their portraits turned out. But *Tomás* had preferred taking portraits of people with a larger camera and *ay ay* the time it took for him to develop those from glass plates, *híjole—muy complicado*, so shortly after he traded that camera and its many accessories for the simpler black box camera.”

As I spoke I had to pause for a moment as the power of projection engulfed me making Tom appear before Lily and the rest of us in full cinematic brilliance. Over 6’ 4’ with strong muscular arms, combed straight back sandy brown hair, chiselled face, and long legs, in a white starched shirt that was open at the neck, he was working in his studio, bent under a camera cloth trying to focus his lens on a very stunning young girl who had her back to the camera.

“There had been a group of *indios* earlier in the day that had brought an old rusted scale probably used to weigh gold bullion. They had found part of it protruding out of a crop of rocks in the hills where it appeared to have been buried for many years, they’d said. Tom took their portrait and then the men left in a hurry as if they were being chased by someone completely forgetting the scale. This made Tom very happy as it was the kind of object he loved to restore and ship back to his family business. Tom loved nothing better than to tell tales of the origins of such things even if he added his own fiction to enhance the story.”

Lily could see and hear him direct the young beauty from behind his photographer’s cloth to release her long black hair as he was explaining about this rather large scale which measured almost four feet in height.

“I refused to let my hair down preferring to keep it up and fastened with my silver encrusted Spanish combs. Isabella, my old governess, was sitting within view and looking quite disapproving of the whole scene and tapping her foot, which made me tense. Then Tom asked me to turn my head and hold the profile shot for what

seemed an eternity.”

Lily commented how this Angelita version of me, looked so unusually proper, almost conservative, in a dark green silk embroidered dress with handmade lace cuffs and collar. I was covered down to my ankles and appeared as big as a minute. The dress exposed a tiny bit of bosom just enough to underscore the young maiden I was then in full flower. I held the pose awkwardly. It was obvious that I felt a great degree of discomfort and fidgeted so much that I ruined the exposure. Tom asked me to return at a later time and I agreed. Isabella, acting as my *dama de compañía*, looking quite elderly in a coarse cotton black dress with white hair pulled behind her neck in a severe bun wearing a bonnet more appropriate for a decade prior, insisted that we leave immediately as any proper chaperone would have done.

We rode on the streetcar together one afternoon without my Isabella.

“*Tomás* had travelled through Texas down to Mexico City and then to Puebla. He had been on a very long journey buying, selling and trading his many found objects as he liked to call them.

“She and I had walked by his studio a few weeks before when he first opened it as Tom was standing out front wiping down his front window. There was a sign saying *Se Venden Retratos*, “Portraits for Trade.” Isabella did not want me to speak to him, but he said “*Buenas tardes, señorita*,” and his American accent made me laugh a bit, but I did not want to embarrass him so I merely responded in English. Father had sent us to a private school where we studied French and English as well so Tom was rather surprised that my English was quite good. This led to a promise for me to return at a later date for an official portrait. Isabella refused to stand more than two feet away from us. Mother insisted she follow me everywhere.”

“And with good reason, *hija*” interjected Amadita. But any more conversation

from her was silenced by Lola and Granny Flynn hushing her again.

“I could never say no to him, not after that first time . . . he was so . . . convincing. And he compelled me to forget who I was and what I should do. He compelled me to obey and no one had ever done that before.”

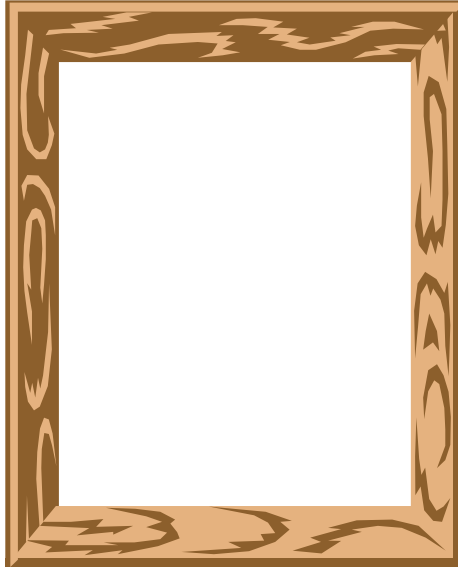
*Lily Adams*

*1989*

Interestingly, Lola and Amadita were making the sign of the cross just as Angelita's admission of such dominance by another spilled from her lips. Fingers touched foreheads then hearts, then left and right shoulders as Mom used to do, especially, upon hearing some news that was upsetting like the fact that Leonard could not be found when she tried to pursue the possibility of child-support from him.

Her attorney had told her not to spend money and resources to find him because without his input she could raise me as she wished. And Leonard would have nothing to say about it. Kindly, Mom had waited to contact the attorney after Granny Flynn succumbed to cancer. Granny Flynn's presence had plugged the hole Leonard's leaving created. And Granny Flynn loved me so much that she preferred to live with her ex-daughter-in-law and provide some sustenance, never wanting any compensation nor exacting judgement over her son's abandonment of us. Granny Flynn simply came to save the day and provide as much love and support as Mom needed. I never thought to ask her why—not even her portrait, not until today but those questions had to wait . . . Angelita was just getting started and I didn't want to give her any reason to cease this intact memory of a past I so desperately wanted to relive along with the others.





*Angelita/Angie*

1989

“*Tomás’s* touch invaded my every waking moment, as I remembered the heat from his hands that barely skimmed my shoulders when he was helping me arrange my pose for him that first time. His hands shook ever so slightly, no differently than my whole being shook from his nearness. Then there were Isabella’s constant throat clearings spoiling the moment. These sobering reminders of any potential breach of impropriety certainly prevented us from moving in the direction that her presence attempted to thwart. I was so dazed by the experience that, after Isabella and I returned home, I had to lie down the rest of the afternoon.”

“Your face was completely pink. I scolded Isabella for not making you wear your hat on such a sunny day,” said *mamá Amadita*.

“Sun had nothing to do with it, *Amadita*,” said Lola with a snort. She always interrupted me. But I carried on paying them no attention.

“And then *Tomás* sent a young Indian boy who ran his errands to throw a note through my second story window asking me to meet him two weeks later. I could

think of nothing else till that day. And then an opportunity came. I told *mamá* that I did not need Isabella to accompany me that day as I was meeting Carlitos's intended, and my best friend, Teresa, for lunch and that her *dama de compañía*, Mercedes, would chaperone us. Teresa was only too willing to help me as we had been close ever since we were babies. Remember, Lily, how I told you Teresa's childhood crush was Arturo's playmate too. Luckily, this ruse worked as everyone was too distracted by *mi hermano's* affair with Petra, the upstairs maid and seamstress. You remember, Lily, I told you about that once too."

"Yes but, *tía*, you only said that Arturo loved a girl, who died, so this maid or seamstress or whatever she was, was my *abuela*?"

Lily heard the same collective sigh that I did from Lola and Amadita as if they were afraid this would come up again and they were hoping it would not. But no amount of forced breathing or admonishment from them would stop me. I was determined.

"Well, yes, and no. I mean she was only fourteen, *la pobre inocente*. She was so taken with him. She used to sew Arturo's shirts. I am not sure who started it, but I know Arturo showed me how Petra would embroider tiny little hearts or roses on the insides of the shirts she repaired for him. He rolled up one of his sleeves one hot day as he was about to mount his stallion, Pico, when he was going out to survey some of the property with *papá*. And he noticed a heart shape on the inside of the cuff. It was ever so delicate in the colour of *café con leche* so as not to show through the fabric. At first Arturo said he thought it was just some sort of mistake, but when it happened again on the tail of another of the shirts that Petra mended he realized that he had an admirer. Petra was terribly shy and hardly ever had spoken a word to him. She had these lovely brown almond shaped eyes. And her skin, although dark, as though she were

perpetually tanned, exuded such smoothness and sensuality. Arturo was not a bad boy; he was just like so many of the young men of that time. He felt that he only had to emanate allure to possess something if he wanted it badly enough, never wanting to really work hard to obtain what he desired.”

“Your *papá* spoiled him too much, he—” Amadita hurriedly added.

“¡*Sí mamá!* We know that,” I hissed. Lily was not surprised at this as she had witnessed how Amadita and I had always sparked during conversations in the hallway so long ago. They seemed a meagre reflection of the power of the enmity we experienced when *mamá* and I were both alive.

“All the same, Lily, Arturo began to truly care about his *querida niña* as he called her. She was so simple, so incredibly lovely with those eyes that looked up at him as if he were a god. Isabella always scolded Petra for thinking that she, a simple servant in the house, would even presume that the son of her employer would think anything more of her than mere sport. But Petra could not help herself and continued with her needlepoint symbols of love inside Arturo’s shirts.”

“But *tía* what happened to you and *Tomás*? Tell me more about Arturo . . . later . . . please I’ve been waiting so long and I’m getting confused between the two stories,” said Lily.

“Of course, *m’ija*, I understand, but they are linked and I cannot necessarily separate them . . . but let’s see . . . where was I?”

“You and *Tomás* were on a streetcar ride” Lily reminded me while shifting in her seat and standing up momentarily to stretch her legs.

“Ah *sí*. It was the one time *Tomás* and I could sit and truly speak to each other on that streetcar. We rode around downtown to the *zócalo* and back twice forgetting that we were supposed to disembark in the square. He told me about his past, where he

was born, what he had been looking for when he came to Puebla, and that he felt strongly that I had a part to play in his future. His parents had escaped an unusually sweltering heat wave in Buffalo, New York to a summer cabin in Chautauqua. And it was there that Tom was born.

“His parents were Methodists, his mother taught Bible school for a time, and his father Harold Willis ran the family business, Willis Interiors, as I said, a company that imported wallpaper from Europe and made furniture with fabric to match that was used on sofas and chairs that they created. They supplied many of the larger retail outlets in the area. They also imported antiques from Europe and Central and South America. His mother finally was persuaded to give up teaching and help run the business and manage the seventeen full time employees there. Lillian Willis was very good at sales in their Buffalo store, which was later moved to Los Angeles.

“*Tomás* took more joy in how things were made, however, and what made them work, and even more how electricity worked. As a curious student at Harvard, where he graduated with a degree in Applied Sciences with an emphasis on Electrical Engineering, he was almost expelled for building Tesla coils in his rented room and practically electrocuting his roommate and then almost burning the rooming house down. And later, *Tomás’s* curiosity turned him from how the mechanical or scientific aspects of life worked to documenting life itself for his personal growth and understanding of the world around him.

“As I said before, for him, the photograph and the act of making one became as profound as creating a brilliant watercolour or painting, however, *Tomás* always insisted that photography stood on its own as a work of art. What a photograph captured was in effect a living thing or an extension of the heart of the photographer who depicts a moment forever frozen in time: a portrait of a child who will never age, a

portrait of an exquisite engraving in silver on the handle of a *pistola* will never tarnish, a portrait of an ancient Mexican sword perfectly hewn with floral etchings and crosshatching on both sides of a blade that will never blunt or dull. He claimed he could only capture one-dimensional moments of the many multi-faceted human beings or objects that came before his lens. *Tomás* truly found his calling in this field and his passion drove his photographic eye.

“This used to frustrate, his father very much, *Tomás* said, because Harold wanted *Tomás* to stay in Los Angeles, and help run the business, but his mother encouraged him to see the world and bring back any curiosities she could supply to the rich clientele that kept the company going and had been for two generations. What did upset his mother was that *Tomás* turned away from his Methodist upbringing. He decided that believing in a god or in nature or in the forces that caused the universe to move in its harmony or even disharmony was so vast an idea that no one should be restricted to any one church, place or particular priest or minister to communicate with such divine aspects. Luckily, his father interceded for him with his disappointed mother.

“As long as their son was finding and passing on treasures to be sold to clients who were appreciative of the craftsmanship and the stories each purchase carried with it—that was God’s gospel or so Harold convinced Lillian. *Tomás* said that he found the power of nature or the universe or even God in all the places and people and things that he encountered along his journey and that God had led him to me. *Entiendes*, Lily, he felt that being spiritual was understanding that real beauty and purity moved, lived, and breathed within the many people he had met and the stories and treasures they shared with him.” *Mi querida* did not respond immediately, but smiled and waved her hand in the air as if to say yes, go on. So I did.

“And on that streetcar ride that day, *Tomás* said that he and I were destined to meet. *Tomás* and I talked and talked for hours. I have no specific memory of the sights and sounds we passed that day only the sound of *Tomás*’s melodious and mesmerizing voice telling me again and again about his passion for objects from the past and the photographic process that he documented them with. He wanted to freeze an artefact, he called it, prevent it from decay and its story from being forgotten. It mattered. It was important, if not to the original owner then to whoever retrieved it from a state of apathy and neglect. These items that once belonged to someone or somewhere had voices that deserved to be heard, deserved to reflect a past that might be forgotten otherwise.

“I remember the chills, as I listened to him and looked into his eyes that pervaded my legs, travelled up through my groin, my spine and culminated at my breast as if his words had pierced me straight through the heart. I knew this man was mine somehow. And I was soon to be his. Those eyes. Those eyes when they looked at me, through me, stripping away the clothes that covered the animal spirit I hid from everyone. I wanted to unleash it. He made me want to. And yet at first I just laughed at him. I felt he was just toying with me. I felt that he was just the kind of man *mamá* had tried to prevent me from meeting—”

“*Ahem, ahem, hem*” Amadita was clearing her throat, but I ignored her again. Granny Flynn actually snickered, but said nothing.

“*Tomás* was a free thinker. He embraced life as I did, but was unable to in the open as my parents wanted me to marry someone they chose who they felt was right for me and who deserved part of our estate as a dowry, but *Tomás* wanted nothing more than for me to ride that streetcar away with him . . . and . . . I wanted to. As the one hour together turned into three, I knew that if I did not go home soon Isabella would

finally notice my long absence, especially if she had spoken with Teresa's chaperone that a deception had occurred. Luckily, Teresa took care of the details so that did not happen. She kept Mercedes busy on a shopping spree and ended up buying her a new frock so that delayed them from arriving home too early and not giving Isabella a chance to get the latest gossip that day. I would have done the same for Teresa if she'd asked."

"She had the sense not to—" interjected Amadita.

"*Mamá*, if you say another word, *te digo que*—"

Lily interceded instantly in this instant, perhaps for the best, knowing that my threat of *I'm telling you* could have unleashed a full blown war of pictures flying off the wall as she knew I had let loose in the distant past although in measured amounts.

"*Tiá?*" She asked as if she feared that *all* the portraits would come crashing as a result, if my rage went unchecked.

"*Sí, mi amor.*" I calmed myself thanks to her.

"You said that the stories were intertwined. How?"

"Well . . . I . . . could not stay away from *Tomás*. And I suppose Petra could not stop stitching her love into Arturo's shirts. And he, in turn, could not stay away from her *que Dios lo bendiga*." Again Lola and Amadita both made the sign of the cross and echoed the blessing as I spoke over them and crossed myself as well.

"After that first time I could not deny him. He asked me to come in for another portrait sitting and that is . . . when . . . it . . . happened."

At this point Lily did not have to ask what "it" was because, again as if watching a film . . . Lily saw me walk into Tom's portrait studio. She heard the door slightly creaked. It was a bit warm inside. Tom shut the door behind me. He looked seriously at me. We talked for a bit, general niceties about the weather, and how long I

had arranged to be away without Isabella being alerted. The arousal in the room was palpable. My eyes kept looking away from Tom as each time I held them, they burned a part of him into me. Lily could see the way each of our movements fought tumbling into each other's arms too soon. We stumbled with formality as he suggested I take off my wrap. I wore a simple dress this time, white batiste with silk embroidery across the neck and the hem. My black beaded four-strap heels accented my small frame and dainty feet. Tom towered over me as he directed me to sit in front of his camera.

“We were like two magnets. I suppose it was the same for Petra and Arturo. Sometimes, a power pulls people together and there is no preventing it. All convention and propriety ceases or at the very least pauses for a time—an eternity, a life altering moment—the result of which, is neither discussed, mentioned, nor cogitated.”

Lily and I heard a deep sigh emit from Lola, Amadita, and even Granny Flynn. Lily sighed too. Perhaps her thoughts drifted back to a time she had experienced such a moment with Scott, as she once admitted. Then her hands pulled up her hair into that twist of a bun. She knotted the ends locking it in place along with that memory also, maybe. Her eyes gaped at me as if to say that was then, this is now. She looked up at me intently showing, I felt, that she preferred to listen, watch and remember this memory and no other.

“*Tomás* asked me to turn my head and look away from him, or perhaps I just did it instinctively as I could not yet look directly at him for too long. Then he placed the gold cross around my neck. The one you once thought was silver. *¿Te acuerdas?*” Lily nodded yes.

“It had belonged to his mother and she had given it to him to keep him safe on his many travels. Sounds familiar, doesn't it, *mi amor?*” She did not answer me, but as I asked this Lily reached up to touch the St. Christopher's medal around her own neck.



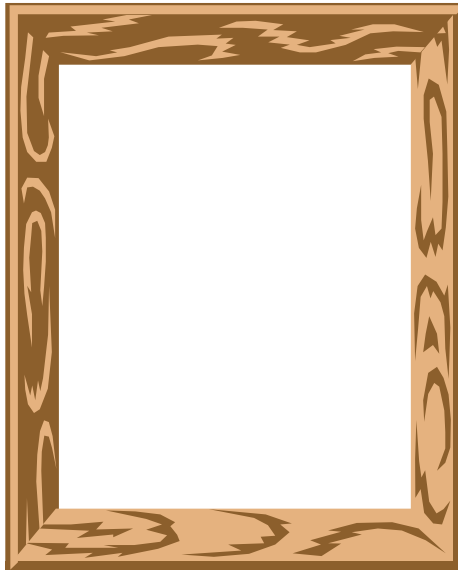
“ ‘Hold it’, *Tomás* would say. And I did, for what seemed to be a very long time and then I got the giggles. And he said ‘please stop, Angelita, or you will ruin the picture’”, but I couldn’t help it. He scolded me with such softness. And I wanted so to run my fingers through his perfect hair. Then he moved a light near me then farther away or opened the curtains . . . I can’t recall, exactly, I suppose to make shadows appear behind me. Then he commented how ‘Exquisite’ I looked and then he’d say, ‘just another,’ over and over. This portrait was to celebrate my seventeenth birthday which was in a couple of days.

“*Tomás* said he was going to make it memorable because it would be a gift to me and that it would be his masterpiece. Finally, after some time, his hands caressed my shoulder as he lingered in front of me. At one point, he kneeled down to arrange my hair away from my face for I had worn it loose into the studio remembering how I had not that first day I posed for him. But this time I felt the need to let my hair fall. This time I also felt the need to let my soul breathe.”

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

I watched the scene grow more heated as Tom gently and slowly put one hand on Angelita's shoulder and gathered her hair up in his other to move it away from her face and in this swift and supple moment, their lips met. Angelita made no movement at first, and then she put her arms around Tom as he kissed the nape of her neck, her shoulder, and pressed his face into her breasts. I almost gasped audibly, as I realized that this was the sitting for the very portrait of Angelita which now spoke, but I knew better than to ruin the moment by letting the present intrude upon Angelita's past. As Tom continued to kiss Angelita, he lifted her up and her legs wrapped around his waist as he carried her off into another room. The movie suddenly fell away. I almost fell off my chair catching the near empty coffee cup from falling instead.



*Angelita/Angie*

1989

“You realize, of course, what came next, need I say more?” Lily did not answer because I knew that she understood the power of such passion. It was readily comprehensible given what she had just seen, most certainly, but she hesitated for a moment as if thinking about the other part of this story.

“*Tía*, what happened to Petra and Arturo? I have to know.”

“Well the same thing that happened to us. After a few months, Petra conceived Arturo’s child and I conceived *Tomás*’s child, or perhaps I should say children” .

“What do you mean children?” Lily raised her voice into a high pitch of astonishment. “Mom said a child died, one child?” There was a long pause. No one on the wall said a word. The quiet turned long and uncomfortable. Lily kept shifting in her chair then standing up smoothing her skirt and sitting back down and doing it again, because she knew that we women had always had more trouble keeping quiet than staying quiet.

“*Tomás* was very excited and we made plans for me to leave Puebla with him before the baby was to be born. He wanted his child to be born in America. Arturo was just the opposite. He loved Petra, yes, he did, for as long as he could not have her and once he had her . . . well . . . I’m afraid . . . the problem was *papá* .”

“He blamed me, of course, for everything” exclaimed Amadita. “He said I should have had a better watch on my flock. Ha! And then I reminded him how he had encouraged you to be independent and stand up for what you wanted . . . the same way you rode your horse—untethered and unbridled. That was his fault as was his privileging of Arturo. Arturo could never do wrong even when he drank and drank and became addicted to that nasty drug after Petra and the baby died and then—” *mi abuela* Lola, immediately inhaled sucking in all the air in the hall. And all was quiet again. No one said a word. That prickly silence. Lily said nothing, poor dear, she probably wondered who would be the first to break it?

“*M’ija*” Lola began, “¿*Comprendes lo que estás diciendo?*” and at that moment Lily knew that Amadita knew exactly what she had just said a moment before.

“She does indeed, *abuela*,” I assured Lola.

“Wait,” said Lily, “wait . . . the baby died? But then I thought . . . wasn’t that . . .?”

“*Sí, amor*,” I continued, “she died as did her mother. The baby was ¿*cómo se dice?*, still born, and Petra had gained so much weight during her pregnancy everyone thought she was having twins, but in those days high blood pressure was rare for a girl her age. She kept working for us through her pregnancy, as *papá* vowed that if he was responsible for her medical care, she might as well stay hidden upstairs, doing her chores so that our friends would not know. He might as well still get some work out of her in return. She had a stroke. The labour was too much for her, I suppose. Arturo

was away when it happened, *papá*, made sure of it, but when Arturo returned he . . . well . . . he started drinking and everything else and . . . *papá* was uncompromising with Arturo for besmirching the family name, not because of poor Petra's death, but because of the way Arturo responded to it. He fell apart and then that kidnapping, but I told you about that."

"But wait . . . who then was my *abuela*, I mean . . . if Petra and her baby died? What have you been keeping from me all these years? My God . . ."

"*Querida*, you know how much I adore you and tried to watch over you all these years," I tried to reassure her.

"You mean, wait a minute—" Lily placed her hand upon her forehead as if to cushion a blow.

"You are my granddaughter, *hija*, and Dolores was my daughter." There, I said it.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

I sat there saying nothing for a full five minutes. And no one else said anything either. It was as if the portraits had never spoken. They looked perfectly normal. No sense of movement from any of them. Not even a momentary whiff of life or breath. My childhood flashed before me.

All those times Mom kept saying her mother had died in childbirth. She even referred to Angelita's portrait on the wall as Aunt Angie and had taught me to call her *tía*. What else had Mom lied about? In an instant the past, as I knew it, was tumbling into a faint memory of reality. Were all these people inside the frames in the hallway of my life a lie then? My imagination? And their stories—false memories, perhaps? Had these portraits all mislead me on purpose?

My mind raced to snapshots of Mom comforting me when I had first cried about Angelita's portrait trying to speaking to me. I remembered, too, how as an adolescent every time a story from one of the ladies on the wall began to engross me, Mom would suddenly pop up out of nowhere to rush me off to bed. As the recollections of these scenes immersed me, I wondered: what else? What else was there? Because there was always something else.

When Alexis first snuck out at night at sixteen to be with her friends after

curfew, and meet other school friends at a party, the what-else was . . . a car accident. Luckily, Alexis wasn't hurt, but the driver, Bobby was in a coma for a month. The other girls in the car walked away, but not this boy. Alexis and those same girls went every day to the hospital to see him after school. Alexis would read to him from her collection of poems and share her drawings that she kept in her journal. She didn't care that Bobby was in a coma, she was certain he could hear her. Bobby was Alexis's best buddy. Bobby was gay and most of the kids knew it in this same Catholic school that I had attended, yet the good what-else . . . was that nobody cared because he was funny, likeable, and popular.

Nevertheless, when all the others in their clique tired of visiting him, Alexis continued her vigil, sharing with him all the gossip about what went on in high school that day or that week. And when Bobby finally woke up, the what- else . . . was that he had to spend another six months learning to walk again. Every mother's nightmare (but this turned out to be a good what-else . . . because Bobby made it through and not quite a decade later was a groomsman at Alexis's wedding).

Or during senior year, when Alexis would come home after a date and her heart was broken by the cutest kid on the football team who saw her as just one of the many girls in his collection of followers, that what-else . . . was that Alexis's best friend, Molly, got pregnant from said football player. And quietly, and without much fuss Molly's parents insisted she have an abortion and the what-else . . . that happened just prior was that her father practically beat the hell out of her. And another what-else . . . here was that she contracted an infection after the abortion or perhaps after her father's beating, the what-else . . . being Molly was hospitalized for another week. And then her father sent her to a boarding school on the east coast. And the football player's family left that Catholic high school and moved to another state before the girl

recovered because this young kid was being scouted by the majors and no one was going to interfere.

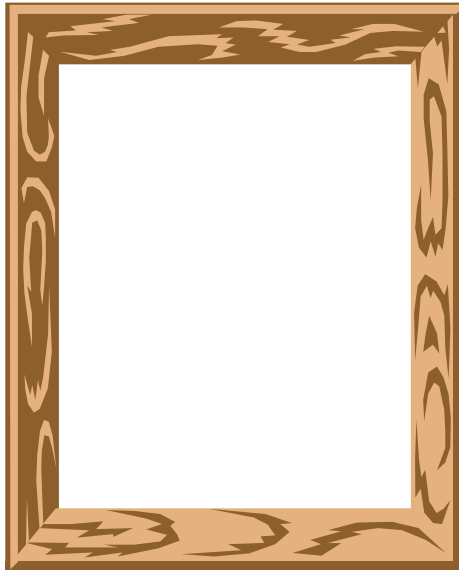
I hated the what-elses . . . of life because, usually, I found them not to be happy ones. When Scott had first shipped out shortly after Alexis was born, I remembered thinking “what the fuck else?” and then I lived to regret that stupid thought. I still did. But I couldn’t stand it anymore. I’d waited this long. I wasn’t going to wait any longer, although I was almost afraid to ask.

“Well . . . what else?” Again no one stirred. The hallway grew cold. I wasn’t sure if it was that last drop of the cold coffee I sipped, or if it was time to close that window I had struggled so hard to open earlier. I got up and noticed the air temperature was definitely dropping. And instead of another cup of coffee I made tea. Fortunately, there were still some old Lipton tea bags gathering dust in the cupboard. As I swallowed that first sip I burned my tongue, and cried out, “God damn it!” I walked back to my bedroom and slammed the window shut making a loud racket.

Then I walked back to the chair in front of Angelita and sat back down and waited. Cupping my hands around the mug, I let the warmth fill me. I took a deep breath and continued to wait and sip the tea more carefully.

“Tell me about, *tí—abuela*—tell me more?” Silence. “Angelita, I need to know and you know I do!”





*Angelita/Angie*

1989

“Your mother was a *gemela*,” I whispered exhausted.

“A what?” Lily must have forgotten the meaning, or she simply did not want to recognize its implications.

“A twin,” replied Lola who should have let me answer, *¡Jesucristo!*

## Part Five: Forgiveness Never Forgets

### TO BE OPENED AFTER MY DEATH

*Dear Lily,*

*I promised you didn't I? I know you didn't believe me, but please do not judge me too harshly querida. Read everything you find first. Completely. Then decide. But now m'ija perhaps much will be clarified. I did my best. It probably wasn't good enough, but my confusion and vagueness, which I know has caused you pain and frustration, was for a good reason. I think. Just know I loved you in spite of it all. I only wanted to protect you.*

*Love, your Mom*

*What I recall from that irrational year 1950—a bit before, and some after:*

*I contemplated not going to the wedding that morning. I was too tired. I had worked hard and long the night before helping the bride get everything ready. That was often the way things were with rushed weddings. And I knew if I didn't, I'd never hear the end of it. After all, I was Edie's bridesmaid. Edie and I had lived together after my grandmother Amadita passed away. Edie's mother, Teresa, had been a long-time family friend and told me I could stay with them until I was ready not to. Teresa, who was Angelita's childhood friend back in Puebla, felt a strong dedication to any member of her family, and after Amadita died, when I was still in high school . . . well . . . Teresa had promised my abuela Amadita she would watch over me if anything ever happened. Teresa always said that I was like a second daughter to her anyway.*

*I had stopped using the name of Lola by then. Dolores del Rio was a popular Mexican actress who was famous and infamous in Hollywood. I was still called little Lola but as I grew, I wanted to honour my given name, the beauty everyone told me I had, and my country, by using it—no more silly nickname. Even still, Amadita continued to call me Lola refusing not to (in memory of her own mother), until she sadly died of a cerebral haemorrhage one morning.*

*My best friend Edie, her name was Edith, but since grade school everyone called her Edie because of her petite size, was not so little anymore, she was just shy of two months pregnant and only the groom and I knew, of course. Teresa would have had a nervous breakdown if she knew. Her husband Carlos would probably have shot the groom with one of the old pistolas he'd saved after my grandfather Julián died and left Amadita alone with a nieta to raise. Mi abuelo, Julián, had given Carlos his favourite silver handled pistola when he and Teresa married back in Puebla.*

*Julián had cried bitterly during the ceremony because Carlos's best friend, Arturo, did not live to attend. Julián never quite recovered after his son died so wretchedly. And no one liked to talk about it because of the stain on the family's honour. Julián and Amadita not only lost a son, but also a new born baby granddaughter as well, yet there was so much more to the story . . . The fact that Angelita had also died in childbirth in the same year and what happened immediately following her death was something else the family did not speak of. Julián forbade it and all obeyed.*

*Luckily, Amadita and Julián did adore their niña Lola as they sometimes called me, after my great-grandmother. Later when we moved to Los Angeles, Amadita often pointed to her one photograph of Arturo so I could see the man she claimed was my father. She had no photographs of Petra so she was usually not talked about other than*

*to say she had lived just long enough to give me the breath of life. And then she was called to God.*

*Julián had intended to move the family and what was left of his estate out of Puebla and up to los Estados Unidos because of so much tumult during the revolution. One week the federal troops would present themselves and insist on Julián providing them horses and food. They paid him with worthless pesos. The next week the revolutionary forces of Villa and Zapata, having chased the federales away, presented themselves to mi abuelo insisting on the same treatment if he knew what was good for him and his family. They paid him with money that appeared to be recently and hastily printed. They insisted when that perro de la Huerta was gone (one of so many presidents)—Muera Huerta was usually their battle cry as they rode out of a town they had just plundered—this scrip would have great value, then they proceeded to take everything that wasn't nailed down. Yet, out of respect for Don Julián, they did not rape and murder the ladies in the family or any of the servant girls.*

*Even when Venustiano Carranza came into power, and then afterwards Álvaro Obregón, Julián knew that his life in Mexico and any hope of progress for an hacendado was over. After Obregón was assassinated, and the brutal president Calles took over, Julián had had enough of Mexico. But he never lived to leave it. Like his father before him, his heart simply stopped one day due to the shock from the sheer effort it took to keep his home, his estate, and his family intact during these deadly times. Perhaps the struggle to keep his family secrets buried, like his gold, weighed too heavily upon him as well. But that remains to be seen.*

*Some years before, one night very late, it was mi abuela, Amadita who dug up a small amount of gold in an old leather bag. He had hidden it in the old cemetery behind Arturo's grave. With that Amadita was able to secure passages on a*

*northbound train for herself and me, just a baby then. She left the family lawyer in charge of selling off the hacienda, the ranch, and the few businesses left, and sending the coveted French antique furniture bisabuela Lola had hidden up in the attic up north, once Amadita could secure an address in Los Angeles for him to ship it to. The furniture arrived, the money from the sale of the properties never did.*

*Carlos and Teresa had left for Los Angeles also, a year earlier, after Carlos found his twentieth dead body lying in front of his aunt's shop. He was sick and tired of having to clear away dead soldiers or dead revolutionaries from the front door and then having to wash away the blood stains and patch up the bullet holes. ¡Gracias a Dios! that his aunt had died some years before because having to do this kind of duty every morning would have killed her. It was bad for business and half of his food shipments never arrived disappearing on the roads into and out of Puebla City. The many skirmishes fought on a regular basis during this madness made carrying on any kind of sustainable trade in the city impossible. No, Carlos had had enough and so had Teresa.*

*This morning I had had enough of work and enough of Edie's drama. I didn't want to wake up. I didn't want to get dressed. I wanted to stay inside my dream where everything was calm, cosy and compelling. White, everything was white. I was walking in it, surrounded by it. It was fog-like and yet the atmosphere felt warm as in a steam room. Perhaps the fog was really the steam, but the heat of it was neither overwhelming, nor oppressive, rather more enticing, humid, even sensual. I was nude, or, no, maybe not. I wore something that left me feeling naked. The fabric looked like linen but felt light like gauze. I turned back to see from where I'd begun, there was a female presence. I was sure of it. Why I didn't know. Dreams are like that sometimes,*

*you exist in them, move in them, with no forethought or understanding, you don't know the why or the where, you just are. Maybe it was the gentleness in the voice telling me to keep going. That's what it was . . . a supple, soothing sound encouraging me.*

*When I turned to look ahead and see where it was I should go there was a person also covered in that same glistening white, wearing that same gauzy garment as I was? Tall, he (for now I was sure the person standing at some distance was a he because the shoulders were broad and appeared strong) waited and watched me, but he did not move. I knew him. I didn't know how, but, but . . .*

*"Dolores, hermana, wake up," Edie was shaking me. We referred to each other lovingly as sisters often. "We have to get going, come on!"*

*"Wait, what about all that crying last night, and saying I don't want to do this? Caramba you kept on until . . . ¿qué hora? . . . 2:00 in the morning," I said rubbing my eyes and stifling a yawn.*

*"Never mind that now, you know if I don't do this what papá will do." And so we gathered ourselves, the bride gown, the bridesmaid gowns, our war paint, as Teresa called the bag of makeup we lugged around with us, and headed out to the church. We decided to change there and I would do Edie's makeup, something I used to do for many of my high school friends. I'd read the movie magazines and copied the makeup of the different movie stars I liked. I charged \$2.00 a face and had a nice little bit of savings from it especially around prom time.*

*"I guess Lewis wants to live, doesn't he?" I called after Edie who was stumbling over her dress as her purse was falling off her shoulder. She didn't laugh, but shrugged her shoulders because she knew she had no other choice. Edie and I had graduated from Los Angeles high school—Edie, with honours and me, with just passing grades. I preferred working in Teresa and Carlos's small restaurant in downtown Los*

*Angeles just off Sunset Boulevard more than studying. Edie preferred studying with her boyfriend, and now soon-to-be husband, Lewis. Maybe they should have studied in the library more and in his dad's old 39 Ford Coupe less? I never quite understood how Edie and Lewis could do what they did in that car and did it way too often as Edie's delicate condition confirmed.*

*I loved working behind the counter and waiting on tables while talking to customers and discovering everything I could about them. I enjoyed listening to their stories and also the tips they would leave me. They said I looked younger and more exotic than a twenty-two year-old with my thick mass of chestnut hair and green eyes with amber centres. Sometimes customers, men mainly, but some of the women too, complemented me on the "loveliness" of my eyes and my figure. I'd smile and thank them, but truth be told I didn't really think much about it. Mainly, I liked making money of my own. I hoped someday to manage or take over the business—anything to help Teresa and Carlos.*

*Once in Los Angeles, Amadita had had to find work sewing in one of the factories in downtown Los Angeles. Amadita, once Doña Amada, the grand lady who was used to ordering servants around and buying new dresses at the drop of her ample purse filled with gold coins, now had to work side by side with women who would have been rejected by her as servants in her hacienda for being too crude, or too ill-mannered. These were outspoken, loud, and poor girls who had also left their homes in Mexico because of the revolution, the offspring of those who lived in poverty, were uneducated, but smart enough to get themselves out of the country.*

*Amadita knew how to sew and embroider as that was the one thing Lola had insisted she learn how to do as a child "because every lady of any worth embroiders quaintly and with skill at the very least." Amadita first began sewing bras in one of the*

*factories, but later because she had such a sense of style, she gravitated into sewing samples for a particular design company. Shirley Designs made women's dresses under many different labels for the larger department stores like Bullocks Wilshire, Saks Fifth Avenue and Broadway. Shirley herself would consult with Amadita on the look of a particular dress design and Shirley trusted Amadita to make just the right changes Shirley wanted to a sample before the final looks were decided upon.*

*I wanted my tired abuela to stop working so hard and that is why Carlos and Teresa hired me to work each day after school in their restaurant named Carlotta's. At first it was part time, but after graduation I worked there full time. The food tasted home cooked with a bit of Poblano and French flair in each dish. We catered to the lunch crowd from the nearby offices and to a small dinner crowd. And, often, we catered small parties. Amadita was against it; she had wanted me to focus on school, and college, but when her headaches grew worse, she relented. And when she retired, Shirley herself made sure to give Amadita an extra bonus that sat in the bank and earned enough interest for Amadita not to worry so much. The headaches lessened a bit except that Saturday morning when she took her last sip of café con leche dipping her final hot steaming croissant into it.*

*"Okay okay, I'll be right there," I assured Edie who was yelling and honking from Lewis's car. He had lent it to us to drive to the church to meet the other bridesmaid as his best man would be driving him there a bit later. They had to get to the church and I was still trying to find the bridal veil that Edie almost forgot. Everything was happening as in fast forward and I just couldn't move quickly enough. That dream. That dream still held me in a trance, trying to recall every detail. I felt so, so . . . discombobulated.*

...



*“Dolores, have you met Daniel?” said Lewis. I had just returned from freshening up my lipstick with some of the other girls in the bathroom. The gossip level in there had reached a high pitch of anticipation when the talk pointed to how handsome Lewis’s brother, Eric was. He was only about fifteen months or so older, but he looked a bit like that dreamboat Frank Sinatra. Yet Bernice, Edie’s other bridesmaid, couldn’t stop cooing about Eric’s roommate, Daniel.*

*“Gawgeous,” is all she could say. Bernice had met Edie and me in grade school. Bernice loved gawking at the boys and gesticulating with her long red painted nails. But in truth I hadn’t really paid much attention. I was so caught up with helping out and making sure that everything was running right that Mr. Gorg, as the girls kept calling him, had escaped me.*

*Carlos and Teresa had asked me to keep an eye out for anything that needed tending to in this event with over a hundred people. I had even made sure the little tulle sachets I had tied with pink and silver ribbon filled with candied almonds were properly placed by each place setting. Being in charge always thrilled me. It gave me a sense of worth that sometimes escaped me when I was alone. I knew how to be self-sufficient because of my strong work ethic. But I had always felt somewhat isolated growing up without parents. Mi abuela’s love was selfless in many ways, but Amadita was not an affectionate sort and that was something I craved—human touch.*

*“No, how do you do,” I said shaking the hand of a 6’ 5” man with sandy brown hair and chiselled features. Daniel . . . so this was Mr. Gorg. The reception had followed the wedding in a hall inside the church. The bride and we bridesmaids all wore white lace mantillas on our heads. Edie had done her own hair and that of her bridal party. Edie and Bernice had decided to open a beauty salon together. Edie was*

*bright enough to go to university, but the urgency of her situation compelled her to start a business, and fast, with a little help from her unknowing parents. She and Bernice had just finished beauty school and Bernice could do the manicures as well. They had rented a small space at the back of a hat shop on Hollywood Boulevard. They were due to open in three weeks, so no honeymoon. It would be spent putting the finishing touches on the salon. But their creative talents weren't wasted on this festive day.*

*Our dresses were made of silk and satin provided at cost by Shirley's designs. Edie's gown had a row of satin covered buttons down the back that had taken me almost twenty minutes to button up before the ceremony. The peinetas, the Spanish combs, holding our mantillas were made of bone and had been sent from Puebla for the occasion. The intricate chignons that Edie created on herself and us girls made us look elegant and high fashioned, although a bit taller than usual because of the combs. We looked like three young señoritas entertaining at our elegant hacienda only it was in California rather than Mexico. Carlos's French cook had made the wedding cake out of pulled sugar. Each layer was dripping with finely shaped roses. The petals looked as if they were falling upward reaching to the next layer and engulfing the little decoration on the top of crystal wedding bells in pale pinks and pale greens. The champagne flowed and the dancing to the small band seemed endless.*

*Everyone was happy to let loose following the almost hour long church service at Blessed Sacrament Church in Hollywood. Everyone was also happy because the last Great War was long behind us. It almost seemed like a bad dream. It had been a hard time and now on this day in January the sun was shining and the joy in the room was blatant making all the guests feel such hope in their future, in that of bride and groom, and in the world. All Teresa did was smile, smile, and smile from lipstick cracked*

*corner to lipstick cracked corner. Edie and Lewis did too, but some of their grand grinning was a bit forced.*

*Eric had brought his roommate, Daniel, at the last minute. They both had driven down to the wedding a few nights earlier. The roommate had the car that worked. They attended law school together at University of San Francisco. Lewis was working as a mechanic at a custom garage in Hollywood which was not too far from Edie's salon. His parents always said Lewis was the brawn and Eric was the brains. Lewis knew cars and loved nothing better than to tear one apart and put it back together again. Eric loved looking at a problem from all sides and fighting for the underdog, any underdog, be it an ignored cause or a classmate who was bullied as Eric had been and that his many cuts and bruises in junior high and high school attested to.*

*"What was your name again, sorry, it's so loud in here?" asked Daniel above the band playing a tango. He reached out his hand to guide me onto the dance floor and held me in his arms close for a moment. "Dolores" I breathed into his ear. Then as the dance ensued and he led me into that first promenade and then left, right, left, right, left, he realized that I knew how to dance, but so did he. The girls and I usually practiced those intimate Latin dance steps back in school when we were supposed to be paying attention during gym class. I hadn't danced for over a year now and I'd forgotten just how much I'd revelled in such movements. My feet and hips were on fire with the ecstasy of the music and my partner. And when Daniel flung me back at the end of the piece and looked down into my eyes, both of us panting from the sparks, a flash of recognition hit us both. Like a twinge that leaves one not uneasy, but . . . uneasy—except this was far more than a twinge.*

*"Who are you?" Daniel asked in between nuzzling my neck and inhaling my perfume. I led him outside after our fifth dance in a row. I needed the air, a drink, a*

*cigarette, and a dose of the street outside. The noise of the traffic and pedestrians shopping nearby at Crossroads of the World, would take me back to reality, or so I thought. And before I knew it he was holding me close again. But this time there was only the music of his breath upon my ears, and his lips moving down my neck. I couldn't stop it. I didn't want to. I didn't know what it was, but I wanted what he had. Such electricity, I felt, with every touch of his fingers. I couldn't speak. I didn't know who I was here in this moment of . . . of . . . I didn't know what this was.*

*I, Dolores, was responsible, and independent. Dolores didn't succumb to silly emotions or sentimentality. Dolores was in charge of herself and the world around her. I had to be ever since I was a baby being raised by an elderly grandmother. I had to take charge of the family affairs when I was in grade school negotiating with bill collectors or with my teachers because Amadita could not leave work.*

*Yes, I'd had school crushes, but because I had to work at the restaurant every day after school, I didn't allow myself to waste time on them. I didn't lose myself then and I wouldn't now. Edie had and she'd paid a price. I wasn't willing to do the same.*

*I felt Daniel's heart pumping against my breasts. He was practically gulping me down. No, it was all too much, too fast and besides someone might see us. I wasn't doing this. I wasn't, I thought as his tongue searched out mine. But I responded in kind. I felt glued to him. The body heat, the wave of his arms closing in on me. I wanted it. The heat of it all was . . . I ran. I ran back to my obligations . . . back inside and into the kitchen. There, I would be back in control.*

*A cigarette, I needed a cigarette. One of the waiters obliged me as I checked to see that all the food was out on the tables and that Teresa and Carlos had nothing to worry about. I owed them. They never made me feel that I did, but I felt it anyway. I owed them my home and my livelihood. I could let nothing interfere with that, I*

*thought, as I madly puffed and puffed away filling the kitchen with smoke. Minutes passed, or was it longer? I wasn't sure? I would stay in the kitchen. I lit another cigarette from the pack of Lucky Strikes the waiter left near the sink. I wouldn't come out, yet I had to peek through the door and check to see if the reception was flowing smoothly.*

*"Dolores," Edie called out waving me over to the bridal party table. I waved back as I blew more smoke and picked some of the tobacco away from my lip, letting Edie know I'd be over as soon as I put out my cigarette.*

*"¿Qué le hiciste? What did you do to him?" Edie said pulling me into the ladies room.*

*"What to whom?" I decided to play innocent.*

*"Daniel, for goodness sakes. Lewis says he's never seen him like this."*

*"Like what?" I asked, acknowledging nothing.*

*"Stop being coy with me, hermana, you know exactly what I'm talking about. I saw you two on the dance floor!" Edie pressed on with a glimmer in her eyes. I always shared everything with Edie, but not this time. This time was too . . . too . . . well I didn't really know and until I did, I couldn't talk about it.*

*"Where is the bride?" The party guests were loud and clear through the ladies room door.*

*"Go on," I said glad of the interruption. "¡Vete!" I said pointing toward the door.*

*"To be continued," said Edie giggling.*

...

*June had been a hot month, but this Sunday afternoon it had cooled to the low seventies. Daniel and I were walking on the beach by Santa Monica pier. Since the reception, I had not been able to keep him from calling me—daily. As long as the phone bill was on his nickel and not mine, what else could I do? He wouldn't stop. I tried not to call him back. Then the letters came. I had to answer him, had to see him. It would have been rude not to. And Edie had been hassling me not to ignore him.*

*First of all, she reminded me that he was gorgeous. All the girls were agreed on that. Second of all, he had a great job and great marriage prospects, and Eric and Lewis said he was a stand-up guy. What else was there? I concurred, but I felt that twinge again, that uneasy twinge when he came to me in words and images . . . I couldn't put my finger on it. It was just there niggling at me. Yet whenever we were together his touch dissolved me and that terrified and attracted me to this passion that had been aroused inside of me whenever I was near him.*

*Now Daniel was nearing the end of his week break from the small law firm he was working at in Frisco. He was holding my hand as we walked, talked, kissed and tried to stop time to elongate these few hours left of togetherness as the waves ebbed and flowed around our bare feet. Luckily, Carlotta's was closed on Sunday and Monday and Teresa had insisted that I spend more time with Daniel as they, Teresa and Carlos, approved of this suitor, even though I refused to accept that word. Friends, I preferred, we were just friends. Edie's response to that was, "In what universe, hermana, honestly?!" when we talked at the salon. I'd agreed to work one day a week for Edie washing heads to help her out. The salon was small, but it was getting busy, the mechanic job was. To make matters worse Lewis had just been drafted. A conflict between Communist and non-Communist forces in a small country called Korea had been evolving into more than just a conflict.*

*In what universe exactly was what I also wondered? Why did I feel like we had met before, Daniel and I? Why did he have those eyes as I did? His green eyes with amber coloured centres mirrored my own. Then he said those words that gave me a sick stomach.*

*“The letter said, Greetings from the President, and you know what that means?”*

*“Wait, you mean . . .” I didn’t want to believe it. I looked back at him and the wind whirling across the sand caught up my hair and it blew across his face.*

*“I report next week.” Daniel was resolute there was no question in his mind this was the right thing to do, but there were huge questions in his eyes about me.*

*“Do you know where you will go . . . for training I mean?” I was leaning my head on his chest and fighting back tears. I didn’t want him to see me that way. I didn’t want him to have any reason to feel obligated to me. I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell him about what the doctor had confirmed for me the week before.*

*“Maybe Ft. Ord, not sure yet.” All I could do was hold onto him with more intent. I suddenly recalled how Edie came to work a few weeks before crying about Lewis’s draft notice. I’d hugged her and told her how brave he was and that she should support him because at least she was married to him and she would receive financial support from the Army while Lewis was fighting for his country.*

*“But the baby, he won’t even be here to see if he has a son or a daughter, he won’t . . . what if . . .” Edie had sobbed.*

*“Stop it, Edie, don’t think that way, you can’t and Lewis can’t afford to see you this way.” That didn’t stop Edie from crying, but the glass of scotch we both drank did even though it was only 11 o’clock in the morning. Edie had kept the bottle in the salon after a night of celebration on opening day, several months earlier.*

*“Listen to me, Beauty,” Daniel said, “I don’t know how you want to play this, but I know I want you and I think you want me.”*

*I had walked down to the water again to put my toes in. It was tepid. I heard him loud and clear, although I didn’t want to answer him. I just stood looking out at the sun as it began its descent into the horizon. The waves pounded the sand splattering it up on my legs and wetting my dress. My brain was pounding too, along with my heart. He had wanted more than just to be my boyfriend, he wanted me to marry him since that first meeting and I had tried to avoid that conversation and that decision in the letters, our brief meetings, and all day today since we had lunch together.*

*All I knew was that I needed to be near him again so frantically that it frightened me, that out of control feeling, that throwing caution to the wind. I hadn’t been raised that way. Everything had a logical outcome. You worked hard, you serviced your customers, you brought in more money, more respect, more appreciation, more of a following, you owed no one anything, you paid your bills on time, you met your obligations, and you expanded your business . . . you . . . you . . . His arms enfolded me from behind, he kissed my ear. He turned me around. He held my face. He kissed my nose, my cheeks, my eyes. He asked me to go to the small quaint little beach hotel nearby. We could walk to it from here. The sun’s final blush of an orb was sinking.*

...



Ft. Ord, Monterey, Calif.

June. 25, '50

Hello Perky Puss,

*It's foggy right now and as the night wraps itself around the base, imagine I am wrapping my arms around you and our baby. I asked you to marry me that last night together and I meant it. I know you didn't want to hear it, but remember that you and now our child mean everything to me. I only wish I had carried you off to Las Vegas and paid little heed to your doubts . . . your fears. I know it all happened too fast, like you said, but it's swell and I never want to let you go again. We came together somehow; call it fate, whatever you want. But we are destined to be together, there's no denying that now. You know that . . . in your heart and in your womb that carries part of us both. You know also that we are like two halves of a whole. That feeling we both have of incredible familiarity doesn't need to be analysed, only accepted for what it is-- we belong to each other. Just that.*

*I haven't told Dad yet because I wanted to talk to you about it first. Dad knows so little about you. And he is not well. I didn't want to tell him about his impending grandchild yet. He only knows that there is a special gal in my life and that she lives in L.A. and is somehow related to my old college roomy. His heart is weak from all those years exploring and moving about the world collecting this and lugging that. After the world wars and he was only in the tail end of the first, all that training at the U.S. School of Military Aeronautics then the war ended before he could officially get off the ground. Purchases of furniture, antiques, and lamps was certainly not at an all-time high in those day so his working, working, working at keeping the family business afloat has exhausted him finally. Thank goodness he sold it when he did. Yet he never stopped collecting.*

*More importantly, my beauty, how are you and the baby feeling? How did Edie, Lewis, Teresa and everyone take it? I know you said you still hardly show, but come on somebody must have guessed? I want to write and tell Dad the truth. I promise he will take it with his usual stoicism. His life has been filled with many disasters and he has always bounced right back through each one. He always said the death of my mother was the worst one, as I told you, but in her death giving birth to me, the gift she left him was me. He could never love another woman like that again. He always said she was his one and only. You are that to me. And I don't want anything to happen to you or I would never forgive myself. So please, please be careful and make sure you see the doctor like you are supposed to. Work is important, yes, but your health, yours and the baby's, is all that matters really. All that matters, too, is when this crazy mess ends we will never again be apart.*

*Before shipping out, I think, I hope, I'll get a 48 hour pass so with any luck you can meet me in Monterey as soon as I know which weekend, okay? To hold you and feel your lips upon me again, that is what keeps me going, Perky Puss.*

*Love, Daniel (who worships you) Willis*

*(What shall we name the little one, why not Willy or maybe not . . . Willy Willis may be a bit too much?)*

*A little more than two months after that visit, I was still working at the restaurant but I was so small my impending state did not show. I'd already told Edie in*

*a fit of hysteria one night after spending most of that morning and afternoon throwing up. I'd been vomiting every morning before work for weeks, but that day it wouldn't abate. I couldn't hide it any longer, so I spilled the truth about Daniel, the baby and how we were going to marry and how I had never wanted to fall in love with him, but that he was me and I was him . . . babbling so nonsensically that Edie just laughed and laughed and told me not to worry. She would straighten it all out with her parents. "I mean look at me for goodness sakes. They couldn't be happier."*

*"But you're married," I kept on crying.*

*"A minor detail" she said stroking my forehead lovingly, "and besides, you will be too, so stop your blubbering, it's all perfect, Hermana, don't you see." She put her arms around me and rubbed my back and just kept saying "there, there, it's wonderful news, really it is, we will have our babies so close together, I can't wait," which made me cry much harder. So later when a telegram arrived relaying the news that no one wanted to read during war time everyone else cried just as hard also.*

*There was one person who did not. He had been coming to the restaurant regularly since before I'd met Daniel. He came for lunch almost daily. I thought of him as one of my regulars, but other than that I didn't really care. I thought he was pleasant enough and very polite. He left me unusually large tips. Sometimes, as much as the whole lunch-check charge. He was an awfully nice fella, or at least Teresa thought so. I did too, but my mind was usually on someone else and something else. This regular worked at a nearby photo lab for Edison Products. He processed all the photographs that were in the catalogue that went out all over the country. He even shot many of the pictures as well. In his off hours he shot movie stars arriving and leaving at movie premieres. The Los Angeles Times hired him as freelancer. One of his old war buddies worked for the paper and put in a good word for him. He needed*

*the money as he had just bought a house in the burbs, as he liked to call it. Actually, it was in east Hollywood, some people called it Los Feliz, it sounded more established, so the extra work was appreciated.*

*He liked it when I waited on him. He made excuses to talk to me more than just giving me a food order. He complemented my eyes, and of course, my petite figure, which had been changing, but not obviously. He tried not to be obvious when staring at my legs. But I could always tell. He liked the way the seams in my stockings always accentuated the curve of my calf, he admitted later. And then there were those hips that swayed in a rhythm of their own making when I carried the coffee pot to and fro in the small and intimate dining room, another admission much much later.*

*He always said he also liked the way I smiled at him when he walked in. He liked the way my hair twisted up around my neck just so. He liked the way my loose forehead hairs framed my face and gave me that just out of bed after my beauty sleep look. He liked the way his name sounded on my lips—Leonard, what can I get you? If you only knew, he told me, after our first couple of dates, and then proceeded with his lunch order. But I did know. I just didn't want to know.*

*He'd been trying to get me to see a movie with him for quite a while now. I always made a polite and tried-to-sound-charming excuse. I had to help my girlfriend at another job. I had to stay late to plan a party that the restaurant owners were catering on the weekend. I had to sleep in as I was so exhausted lately. I needed to do so many other things than have dinner or drinks or anything with him. He was determined, however. So much so that one day when I missed work, he didn't know why only that something bad had happened because Teresa's eyes turned weepy when he asked after me. He asked if he could call on me, she said. He was worried and wanted to see if I needed anything or if there was anything he could do. Teresa tried to*

*stall him, but finally as she wrote out my phone number, she said she had to wipe her eyes to keep them from staining the paper, and then she told Leonard to wait a couple of days, a week even. He said he would, but when I still hadn't returned to work two weeks later, he couldn't help himself, and he dialled the number.*

...

*It wasn't until a couple of years after you, my dearest Lily, were born that I received another letter, letters, inside a package. I named you Lily because I loved the opera singer Lily Pons and so had Daniel actually. We had talked about names and Lily Willis had a lovely ring to it like the coloratura's voice. But that too was well after the rushed wedding to another in Las Vegas. Leonard had thought it best. He always did what was best. He had been selfless, caring, considerate, and above all gentle. Everyone, especially Teresa, thought marrying him was best.*

*Teresa urged me to accept his proposal, "Ay hija it's for the best mi amor, the baby will have a father to be counted on! Really, no te procupes." That only made me worry more, but I finally convinced myself that it was the only likely choice. I didn't want to go there to do it, but it was in my, our, best interest, wasn't it? Leonard had done all the thinking for me. He said he loved me that much. I needed time, I said, but really I'd taken my time before and . . . well . . . that hadn't turned out for the best, had it? And on the drive through the desert that nuptial weekend, Leonard had convinced me it was now best to let him do the thinking for all of us.*

*Inside that package were photographs, a piece of jewellery, some letters, and a check made out to me, which made my eyes bug out, along with a letter from an attorney, Eric, Lewis's brother. Funny how those items don't really seem to group*

*together well, but in this case they did. Within the initial letter was the usual legalese, which I didn't quite understand at first, but what stood out was the following section:*

And so Mrs. Dolores Adams, the following items were left to you in the estate of Thomas Willis and that of his son, Daniel Willis. As the attorney for said clients, the bracelet, the photographs, enclosed letters, and the check in the amount of \$20,000.00 were requested by Thomas to be sent to you upon his death. However, these items thought to be initially lost, were found last week among his belongings in the attic of Thomas's home which was not sorted through for almost sixteen months hence. I apologize, but please know that these items now have found their home with you as was Thomas's intent. For health reasons, doing it himself became impossible and he entrusted this duty to me. As his friend and counsel, again please excuse this delay. Please know we are available to answer any queries or clarifications you may require. Feel free to contact us at . . .

*Suddenly, I drifted off to the memory of a dream I once had not so long ago, about being in white. It had returned following Daniel's death many times. I saw myself walking toward that man in white surrounded by white, yet somehow, just as the man's face in the dream sharpened enough for me to make him out a bright light would blind me and then I'd wake up in a panic, short of breath, and in a sweat. The dreams stopped after you were born, Lily. This familiar flash came to me as I opened another envelope labelled "To my daughter." Strange, I thought, as I unfolded the yellowed onion skin pages, my hands shook. I didn't know quite why, they just did. I took a deep breath, pushed the dream memory away and began reading:*

To my daughter,

You do not know me as you should. But I know you and trying to forget you was by no means an easy task. Please believe me when I tell you that this is the hardest letter I have ever written so please excuse the ~~shake~~ shakiness of the hand.

When Daniel wrote to me the very last time, he wrote about you in a way that recalled a younger version of myself pledging my own love and devotion for his mother. . . Your mother.

How can I explain this?

We fell in love in Puebla City, Mexico, one afternoon. She came and sat for a portrait for me. After her death, I stopped taking such photographs, but that is not important for the moment. Now it is yours along with the others about which I shall explain a bit later. She smelled of cinnamon or canela as they call it there. She was of petite stature but had the passion and the heart of a lioness with the mane of hair to

boot. We both had a lust for life that knew no boundaries. Hers was in check because of the circumstances of her conservative father. He lived a life circumscribed by many boundaries of behaviour ~~as many tyrants—~~. He had her life ~~prearran~~ prescribed to be as he chose it for her. Accepting this love of mine, mercifully, would have enabled her to reject any and all such confines by embracing me and my desire to grow old with her here in the U.S. What we did not foresee, however, was the impending birth of you and your brother. God always has his plan and this we had not counted upon.

When I realized, too late, just who my son had fallen in love with, well, as you know, he died too soon, and, before knowing the legacy that he had, unknowingly, stumbled upon . . . falling in love with his twin sister. My heart serves me poorly as I write this. The doctors have told me it will not let me live as long as I would like. And I am too ill to travel. And I have not the strength to call. But now you know that although forbidden by society in both my case and Daniel's, this love that you shared must by no means bear fruit. And I mean by that no children. Luckily, that has not happened. I think you understand why.

Please know that I did everything I could to keep you two together with me as babies, but your grandfather's power at that time only allowed me to keep Daniel. Being forced to attempt to kidnap my own children from your mother's home in the dead of night did not exactly go as planned. And worse, I never imagined that in attempting to free you both. . . it would be from your dead mother's arms. Now you possess her photograph and the bracelet she once wore in her short life, the photograph of Daniel as young a boy on the verge of his manhood and a postcard photo of me during the time I was with your mother.

There is more to tell, but I am weary and will try to write again when I feel stronger. In this miserable moment, I trust you will forgive me for not speaking to you directly, perhaps I am the coward Julián Soler once called me.

I can only tell you that her name was Ángela Soler. She was known to those who loved her as Angelita. . . . She, we, loved you both more than our lives.

Your father, Tom Willis.

*I couldn't breathe. I felt as if I'd been punched in the gut. Doubled over and gasping for air, I forced myself toward the sliding glass door. Collapsing on the backyard lawn next to the hydrangeas I'd planted last year, I wept silently. Lily, how you loved those big blossoms. I had to stop you from tearing them off the stems and burying your sweet little face in them. You were napping, otherwise I think I would have shrieked.*

*I stifled an urge to howl at this past that had arisen to kill my future. I began to gnaw on the knuckles of one fist. It was early in the afternoon. Leonard was at work,*

*thankfully. I pulled my hand away from my mouth, saw blood, and my breakfast projected out of my mouth into a putrefied puddle under the bluest of the flowers.*

*Breathe, just breathe, I thought trying to slow down each hyperventilating inhale as I stared at a single cloud floating up in the bluest of skies. Why can't I just drift away on you? Why? Why? I wished I could fly up to the cumulous and float out of this moment of disbelief. But there was more. I was still clutching the packet of papers, photographs, and newly received income. I looked at the other sealed envelope. I was afraid to open it. Instead I reached for Daniel's photo. It showed a boy of, perhaps, junior high school age. It was black and white, but those eyes were unmistakable. There was a calmness and wonder in his look. Tears appeared on the surface of the picture. I wiped them away with my cashmere-sweatered arm, but stopped short as smears began to compromise the image. I turned it over and on the back was written Daniel Richard Willis, 14, in his own hand. Then I bawled in large gushes all over the front of my silk blouse.*

*While reading that other letter, I could hear you, my Lily, starting to wake up. I surged on through the letter. It was from Daniel to his father. The date was torn off, but I knew it was just after our last weekend together. A mass of memories flooded back of hands, arms, lips: bodies embedded, clutching, holding merging in desperation not wanting to part or say that cruel word—goodbye. That kind of love can drown you, and after Daniel died, I felt submerged in the deep end of such a loss. Only Leonard's force of will and your sleeplessness had returned me to the surface.*

*I held Daniel's letter rubbing it against my hand, to touch him, his cursive, and absorb it all into my palm.*

*Dear Dad,*

*Come on old chap. I know you'll love her eventually. Just know that I can't live without her just as you once told me you couldn't live without my mother. Don't be angry with me. Yes it all happened faster than we could have imagined. And we have so much more to tell you, but I promised Dolores I would wait to hear from you first. She will be my wife and there is no power on earth that will prevent it. For the first time in my life I can breathe in my soul's twin. We complete each other.*

*Look, when my tour's over we want you to be with us in Los Angeles for the wedding. You'll love all of her extended family...I already explained about how she lost her parents.*

*Make sure, Dad, that if anything happens to me, she gets the life insurance. And, Dad, if you can add a little something to it that would make me feel a whole lot better right now. But what the heck, nothing will stop us. It feels so damned right...the two of us. I know you understand.*

*Aw hell, we're about to go out on patrol again...A big bear hug to you from this shithole of a country--warmed by Dolores's love and your prayers....please write to her (and me) as soon as you can.*

*Daniel*

*P.S. send more Camels.*

*I pressed this letter to my heart. My lover, the father of my child, my other half . . . was all along my . . . twin. The instant recognition. The eye colour that you, darling Lily, had inherited. But what explained the passion? God help us, God help me, and God help my baby girl. Leonard must never know. No one must know, especially you, Lily. You must never know that Leonard is not your biological father. This is going under the lock and key of my life, I immediately decided. The secret of Dolores and Daniel. Keeping it locked inside of me forever made me feel less ashamed, less . . . less guilty. There was that out of the ordinary feeling again. That twinge that put me off when I first met Daniel suddenly returning. Had this been why all along? Twins are so linked, can't they read each other's thoughts? Can't they sense each other's whereabouts even if separated at birth?*



*Where was it that I had read about a study of twins, by chance, at the doctor's office one morning? Or had I imagined this? My brooding was interrupted by your crying, Lily dear. Oh my god, I thought, I wonder if Daniel's father had known about you what would he have done? I clasped that check tightly realizing that this legacy would go into a bank account no one would know about or maybe I should invest in stocks? It didn't matter what Tom would have done, he had done right by his son, but death had been quick and plans had been slightly delayed. But I knew the first thing I was going to do. Tomorrow morning I'd call that attorney and then probably go straight to the bank. Another secret of Dolores . . . and Daniel. Thank you my sweet. Thank you Thomas, I said aloud, then that word Dad. I couldn't even think brother and Daniel in the same sentence; all I could do was recall the smell of his skin, arousingly fresh, like the grass I was wiping from my skirt.*

*"Maammaahhhh!" you were calling me in between my own sobs.*

*"Baby girl, Mommy's coming, don't cry!" I called back as I ran in the house. In my haste Thomas's postcard picture fell on the floor. A dashing man—long and lean. His hand rests on top of a large boulder. He wears a suit, tie, and hiking boots of some sort. Smiling into the camera, his eyes are wide, joyous even, though his brow is wrinkled from the direct sunlight. Quickly, I scooped it up and placed it on top of Angelita's larger portrait. In time, I thought, these will hang together somewhere in this house. Even Daniel's picture that too, will have its rightful place somewhere in this house, someday.*

*My poor baby, Lily, your crying was intensifying into a wail.*

## Part Six: They Still Talk To Her

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

Holding the letters in my hands, I wailed. Not like the anguished lament so many years ago after losing Scott, but a wail of shock nevertheless.

“*M’ija?*” Lola called out to me tenderly. I had slid out of the chair and was kneeling on the carpet having dropped the packet after reading its contents. Trapped by this past that had seized me in such a way, I was unable to answer. I felt as if what went before wasn’t mine to own. Still, its overwhelming memories were squeezing the air out of my lungs, determined to kill my future, or so I thought. How could I deny

that this current revelation and where it would lead me was all part of who I was—so exposed in the light of new truth?

After Angelita's startling disclosure, I single-mindedly searched for that bracelet and anything more that I could locate to shed more light on this discovery. I'd hurried back to Mom's bedroom pulling out every drawer in the dresser and night stands. Then studying the contents of the closet, sweat trickling down my forehead and my back in the frenzied hunt, I yanked clothes off of hangers, emptied out each lovingly cloth-wrapped leather and suede purse, raining shoe boxes of old suede covered high heels from the fifties Mom had hoarded, in green, purple, brown and navy whacked and bumped me on the head. Sneezing from the dust kicked up from the flurry of foraging for clues, I wiped my teary eyes and then hollered at the room and its possessions, "Where are you? God damn it, Mom? Where? Where is it?"

Ultimately, looking under the bed, I found a flat plastic storage box. Something I realized I should have located ages ago, but because of the obvious hiding place, I'd never thought to look there in the first place. That's when I remembered Mom's long ago phone call of joy pronouncing how she'd found the bracelet and the photograph of Lola wearing it. I also remembered I never had called her back that day. I'd forgotten about it, or I just didn't want to see the photograph or any of the photographs anymore. And now here was Lola's beautiful portrait and the very gold Greek key bracelet I now held in my hands. Along with it were the family letters Mom had mentioned so casually in the past as if par for the course.

During that age old phone call, ironically, I could have cared less about any of these items. I was supporting Alexis and her wedding plans back then. Wasn't that more important? Plans that I had been unable to share and enjoy with my own mother's participation because her mental state had declined so rapidly by then that she

was unable to attend her own granddaughter's wedding. Mom would not have recognized Alexis, or her husband-to-be, Joshua, even though Alexis had introduced them months before. Even though Mom had pronounced him handsome and a good man for Alexis, her grandmother would not have known him, her, or the whys or wherefores of such a ceremony. That was the way of that damned illness.

Remembering the chasm of such a loss and the agony of watching Mom's decline cut deep into my psyche—so little was understood about this demon of a disease. It was only with the help of a CAT scan and a memory test that proved Mom did not have a brain tumour, or was not going insane, or was merely suffering from the stress of her hard working life or just dealing with an old person's disease. Barely in her sixties, Mom wasn't that old! So, why at such a young age? The doctors could never answer that question.

I recalled the day Mom forgot my birthday and never remembered it again. That was the beginning of the mother I knew disappearing over time. I remembered, too, that one night when I had stopped by to have coffee with Mom and share the joy of Alexis's five month old daughter's ability to sit up on her own that Mom had looked me in the eye and asked, "Who are you?" And not long after Mom became fascinated by a woman in the mirror she stopped recognizing.

"Why does she keep following me around all day?" Mom wondered. Even her conversations with this stranger in the mirror brought no clarification to her repeated question. Soon after, I had had to move Mom into skilled nursing.

The only way to know Mom now is through these photographs, I realized. The woman who inhabited her body those last several years did not know her own daughter, granddaughter or great-granddaughter which is why Alexis refused to visit anymore. Mom had just stared into space when Alexis laid baby Lola in her lap. In fact, Alexis

had to quickly scoop the baby up because Mom did not stop her from rolling right off. Mom only took consolation in her caretakers in the nursing home she ultimately died in. I recollected sitting outside one afternoon with her in the sunlight on the patio outside her room. Her caretaker had wheeled her outside and I was talking to her about Lola's first birthday party. Mom looked over at the caretaker; his name was Juan. She reached for Juan's hand and held it up to her cheek so tenderly. It should have been a sweet moment. But I felt betrayed, stunned, and defeated. It was as if I was not even there as far as she was concerned. Comfort could only be appreciated from this stranger, not from me, her one and only daughter.

The real Dolores would only be understood on these walls through the voices of these beloved ancestors. The force of such a blow—that only the feeling of such historical betrayal can dredge up—was all too much.

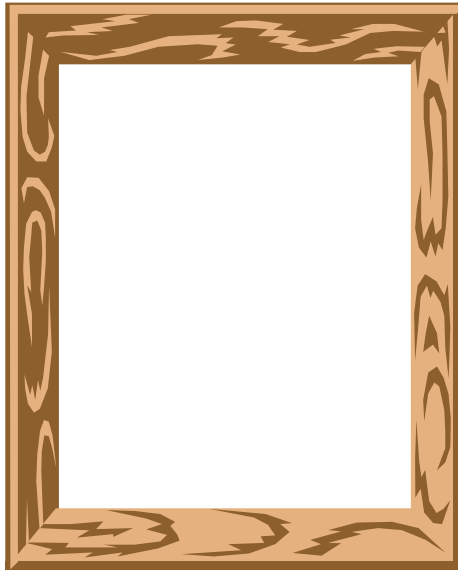
“God damn it all” I bellowed, “God damn everything and everyone to hell.” And that is when the women on the wall could keep silent no longer.

“*Hija ¡mírame, por favor!*” I would not look at my . . . my grandmother . . . my . . . *abuela*. How odd it sounded when associating the word grandmother with Angelita whom I had always called *tía*. But I wouldn't look at her or Lola either, no matter how much each asked me to. So both Lola and Angelita just waited. They were used to that and they were skilled at the practice. They had waited this long to enlighten me about who I really was and the arduous journey that led to my presence in this life. Never mind that I felt distraught by it. In time, with patience, I would see the good in owning my real identity, they said.

And in time Lola, Amadita, Angelita, and even Granny Flynn would continue their patient guidance of me and those I loved, but that could not be rushed. That they knew, they said. They also knew if they waited long enough, all would be well. That

was Lola, Angelita, and even Amadita's adage, "*esto también pasará.*" This too shall pass. Granny Flynn preferred to say, "It is better to give than to receive," but that was because of her Methodist upbringing. The others had been raised Catholic, so actually they all believed in a similar God; however, it was the way in which they went about it which was dissimilar, but the ladies didn't like to admit it as that would have been impolite.

"God damn it," I blubbered, "I don't care!" Even though they would say 'God damn it' was also impolite.



*Angelita/Angie*

1989

“Lily, *por favor, mi ángel*, do not take his name in vain.” I pleaded, “please just stop and talk to me, *querida nieta*?” I told her how I wished I could extend my arms around her, my beloved granddaughter as her sobs grew more muffled. I ached to hold, I said, hold my granddaughter in my arms, stroke her forehead affectionately. But this was not something any of us could ever have done or do now, unlike Dolores who could have done more of it when Lily was younger.

She remained on the floor in a heap, crying still but more softly. Wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater, she started to stand and speak to me, but just collapsed back on the carpet crying louder.

“Your *mamá, m’ijita*, had made up her mind long ago to block us out, not consciously, but with her mental state in such flux even if we had revealed ourselves to her, she would have thought it was the tricks her brain had already begun playing on

her many years before her illness was actually diagnosed. No, my dear Dolores fulfilled her part as the creator of this gallery compelled to frame each picture, and place each one artfully and devotedly, unaware of the visual truth she was orchestrating.”

Unaware, she was, too, that by taking each image and presenting it on these walls enabling us to refine our shared oral histories, a community, once fractured, has been created by dialogue and knowledge. Dolores has given us a precious gift, but I don’t believe I have to remind Lily of that. It will become obvious, in time.

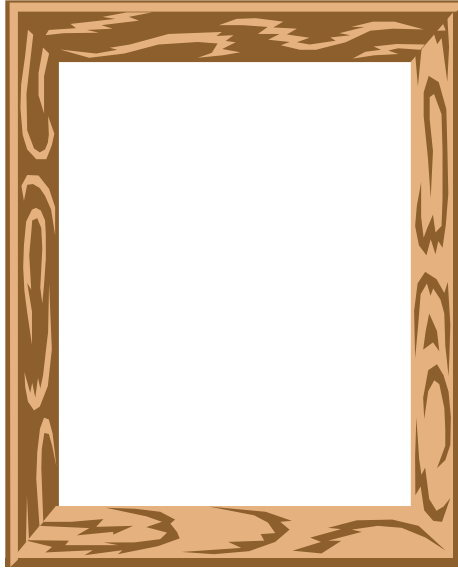


*Lily Adams*

*1989*

I picked myself up off the floor and sat back in the chair. My face still red and swollen, my eyes puffy—I wiped them again with the sleeve of Mom’s old black beaded cashmere cardigan that I had loved as a girl. I’d only had to have a couple of moth holes repaired on the back and on one sleeve. When I first wore it to the home to show Mom what wonderful shape it was in, she erupted in accusations calling me a thief who was taking pride in stealing everything from her poor mother, including her home. I rushed back to the car and discarded it. Then upon returning, Mom greeted me as if we had not seen each other in years. I’d not worn it since, how funny that today of all days, I’d chosen to wear it again. Probably, because no one would admonish me for doing so. What I never assumed were the memories and the scabs they’d inflicted being unearthed. The photographs had documented each and every wound. The photographs had made records of what was previously invisible.

“Yes, all right,” I said, smoothing back my now lighter brown hair, made lighter by a small gathering of grey streaks on one side. Pulling my hair up and twisting it into a knot, I took a breath in and said, “I’m listening,” to Angelita and Lola still talking over each other beseeching me to hear them.



*Angelita/Angie*

1989

“¡*Silencio!*” all the portraits were talking over each other momentarily, “I will speak now and only I!” I paused a moment and waited to make sure that my mother and grandmother would say no more until asked. Amadita knew better than to make a peep at this point as she had already kept quiet through much of Lily’s moments of despair. Granny Flynn had wisely chosen not to intervene at all as her time would come.

As Lily stared at my picture, she knew from times past that the holographic breadth of my powerful voice and persona would command all of, not only Lily’s attention, but all of the portraits in the corridor. Especially now.

“*Papá* had locked me in my quarters in the house, you see. He wouldn’t abide his daughter looking like a *puta* in public. And bringing shame to the house of Soler would not be tolerated. But what *papá* did not comprehend was the power of Tom’s love for me and mine for him.” At the mention of this insult, whore, Amadita’s mouth

opened attempting a futile rebuttal to a past of pitiful secrecy, and yet she knew to shut it just as quickly.

“Then I cut my hair. After screaming each day for the last few months to be freed, I lost my voice. I took those scissors thinking I was going to kill myself, but I was afraid of hurting the baby, and instead sliced off my hair .”

“You took 10 inches off of that exquisite mane—” Amadita finally interrupted, but I gave her a look that could have just sliced her portrait in pieces so no more was heard from *mamá* at that moment.

“I did it on purpose because I wanted *papá* to see me as a shackled prisoner. I wanted him to see that he was cutting me off from the life that was rightfully mine—a life with a man who honoured my intelligence and my passion, a man who was unafraid of *papá* and unimpressed with his wealth. Tom and I were going to build a marriage of equality and creativity together. He would teach me the art of photography as he saw it. We would work together and open a photographic studio similar to the one in Puebla, but in Los Angeles.

“I had arranged for some of Mercedes’s younger brothers to hunt and collect unusual items that Tom loved to collect and trade. And then they would be shipped up north. These would add to the curious finds that compelled Tom so and inspired him to make art from them with his photography. We would build a new venture out of this and have an art gallery inside the photography studio. We spent months planning this move. But Tom insisted on seeking *papá*’s permission by asking for my hand as any gentleman would have done.”

At this mention, Lily and I heard both Lola and Amadita emit audible sighs tinged with tones of longing and regret. Such plaintive sighs they were that for a

moment I thought I would have to admonish them again to keep quiet. However, I did not acknowledge the ladies, or stop my story, I merely carried on.

“What we didn’t plan on was that life . . . two lives were growing inside of me. The seed of our commitment to each other would not be stopped. And these small souls were proof of its durability . . .” I had to pause, just for a moment. *Que Dios me ayude.*

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

The hallway light began to sputter. Yet there was no breeze, not even from that open window in the kitchen, I realized. The sun had just set and the air outside had grown cool, but all felt calm. I thought at first that the force of Amadita and Lola's sighing sounds caused the light to flicker, but then I realized that only candles flicker from a breeze not light bulbs. That's when Angelita's story revealed itself as if on film right in front of my eyes. But there was no film, only the power of my grandmother to render the vividness of the past as it really was. I was not watching a movie on a screen, I was seeing the events and the people in them move, speak, interacting with each other as Angelita's narration continued. This atavistic vision enraptured me completely. I forgot where I was and what time I was living in because for the moment the power projecting from my grandmother's portrait encompassed my entire being.

I saw Angelita heavy with child lying in an intricately carved mahogany four poster bed with Mercedes, and Isabella standing around her. Mercedes was wiping the sweat pouring from Angelita's face with an embroidered lace handkerchief. I wondered if that might have been one that Petra had made. Another indigenous woman, *la partera*, who was the midwife usually called upon to deliver the babies of

the less fortunate was sitting at the end of the bed. Julián, Angelita explained, did not allow the family doctor near her to prevent the possibility of any word getting out of his daughter's indecent behaviour.

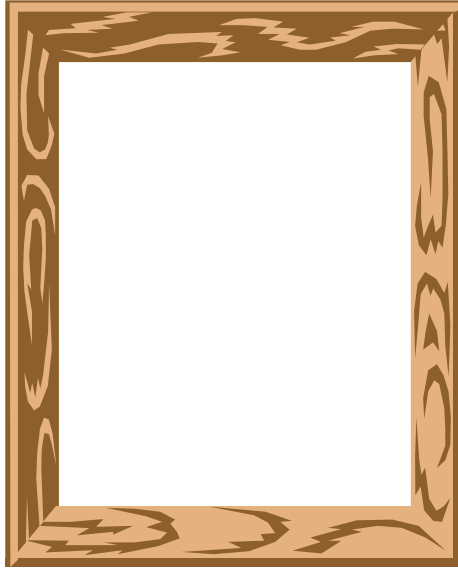
It was bad enough, she added, that Dr. Morales had delivered Arturo's illegitimate child just a week ago and then seen to the burial of both the baby girl and her young mother with the discretion that a bag of gold could buy. A son's misbehaviour was anticipated, even expected, although Arturo's reaction to his boyish blunder was not. As the son and heir of *Don Julián Soler*, Arturo should have shown indifference to the death of a simple servant girl—the mother of their bastard, but we already know that his subsequent behaviour following this loss exhibited quite the opposite.

Angelita looked tiny, almost childlike, with the exception of her heaving belly. And even though she looked the same age as she did in the portrait it was clear that she was in physical distress. Childbirth was well on its way and the midwife was ordering Isabella to get more towels and more hot water to assist in heating and massaging Angelita's perineum. I kept watching as Angelita sucked in her breath and then Mercedes helped pull her legs back as Angelita pushed and pushed to facilitate the crowning of her baby's head. Again and again she inhaled and then pushed for her life. Her face turned scarlet, her eyes bulged and I, too, felt the same urge to push. Angelita released her breath with a loud moan and finally after what seemed an eternity and countless pushes out popped a perfect little cone shaped head, indicative of the challenging trip down the birth canal.

*La partera* coaxed Angelita to keep pushing, *puja, puja* as she caught the little boy's body and gently placed it on top of Angelita's bare chest. I could hear the little

one cry softly as Angelita struggled to latch him correctly onto her breast. He looked to weigh barely five pounds—like a tiny white new born puppy rooting for its mother.

I wiped more tears coursing down my cheeks with the sleeve of Mom's sweater again. I recalled a student photography exhibit at my old college. One photograph stuck in my mind—simply titled “Madonna and Child” it showed a poor girl barely sixteen lying in squalor in an alley in some nameless ghetto having just delivered her dead baby on the sidewalk while apathetic pedestrians walked by. One man is looking over at her as he is about to flick his cigarette. She is holding her lifeless child, and the mother's mouth is open as if in a silent scream. The photograph was black and white—so stark in its surreality. Impossible to imagine it was not staged. But that was the point. What I saw in front of me was neither black and white nor staged. It was its own absolute of a flagrant reality in its depiction of the very birth of my own parent . . . parents. Immobilized, I stared transfixed at the images.



Angelita/Angie

1989

“We did not realize that I was carrying twins. I had grown large, yes, but not unusually so. It only became evident after Daniel pushed out of me with such force that, as you see, I screamed so the saints and anyone in *la casa* could hear me—save me. Tom had tried, but *papá’s pistoleros* had chased him off the property, which forced him to be far cleverer than they or *papá* .

“No one knew that I was even pregnant except for Tomás, Arturo, your *bisabuelos*, Isabella, and Mercedes,” I continued. Watching the scene, Lily could see that I called for Mercedes to pick up the baby boy and then I began pushing again. Isabella’s “*puja puja*” filled the room. Suddenly everyone heard it in disbelief.

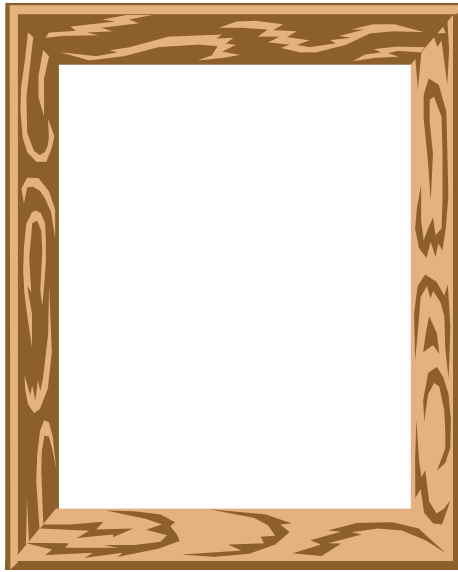
“*Viene otro,*” said the midwife simply that, another one is coming.



*Lily Adams*

*1989*

Having sat back on my chair, I was now on the edge of my seat as I saw another tiny head crowning. I was in as much disbelief as everyone in the scene, and then Angelita gave one final grand effort as *la partera* caught a baby girl who entered the world a full six minutes after her brother. Angelita reached for her as the little female gurgled while also nuzzling at her mother's breast, but Angelita felt so weakened that she could hardly hold this sudden surprise from *Jesucristo*. Isabella and Mercedes tried to whisk the babies away to clean off the vernix and swaddle them tightly. Isabella was supposed to quietly inform Amadita that all was successful. But Angelita wanted to keep her new-borns protected in her arms and on her chest just for a minute or two longer. As she smelled them, caressed them, kissed them, she began to lose consciousness. Transfixed, I had to remind myself this was the birth of my mother and father in living colour. Oh my God!



*Angelita/Angie*

1989

“Lola and Amadita had been locked in Lola’s bedroom as *papá* had forbidden them to be anywhere near my room.” I could hear deep sighing from them both on the wall as I continued my account.

“Papá ignored *mi abuela*’s pleading and *mamá*’s wailing to be set free to attend to me. Their cries fell on the deaf ears of *papá* who sat in the parlour holding his double barrel 12 gage shotgun loaded and ready across his lap in case Tom showed up unannounced again. He had promised to shoot Tom dead on site,” I said, “and he made no secret that he hoped I would deliver a still born.”

“However, the all-powerful, all knowing *Don Julián* was unaware that Tom had been climbing up the wall via the gigantic vermillion bougainvillea clinging outside of my second story bedroom window.” Lily saw him struggling. “Fortunately, he wore heavy leather gloves so as not to be a bloody mess from the thorns. He had bribed one

of the *pistoleros* who had happened to moonlight for him by going on some of those scavenger hunts for those unique and hard to find artefacts that Tom treasured.

“Pedro was very fond of *Señor* Tom,” I added, “who had helped him pay a doctor to nurse his febrile baby boy back to health in months past, whereas his current employer had refused. And when chasing *Señor* Tom away the week before, Pedro had falsely exemplified his hatred of *el patrón*’s enemy by taking aim with his *pistola* and purposely missing *Señor* Tom so as not to arouse suspicion to the other thugs of his disloyalty to *Don Julián*.

“Tom, wisely, had also bribed Isabella to keep him aware of the goings on in the hacienda all throughout my confinement. Isabella found *Señor* Tom quite attractive herself and even though she was elderly she couldn’t help flirting with him when he approached with coin in his hand. He would crook his finger gently and tease her with a little touch on the cheek and a wink of those dramatic eyes, which sent chills down to a place she hadn’t felt anything in a long time, she had admitted to me.

“Tom knew I had been in labour. Tom also knew he would soon free me from this jail I had been raised in. Through notes passed via Isabella who asked for Mercedes to help encouraged by some of those same coins, we had planned an escape with our new born, but soon he would discover a slight alteration in the plan.

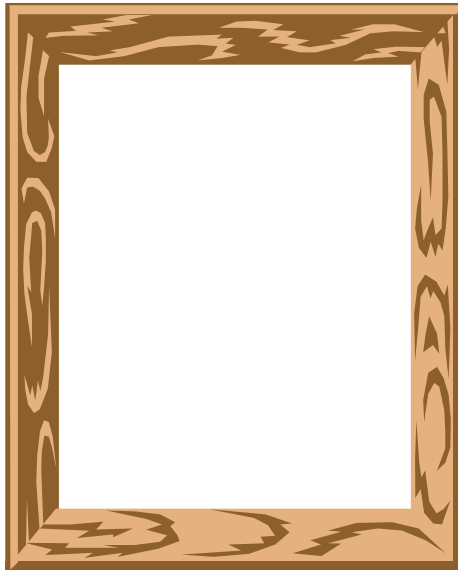
“Fortunately, the German shepherds that patrolled the hacienda had taken to Tom on his earlier secret visits as he had always brought bits of tasty meats. So the bitches were busy dining and saw no reason to bark at their chef. They merely responded to his pats on the head and scratching of ears with slobbery anticipation as the chunks of pork landed in front of them.”

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

When I first heard those words, I didn't want to believe it. I put my head in my hands and looked down when she said them.

"*Las placentas no salieron y se desangró,*" I heard *la partera* sadly proclaim, but didn't fully anticipate its meaning. Angelita had fallen asleep, at first, I thought. But then as Isabella and Mercedes burst into tears, each holding a swaddled tiny creature close, the travesty of Angelita's lifeless body washed over me. I watched spellbound as *la partera* put her head down to Angelita's nostrils, no breath. She began to wash off the large amounts of blood on Angelita's body, and then she wiped stains from the bedclothes and the floor as if not knowing what else to do. The placentas did not come out and my petite and spirited grandmother had simply bled to death. Isabella handed *la partera* a purse filled with money telling her to leave immediately. The lady opened her mouth as if to protest and Mercedes put her finger to her lips commanding the midwife's loyal silence and then hissed, "*¡Fuera!*" Out.



Angelita/Angie

1989

“Tom had to act rapidly, and he did,” I interrupted Lily’s deep concentration and then encouraged her to keep watching. Isabella and Mercedes were then whispering. Lily appeared not quite to make out the mutterings, yet she nodded understanding they possessed the tenor of a conspiracy between them.

Mercedes instructed Isabella to take my baby girl to Amadita’s suite of rooms where Lola waited with her. After all, they needed to meet their one and only *nieta* and *bisnieta*. Isabella also had the key to the suite of rooms and *gracias a Dios* she was so devoted to me. *La niñita* would soon need a wet nurse; she announced it was too late for me. *Mamá y mi pobre* Lola would soon learn the heartbreaking truth—what was lost in order for this baby to survive. And they only needed to know about this one baby.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

I suddenly realized that I'd bitten my right thumbnail down to the quick. I pulled my hand out of my mouth and sat on both of them and continued staring at history, alive with the force of its intensity, unfold before me.

Mercedes laid the baby boy down on his mother's chest for one last sensory moment with a woman he would never know. Then Mercedes rushed to the window, unlatched it and Tom climbed in. Shaken, stunned, desperate, he bent down and put his lips on Angelita's lips. They were still warm, he said. The baby grew fussy and then quieted as Tom grasped him tenderly in his arms wiping away the tears streaming from his own eyes so they wouldn't drown his son.

Mercedes warned him that if he didn't act immediately, he just might be shot dead before the night was over and maybe even his progeny. Mercedes apologetically explained that he had already missed his moment with his baby daughter, and the pain of not being able to see her stabbed his heart. He was not going to miss a life with his little boy, he pronounced. He prayed that by some miracle the loss of Arturo's daughter might somehow compel his daughter's existence. Yes, that might be. His daughter, a possible changeling, a precious surrogate for Arturo's. Could this be? It

had to, it had to. He convinced Mercedes and himself of the certainty of this truth of his own making. She agreed.

“*¡Vete, ahorita, Señor Tom, vete, por favor!*” Mercedes insisted. Go now, go, please. Tom didn’t move. “*¿Señor?*” He knelt down holding the woman he adored and the son he would certainly grow to adore. Put his lips on her lips once more. I was mesmerized watching my own grandfather act so heroically and yet I couldn’t help thinking that he was a coward for abandoning his daughter. I pushed that thought away and listened.

“My angel, keep a watch on them both. My beloved . . . my life, he will grow knowing of you. She will grow not knowing of you . . . unless you . . . we . . . force that knowledge, somehow, someway, so help me God.” Tom struggled through his sobbing as he murmured this into Angelita’s ear. Meanwhile Mercedes eyed the bangle bracelet with the Greek key design. Acting on impulse, she retrieved it from Angelita’s dresser; she slipped it into Tom’s pocket. She knew how much the gold piece meant to its owner and former owners. She knew that it had been passed down through the maternal line. She also knew that Angelita’s daughter, my mother, might never see it. Perhaps it was Angelita’s spirit gripping her to act, but Mercedes must have known it was the right thing to do. And then father and infant, hidden safely inside his jacket, slipped out the window and disappeared into the night.

Just as abruptly, my dissociated experience of this painful reality left its imprint—I had been unprepared to confront this new real thing. It felt cruel, upsetting, even scandalous. By this process framing my life, and that of my family, I understood, very quickly, a new way of seeing myself and the history that made me. The images before me had enlarged the neglect of the truth I had always been fed. I looked up and down the hallway. All was still. None of the portraits stirred. The quiet was stifling. I

turned the overhead light on again, which cast shadows oddly bent upon the carpet and on Granny Flynn's portrait. I rushed over to it because I saw a stain I had never seen before on her chin. I reached up to rub it out. It was an illusion, only the way the fusion of light and shadow struck the face. I found myself caressing the photograph just as Granny Flynn had done to me while putting a young six year-old me down for the night. Granny Flynn would rub my belly tenderly and tell me to pretend I had Jell-O in there. My jellowy stomach felt so relaxed that sleep usually came quickly.





## Granny Flynn

1989

“Sugar plum, are you okay?” I asked her as she was walkin’ away.

“I’m not sure, Granny, I . . . I don’t . . .” she turned around slowly to face me.

“No matter sweetie, your father has been watchin’ you all these years,” I gestured toward that one smaller photo Lily barely remembered seein’ and hearin’ once. “You see dear he has always been here, lovin’ you and waitin’.” Lily’s eyes opened wide and I saw that she remembered the portrait of Dick, so young, with those eyes. That was the photograph mentioned in those letters. Dolores had hung this portrait and never really explained it. And I had kept its origins a vague mystery, because—

“I gave Angelita my word. I had to protect her, your dear mother and of course Dick, well, his name is Daniel, as you now know, Dick (his middle name), also wanted it that way. Besides I had a school girl crush on a Daniel once.”

“But what about Leonard? Didn’t you have to protect him?” Lily said.

“He should have protected you and he didn’t. I thought I had raised him better than that. He walked out! Perhaps he couldn’t help it, but honey pie you were and are special. I had to stay for you, and then later, for . . . for them,” I said gesturin’ at all of the portraits, my companions, hangin’ in the gallery.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

Out of the blue, a memory of a long ago particular argument between Leonard, the only father I had known at the time, but a name I refused to use for him in decades, and Mom came rushing back with a new level of lucidity—Leonard storming out as if he had received the worst possible news from Mom. This revelation had nothing to do with her falling out of love with him. There had never been a real explanation given when I queried her in the subsequent years, other than her usual pronouncement filled with contempt of “Men!” But now I could picture the whole scene, certain that the truth of my own biology had caused Leonard to leave.

“Surely,” I said glaring at Granny Flynn with my hands placed on hips, “he knew that he wasn’t the man who fathered me, he obviously had lived with that.” Granny Flynn did not respond. So I had to say it.

“So what he couldn’t live with was that my conception was the result of incest. Of course, he just couldn’t bear it. Yet what right did he have to blame an unknowing participant? ” I think I yelled a bit too loud and I immediately felt guilty for Granny Flynn had never yelled at me. And the look on her face showed hurt. So I plunked back down on the chair and spoke more calmly, but still upset. “My mother was innocent of her own past. Why couldn’t he have understood that? ”



## Granny Flynn

1989

“Lily, you must . . . please . . . forgive him, he really wasn’t up to that kind of truth. Perhaps I protected him too much as boy. I let him believe that sheer will if well intentioned could make anythin’ right. I raised him to look away from the ugly truths in life considering his own father was one. Oh, I don’t know . . . there was so much that we didn’t talk about back then . . .” I said in my usual disarmin’ southern drawl, as the ladies on the wall used to say. However, I could see that Lily was far more interested right then in speakin’ to her true father as she was regardin’ his small photograph with some apprehension.

“How odd that seems,” she pronounced starin’ at his portrait, “my true father. What is true? That stupid and elusive word. And how is he my real father, because of

an accident of birth or was it something else?” She couldn’t be sure, she said, she only knew she wanted to hear him speak in the worst way.

“Will he speak to me now? He never has before . . .” She hesitated walkin’ over to where his portrait had hung all these years. Only once, years ago, did he slip and try to speak forcin’ me to hastily make up a lineage of his background.

*Lily Adams*

*1989*

“Go to him *m’ija*” urged Angelita. I looked at my *abuela* with new found love and admiration and walked the few strides down the hall and stopped.

Teenaged Daniel’s portrait still hung where it always had high up in one of the top rows where a younger me always felt he was watching, but the older me had just ignored. I stood and looked deeply into his eyes—eyes that reflected the power of my own gaze. I waited, wondering if he would indeed speak. He looked down at me for a moment. He took a rather large inhale as his shoulders seemed to rise and fall.

“At last,” he exhaled. His voice sounded like that of a young boy.

“So you are my real father?”

“What is real?” he asked sounding more like a man than a boy.

“Apparently you and I are,” I answered as I looked back down the hall at Angelita as she nodded encouragement. “Daniel, or should I say Dick or should I say Dad, or . . . none of them sound right.” I hesitated, untying my hair, letting it fall around my shoulders, then running my hands through it and then twisting it back it into a knot again. Still a bad habit when my nerves besieged me.

“No matter. It is unimportant what you call me . . . what matters is that you know now the journey those who are your flesh and blood travelled so that you could be standing here and in this moment having this conversation. What matters is that you believe how much you were loved, are loved, and will always be loved,” said Daniel sounding far more mature than in a previous moment. I began to cry, again. I couldn’t speak. My tears overwhelmed me in rivers down my face creating spots on Mom’s sweater. Shit, I needed a tissue badly..

Then I caught sight of the portrait of Mom from a reflection in her bedroom mirror. I viewed it intently. It was still in its two dimensional life. It did not move. She did not look over at me, although I hoped she would. Then I returned my gaze to Daniel, my, my . . . father. His portrait went back to its two dimensional existence as he no longer was looking at me straight in the eyes. I kept looking back and forth for, probably, only a few minutes, yet it seemed like all the minutes in my life leading up to this one called me to engage in a broader comprehension—enter a more vast space of new awareness.

It was as if I finally understood how to decipher a complexly articulated series of photographic codes that each portrait had given of itself for me to capture, and to analyse over all these years. These portraits on the wall of my life, through the range of subject matter in each, through the many elements within each and every pose, had magnified my visual vernacular of a world I thought I knew in such a way that it all began to implode. It was too much, this new consciousness too weighted, this gift of sight beyond measure, beyond understanding, beyond . . . I blacked out.

*Lily Adams*

*1993*

The house was a bustle of newness. Alexis had been helping me with the move. It seemed as if we had been packing and unpacking for months. I unexpectedly decided, at least that is what Alexis said, to not sell, Dolores's, house. No I preferred moving back into it. I'd wanted a larger place so that Alexis and Joshua and the baby could enjoy it. The apartment, the one I had kept probably too long after Scott died, I had to admit, was just too small. So I remodelled the old kitchen in the house, just before the move. A new pine swing set freshly stained and lacquered graced the back yard. Soon I was intent on replanting Mom's still bare overgrown flower garden, with a lot of help from the gardener. Even little Lola wanted to help. It would be our very own project.

My granddaughter loved the chaos in the house this afternoon because she could run and run among the stacks of boxes pretending they were mountains to be scaled.

"Lolita, stop, you're going to fall, sweetie," warned Alexis right before rushing off to meet Joshua for dinner and a movie. Lolita, as we now called her, would giggle,



and run faster with her long black braids trailing behind her as she played hide and seek behind one of the stacks of boxes yet to be unpacked. Then she'd manoeuvre as if she were on roller skates through the maze of boxes piled up throughout her *abuelita's* home as she had learned to call me. Well sort of. Lolita could never quite pronounce the name *abuelita* correctly so she called me, *Wita*, for short. Alexis gave up trying to get Lolita to say my name in Spanish correctly because Lolita refused to call me anything else. And I was quite touched by the nickname, revelling in its uniqueness.

Lolita was turning five in two weeks and I so wanted to get the house ready for her birthday party. She wanted a bounce party. I had the backyard to fit one and Alexis and Joshua owned a condominium with no yard. Lolita loved nothing more than to bounce up and down on those large oversized air mattresses. At a circus charity event at the Little Red Schoolhouse Day school, a few weeks earlier, Alexis could not get Lolita off the darn thing, she'd said. Lolita loved the feeling that flying up in the air brought. She knew she could touch the clouds if she jumped high enough, she said.

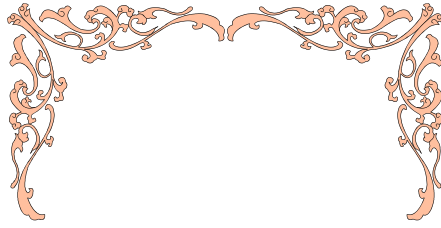
One of her favourite pastimes, after sliding down the slide, was lying on the grass with me in the backyard and looking up in the sky and describing all the clouds we saw. I would point out clouds that resembled horses, or camels, or trees, or angels. Those were Alexis's ideal clouds, back when we played a similar game. I told Lolita that she had many guardian angels, not just in the clouds, but right there in the house, in the hallway. We had walked it together often whenever Lolita had slept over. Alexis and Joshua regularly went out on weekly date nights and I was more than happy to accommodate them.

I pointed out the faces in the portraits on the wall. They looked quite dusty from the many workers who had clustered in the house shifting boxes, furnishings, or making dust clouds from the remodelling.

Lolita said she thought she would have to do some very high jumping in order to truly see the faces of these ancient people cluttered on the walls. They didn't look like angels to her. Where were their wings? Why were they all in only black and white? Maybe that was why they looked so serious, she said. They must have all been sad to live in a world where everything was just black and white. Lolita figured that if she bounced high enough she might be able to draw some colour and maybe smiles on some of those sad faces with her special Magic Markers. I had to put a stop to that right away.

"*M'ijita*, these are your family," I gestured at the pictures, as I lifted Lolita up on my hip. Then shifting her to my other hip, I walked by each of the portraits of Lolita's ancestors. I pointed out how beautiful each of the ladies was. I'd already explained the portrait of her great grandmother Dolores that hung in the bedroom. Lolita had heard, "like a thousand times," she whined that she was named after her because Alexis and I kept telling her over and over and over. Why do grownups repeat themselves so much, Lolita wondered aloud? She knew more than we thought, she announced, but she didn't want us to think she did as I often heard her whisper to herself. And in this moment Lolita just laughed and squirmed wanting to get down and run back and forth in the space to take in all the portraits, or these guardian angels, from her mere three feet in height perspective.

All of a sudden the phone rang, and Lolita dashed off as I walked into the kitchen to answer it.



## *Dolores*

*Great-granddaughter of Lola, granddaughter of Amadita,  
daughter of Angelita, mother of Lily, grandmother of Alexis,  
great-grandmother of Lolita*

*Mi cielo*, Lolita, could hear her Wita laughing and talking so as I watched her, she decided to scamper into the bedroom. Lolita loved nothing more than to lie on the stuffed pillows and chenille bedspread. I adored watching the precious little thing kick her little legs up in the air, roll over and pretend to fall asleep. I saw how she noticed Wita's gold bracelet with that funny black design on it, as I heard her describe it, sitting on the night stand. Lolita reached to pick it up and slip it onto her tiny wrist, but first she felt bound to stand before my portrait.

Lolita froze for a moment as she must have thought she saw something odd. She looked unsure. She stared at me, or as Wita told her, "That's your *bisabuela*, Lolita!" because I was winking at her, but rapidly so that she couldn't be too sure.

Lolita turned her back on my portrait playfully and counted to three. Then she turned around fast just to check on me. She began to count to five out loud in Spanish because the dear little one knew just enough.

“*Cuatro, cinco—*”

“*Seis, siete—*” Lolita heard me and she turned back and stared. So I just stared right back.

“Nine . . .” said Lolita as she held up her fingers to help with her counting.

“Ten!” I said with a grin and a twinkle in my eyes as Lolita watched my lips move.

“Are you my . . . are you my *bis ab. . . abue—*”

“Just call me Dolores, *mi cielo.*”

“Are you really my great grandmother, or an angel looking down at me, or maybe even a princess?” I chuckled at so many words coming out of such a diminutive mouth. I think Lily had been telling her too many tales.

“See her long dress and how it shimmers. Her skin looks almost like—” Lily had said the other day.

“French vanilla ice cream,” Lolita squealed, her favourite.

“Yes and the jewellery” Lily continued, “your grandmother Dolores wears on her ears and around her neck—”

“Sparkles like magic!” my sweet Lolita declared. This was like a game to her. But my little dear looked up at me with such curious eyes, green with large amber centres.

“Great-grandmoth . . . Dolores, who is that man behind you in the picture cuz, cuz, I can’t really remember what Mommy said about him,” asked my curious baby

Lolita while she was now fingering the bracelet and slipping it on her tiny arm. How many more generations of women in this family would do the same, I wondered.

“Lolita?” said Lily who appeared quite without warning. Lolita froze, and so did I.

Seeing her Wita walking very slowly toward her startled us both.

“*M’ijita*,” asked my daughter and Lolita’s grandmother, “who are you talking to?”

## Epilogue

2013

Mother was indeed special. She lived a special life and gave to us, my daughter and I and, our family special gifts. Talking images have ruled our life. It is our way—narrative and images forever combined. It is the norm. Our family portraits continue to inform and guide the family from one century into the next and we trust into the next. Mother's portrait now hangs in our home, as do all the rest and, like Granny Flynn, cancer took Mother sooner than we all would have liked. We wait for her portrait to speak because we know we must. But her love, devotion and her guidance has kept the link between a long line of remarkable women continual.

Whenever you view a family picture never doubt its power of address. No matter how long it takes. Never doubt for a minute that it has a voice that will speak, but you must listen just as my daughter Lolita still does.

Alexis Adams Madison

Mother of Lolita, Daughter of Lily Adams, granddaughter of Dolores, great-granddaughter of Angelita, great-great granddaughter of Amadita, great-great-great granddaughter of Lola.

## **Photographic Interventions in Narrative: a critical commentary**

## Introduction

*Pictures on the Wall of My Life* is a novel, with a strong autobiographical origin, and underpinning. The remembering of a particular moment is painful for the writer.

However while the investigation has, to some extent been therapeutic, my intention has not been to write a novel as therapy. The relationship of a novel with such an origin and the reader is initially discussed in Chapter One which revolves around Roland Barthes' notion of punctum, 'that accident which pricks me'.<sup>3</sup> The motivation and technical side of writing the novel in the chapter is not about indulging in a therapeutic process and expecting the reader of the research to follow this, rather it is about finding a method of writing fiction for the public stage which nevertheless originates from a wound.

As a stimulus for the novel is a collection of family photographs I own. Part of this investigation is on the relationship between fiction and life with a focal point being photographic images which migrate between the two and become central to the creative process. I sifted actually, and in memory, and remember sifting with my mother through some photographs, and drafted a novel.

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (Reprint, New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1981), p. 27.



My research is on the writing process as moments of transformation in the process of constructing and reconstructing a series of lived and/or felt moments through photographic image and written fictional and non-fictional narratives. I use the notion of ekphrasis, which by dictionary definition simply refers to the ‘graphic, often dramatic description of a visual work of art’<sup>4</sup>, however, I am choosing to take this rhetorical device and reapply the definition of ekphrasis to some of the most effective works of art—in this case photographs and their narrative complements—to explore this. I ask the following question: To what extent does the act of ekphrastic narrating construct fictional memoir as visual to verbal de-familiarizing re-memory?

Photographic texts are a stage in the construction of these moments and memories. What I found was, after writing the novel a piece of life writing emerged. In terms of this writer, one might say that the life writing touches on a place that comes before the novel and the development of the photographs. It is in the nature of an investigation that we come to understand and/or have a new relationship with the phenomena under investigation through the process of research. What follows subsequently is both an explanation and what became possible to write.

My original contribution to knowledge is then the preceding final draft of a novel. I view the relationship between visual and verbal text as ways of representing experience, or as a means which when grasped together may do this job. Perhaps it is the researcher/writer alone in the moments before the text is written, in the act of attempting to write the text or another text, which is the place where the phenomenon under study resides and yet continues to elude. What I refer to as imagetexts may be a means of moving back towards, though not reaching a place that is gone, but which, just maybe by arriving obliquely, somehow might explain the scars.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Ekphrasis’. *Reference.com*. <<http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Ecphrasis>> [accessed 8 Aug 2008]

The research journey started while attending a conference at University of Manitoba in Winnetka, Canada in 2004. At the conference called ‘The Photograph’, cultural theorist and critic, Mieke Bal was the featured speaker. Her *Narratology*:

*Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985) states:

*Narratology* is the theory of narrative texts. A theory is a systematic set of generalized statements about a particular segment of reality. That segment of reality, the corpus, about which narratology attempts to make its pronouncements consists of narrative texts. . . . If the necessary characteristics can successfully be defined, these same characteristics can then serve as the point of departure for the next phase: a description of the way in which each narrative text is constructed’.<sup>5</sup>

She continues further with an in depth illustration of concepts she regards as tools by which to enable the reader to understand narrative texts. Because of my interest in photography, family photographs, and fiction, I realized that in the world of ekphrasis and imagetexts similar tools exist. As a result of a nineteenth century technology, a photographic text can act as a visual prompt to memory, perhaps ‘fixing’ certain denotative aspects of the selected view. Tools provided by the world of photography and literature in combination can enable the viewer/reader to describe and tell all in and about the world of imagetexts. Various photographic terms such as focal length, depth of field, aperture, focus lock, and/or frame might be used as analytical terms and used to address an imagetext. I will go on to demonstrate my sense of how this works with some examples from the media.

A photograph need not be taken in a studio but can also be an image plucked out of the flow and stream of life. Whether an artist works on the street or, as is more usual, retreats to the studio after being inspired by life, or takes someone out of the flow of life to pose for him in the studio; whether s/he works based on a photograph,

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<sup>5</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1985). p. 3.

from memory, or from a 'life' subject—it takes time. And, for example, such a painting will sometimes take weeks or even months to produce a canvas. This is done to a great extent, whether in the past or in more recent times, in a solitary situation or in at least partial silence and stillness if there is a sitter. A novel is also written in this way.

However, a novel influenced by an image that is instantaneous (and by means of a technology that is relatively recent) is responding to this flash or snap of life, selective though it may be of subjects aware or oblivious at the time of taking. And this must become an aspect of the influence on style and/or genre that I am proposing. So by uniting a creation of narrative and that of photographic image, we can then co-locate these two worlds to create not just ekphrastic narrative, but one which encompasses aspects of magical realism as well.

I would argue that a magical realist category is not enough or is lacking as a way in which to situate my novel or other ekphrastic novels. It is perhaps not 'magic' that Lily lives with in an everyday sense, but certainly something understood by all of those exposed to this photographic technology that visual 'records' can conflict with memory, and also augment it in various ways as well as offering the possibility of other versions. Such is Lily's issue with the photographs recalling ancestral events in Mexico and Lily experiencing them in the novel's present, in Los Angeles, enabling her and the reader to move through the generations together. It is this knowledge of different versions that Lily is playing with and this gives her enhanced sensitivity to the multiplicity of truths, lies and deceptions that lie in wait for her.

Perchance the magic is less to do with the acceptance by the culture of the supernatural, or other belief-system, alongside rationalist values imposed by a more dominant culture, and more to do with a heightened sensitivity to the modern form of

relic of the dead . . . the photograph. So if not purely magical realism, then conceivably I will place this novel on a continuum somewhere with other novels between magical realism and something else as yet unnamed—ekphrastic realism. And among this continuum ekphrastic realism resides at an intersection which has to do with the observation that

photographs have an ontological function as well as the obviously anthropological, descriptive one they are often narrowed to by iconoclasts. Photographs are an extension not just of our sight, but of our thought. Like human thought itself, they use displacement, metaphor and analogy; they step back to give us perspective and orientation. They allow us to evolve.<sup>6</sup>

As a result one cannot deny that photography in conjunction with the flow of discourse around it does exceed that of mere visual representation. Visual and verbal representation becomes a symbiosis where the vision of one cannot exist, or work fully and effectively without the voice of the other.

In the following chapters, I will discuss the motivation and technical aspects of the novel, the theoretical basis for this work, and end in attempting to situate my novel on the canonical intersection of ekphrasis and magical realism.

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<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Seed cited in Timothy Dow Adams, 'Photographs on the Walls of the House of Fiction', *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (Spring 2008), 176.

## Chapter One: Punctum is that which pricks, wounds, cuts, bruises Me

*Memory heals the scars of  
time. Photography  
documents the wounds.*<sup>7</sup>--  
Michael Ignatieff

### Background

I am a writer and also the daughter of a photographer. It was not until I participated in a class in memoir in graduate school that I realized the degree to which my fiction writing is informed by the structures and compositional values of other quotidian genres such as the epistle, diary, or, in particular, the photographic image. In this investigation by writing fiction and thinking around my writing process, it is not the visual image in general that concerns me. The photograph documents (albeit ideologically infused) a moment—the ‘capturing’ of a subject followed by a period of working in a dark room in pre-digital times, whereas the portrait painter captures a face at a series of sittings. Specifically the photographic image, as I try to frame my fiction, and the process of its inception from camera technique to chiaroscuro to the setting in which the image is consumed and—its surrounding talk and storytelling *is* my concern.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *The Russian Album* (London: Picador, 2001), p. 7.

For this reason the commentary following is constructed of both life writing and criticism in juxtaposition in that it assists in making explicit—in a way helpful to me as a writer—the relationships between the visual and verbal, spoken and written in my work.

The emphasis is on the writer's relationship with the text during the creation of the piece, a relationship in the case of family photographs whether fictionalized or not, which already involves a heightened cluster of meanings for the writer. By this means, I hope to offer as a contribution to knowledge both a work of fiction and to discuss my route to arrive at that fiction, a route which, naturally, has an effect on the style of the narrative and on the photograph as an incitement to narrative, as evidence of life or death; on relationships between the still photographic image as verification, its contradictory and problematic nature, story, and narrative, and the process of fictionalizing (which begins at the moment the camera is raised).

The term 'ekphrasis', being a commentary on a visual work of art, is useful in this enterprise as a way of expressing something of the nature of these relationships and I will go on to appropriate this term as a means of grappling with them. The term ekphrastic narrative is a critical term I am applying to the writing process as well as, tentatively, to the style of the resulting prose fiction.

Encompassing this examination, I see myself as playing multiple roles, one of researcher and writer, in addition to being both a reader and new interpreter of photographic text, along with writer and reader of the fictional memoir that I construct. In the undertaking of these combined, recursive and recurring roles, they and their reversal in themselves might make some kind of contribution to an understanding of the concept of ekphrasis. However when translating visual to verbal (spoken and written) something unanticipated, or newly created may arise—or inevitably, due to the

necessity of experimentation, a failure may occur. For there will always be those literalists who, rather than accept a new translation of, or creation of a genre, will wish to remain firm in the belief that some kind of word for word exchange is all that counts.

A claim can be made that the camera cannot lie, but sometimes the camera is simply not enough as a photograph is always consumed within a cultural context. I contend that my novel plays with this claim of truth and undermines it giving it a distinctive style. So at this stage, I am advocating the critical recognition of the contribution to style and therefore *shifting* in genre that photographic text, as part of the process, can make. I am interested in the notion of image and text being inextricable or simultaneous in both the writer's work in the genre I will call ekphrastic, and I will go on to explore whether this is the case purely in the writing process, or whether this has a noticeable effect on style. As the sources and types of text I draw on in my novel are diverse, I present this critical commentary in more than one textual style including visual (photographic) and prose imagetext.

Photography has changed our world by the very nature of the defining moments it presents. Photographs have galvanized images of history for us: Joe Rosenthal of the Associated Press, for example, snapped 1/400th of a second of six boys raising a flag on top of a mountain they had climbed, on an island in the midst of a terrible battle during World War II almost seventy years ago<sup>9</sup>, Mt. Suribachi. Iwo Jima. Six boys. Click!

What the photograph does not tell us is that these were just kids: all brave, but tired, hungry, thirsty and scared. Three were killed in action later in that same battle; two died much later in peace time, overwhelmed by heartbreak and alcohol. One of the survivors managed to make it to old age and die in the town of his birth.

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<sup>9</sup>James Bradley and Ron Powers, *Flags of our Fathers* (New York: Bantam, 2006), p. 3.

More than half a century later, another flag raising also galvanized us. Another attack, another battle of sorts, another photograph, this time by Thomas E. Franklin of Associated Press,<sup>10</sup> who captured three firemen trying to raise a flag on what many of us in the United States refer to now as Ground Zero. What the photograph by itself of three helmeted young men bathed in dust and smoke does not tell us immediately is that Ground Zero, the Twin Towers, were two 110-story buildings, designed for strength (by a second-generation Japanese) and demolished by a terrorist attack. Click!

Many still recoil from further images of the World Trade Centre towers, caught by another photographic lens, erupting into fireballs, the upper floors of these elegant monuments plummeting to the ground along with the unlucky thousands who fell out of, or were vaporized, along with nine million square feet of office space. Click!

Following the flood of published photographs in the aftermath of the World Trade Centre, a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and Pentagon disasters, one photograph struck me, like the punctum of a photograph described in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, a moving meditation on the polemic of photography's subjective/objective nature. Punctum is a Latin word which, Barthes contends, exists to designate wounds, pricks, or marks 'made by a pointed instrument . . . precisely these marks, these wounds are so many points . . . for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole'<sup>11</sup> and also a cast of the die. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). And this particular photograph published in *People* on October 1, 2001 is titled 'A Sorrowful Goodbye' and bears the following caption, which by itself is missing something:

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<sup>10</sup>Thomas Franklin, (2001) *The Record*. North Jersey Media Group Foundation.  
<<http://www.groundzerospirit.org/about.asp>> [accessed: 9 Aug 2008].

<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 26-27.



‘Eight-year-old Kevin Villa, with grandmother Fina Jager, grieves for his mother, Yamel Merino, 24, an emergency medical technician. One of the first rescue workers on the scene, Merino, of Yonkers, N.Y., died when the south tower collapsed. She had been her company’s 1999 EMT of the Year’.<sup>12</sup>

What the caption does not state and what the viewer sees is:

White. Patent leather white foregrounds the picture of the rectangular austere shape of a coffin. Yellow. A yellow slicker wrinkled from crumpled disuse hugs a little boy’s body as he buries his head in his folded arms which, lie heavy against the white rectangle containing his mother’s body. Flowers rest on the curve of the lid; red roses and pink carnations caressed by baby’s breath brush his closely shaved head. Grandmother’s black finger-spread-hand implores Kevin to come, come away. Her lower lip quivers, her weeping eyes hidden behind wide black sunglasses. Kevin’s hood does not cover his head, but forms a resting triangle. The tip points to Grandma. The base hugs his neck. A row of buttons and black coats surround them both, and another black hand holds Grandma’s hand, which grasps her grandson’s body, who holds on to his mother’s body inside that shiny white resting place. A blurred outline of more roses, daisies, carnations, and gladiolas appears in the photograph’s lower foreground. For now, this is all Kevin knows of his mother, only sixteen when he was born, in this moment of complete despair and sorrow.

So utterly sad, so heart wrenching, this snap-of-the shutter by a photographer who simply records history and does not interfere with it.<sup>13</sup> And I can never view this photograph without holding back tears even though the subjects are of no relation to

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<sup>12</sup> ‘A Sorrowful Goodbye’, *People*, 56.14 (1 Oct 2001), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Although some might argue that by his very presence, a photographer does interfere with this type of event filled with absorbed mourners perhaps dimly conscious, if at all, of his presence, I would vehemently disagree that an eight year-old boy lying across the coffin of his dead mother has any such awareness negating the possibility of the photographed event being altered even subtly. Later, Kevin’s own grandmother, in deep despair at the time, stated she had little memory of it at all.

me. This tiny fragment speaks to me as a viewer in a way that the whole event of 9/11 in its magnitude could not—it is too great to comprehend, yet this particular scene selected from so many with its caption gave me the beginnings of a narrative which, perhaps came together with my own in some ways. I cannot reconcile the gap between the caption, which informs us about the photograph, and the pained focus of what we see as a subject. The punctum of this photograph wounds with so many sensitive points, and that is no accident. A single mother at sixteen,<sup>14</sup> and against all odds, later becomes employee of the year. Ultimately, all the people in the photograph are connected to each other via her coffin.

Something is said here about the experience of family relationships in grieving and finding ways of keeping a loved one alive in memory. So a truth in my version of an extended accompanying text particularizes these things without need to analyse them. They are recognizable as a version to others who read my text which, perhaps, articulates what others might be feeling. In a collective sense this implies or suggests meaning rather than stating it explicitly and this is powerful and is a way into fiction. And, in effect, this writer is dealing with a genre that speaks by showing, uncovering, shedding light, illuminating the general through the particular and small, which is not attempting to make a large overarching philosophical statement necessarily, but rather retain a quieter power.

At the intersection of self and history, this photograph of a little child bidding his mother's body a final goodbye resonates with a deep unrest and weight. The huge burden of its meaning persists and will always have an impact not just the event, but the

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<sup>14</sup> 'Yamel Merino', *New York State Senate*, < <http://www.nysenate.gov/story/yamel-merino> > [accessed 21 June 2013].

way we remember it.<sup>15</sup> For '[m]emory does not simply happen . . . it is always motivated, always mediated, by complex mechanisms'<sup>16</sup> because 'cultural remembering is an action, often a profession'<sup>17</sup> and that is why we must realize that photographers will pose, frame, edit, develop and otherwise manipulate a photographic subject, just as writers do with their texts and as tale-tellers do with their oral histories. This does offer us a representational image for the autobiographical act of looking back at ourselves and our intersection with history, however, we must consider that memory is fluid and fated to endless change. Walter Benjamin says it this way: 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was." It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger'.<sup>18</sup>

At times, readers/viewers may be more familiar with works of art as paintings, or sketches, or large format art works in relation to poetry 'as in the Horatian tradition *ut pictura poesis*, (as is the picture, so is the poem)'<sup>19</sup> than they are with photographs as exuding an ekphrastic narrative or conversation. And by 'exuding' I am referring to the sense of 'giving off/out' as something intrinsic to the thing rather than the viewer bringing preparedness to be affected or bringing something to the image. That 'giving off/out' does capture an experience like a voice coming from the photograph. This brings an unexpectedness signalling something that suggests a process peculiar to the genre. Whereas 'photographs do not always support the process of forgetting and

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<sup>15</sup> Yamel Merino, now 20 years-old, indicated that his grandmother asked him the day of that photograph if he had anything to say to his mother, so he laid his head on her coffin and said, "Goodbye Mom", Shawn Cohen, 'Boy who symbolized nation's grief now is man who honors mom's memory'. *Lohud.com*.  
<<http://www.lohud.com/article/20110910/NEWS02/109100337/Boy-who-symbolized-nation-s-grief-now-man-who-honors-mom-s-memory>> [accessed 17 July 2013].

<sup>16</sup> Wendy Steiner, 'The Casablanca Theory.' *New York Times (1923-Current file)*: 1. May 26 1996. In *ProQuest*, [accessed 9 Jan. 2014].

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Joseph Flanagan, 'The Seduction of History: Trauma, Re-Memory, and the Ethics of the Real', *CLIO* 31.4 (2002), 387.

<sup>19</sup> Mack Smith, *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995), p.26.

remembering by which we weave an integral and stable self over time . . . More often than not photographs subvert the continuity that memory weaves out of experience. Photography stops time and serves it back to us in disjunctive fragments'.<sup>20</sup> This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Initially though it is worth noting that it is the reader who consumes the text at a site which may have different sociohistorical conditions from those of its production. The peculiar way in which a writer is moved (literally, mentally) into apprehending neither image nor text, but imagetext does affect the reader's tasting of the text. It could be argued, however, that the intensity of the writer's experience may have an opposite flattening effect for some readers. This may be because the writer is holding a picture in her head while writing, which the reader will not have. Even if the reader did have it, it would not mean the same to her as it does to the writer. The strong sense and feelings the writer has will not necessarily transfer in any easy and transparent relationship to the reader. It is not that simple because the reader/viewer is almost physically affected by certain photographic images that instantaneously capture moments, for example in 1/60<sup>th</sup>, or even 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of a second (unlike paintings, which take far longer to render such moments). And this susceptibility to feel viscerally affected—rather than only stirred by emotion—such as the quivering and weeping eye is mine as well as that of the grandmother in the photograph described above.

This is then experienced to greater or lesser degrees by readers/viewers of the visual text and if someone is physically changed, that is reacts physically by lamenting, crying out, retching, or being ill, etc. then writes about the photograph in the grip of the physical change, perhaps that is one aspect or component in determining the genre in the resulting prose.

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *The Russian Album*, p 6.

In effect then one must agree that a photograph without a companion narrative becomes a thing in its own separate cut-off space. There is no coterminous world to be inhabited and it is this absence, which creates the imperative for *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*. One cannot clearly inhabit that space if one does not have a text to unlock the code enabling a visual to verbal transition. So this type of photograph has acted as a prompt to make me look back at my own collection of photographs.

### Foreground

As the daughter of a photographer, my father taught me how to appreciate the finished product of his craft, but nothing about the developing of the negatives nor the labour and artistry involved in the printing of such art. He simply completed his photo shoots on location at banquets in honour of someone or something I cared little about, or in portrait sittings of CEO's and CFO's of national or international corporations for their corporate reports, or of the many mayors of San Francisco, California, in the last century. As a little girl of divorced parents visiting a father annually, who was a stranger to her, I saw the finished photographs ready to be sent out to his many clients and the out-of-studio candids of friends and family members. I never understood how those photographs ended up in frames (the best of them, that is) on the wall of 'William J. Rader Photography' as his small studio was called, in downtown San Francisco. I only observed the work involved in my father's scheduling of his subjects to come to his studio for a sitting, or the logistics of planning and capturing remote shoots.

He had to collect all the right cameras, necessary lights, his tripod, and enough rolls of film to complete the job in a timely fashion. Gathering his subjects together whether posing one person or a group of people—directing, cajoling, amusing them while snapping shot after shot and cracking jokes to keep up the levity of the moment

invigorated my father, but also exhausted him. Then there was the job of packing up all the equipment, and carting it back to the car and then that same day or the next, lugging it all upstairs to the studio. Occasionally, I assisted him with the setting up and tearing down of several such shoots through the years, in addition to running some of his black and white prints through his dryer, an old rotating drum, which enabled him to complete his backlog of printing in the darkroom, without interruption. This was one of the few ways we related, not through any sort of long involved discussion about such shoots, but by my assisting (without his asking) untangling cords attached to lights, handing him the right lens, putting the right camera back inside the proper camera bag.

I always found it odd that my stepmother never offered to help. She was too busy talking to the smartly-coiffed-and-elegantly-dressed-as-she-was attendees at these events that enabled us to accompany him. Being, at times, the only pre-teen at such happenings, I usually had no one to talk to so pitching in gave me some measure of purpose and importance. At times, I prevented him from forgetting his Hasselblad, or his Nikon at a shoot. He always thanked me for this assistance with some measure of astonishment. Then he would comment on how nice it was that I would just pitch in in such a helpful and unsolicited manner, ‘just like your mother used to’ he would say with a tone of regret and disdain. And that was about all as he drove us back to his uptown flat where we said our goodnights before I was to fly home the next morning to Los Angeles and report back to Mother. She expected details and any she could squeeze out of me about my fathers’s life and the new wife, but I had little to offer. I did not appreciate being used as a spy, until a few years later when his photography took a turn.

It was all so complicated, but so was our relationship:

Photo, Circa 1966

I stand posed bare. I am frightened. I don't know what will happen next. Dad says my breasts 'resemble your mother's.' He tells me how excited he is becoming. I am scared. My father wants to take pictures. I want him to stop, but I don't know how to. The shutter clicks away. Dad persists.

I am fifteen and Dad always documents my visits. I wear my sweater and bell bottomed-hip huggers. He suggests I take my sweater off so he can get some off-the-shoulder shots. He drapes a piece of dark green velvet around my shoulders. 'Could you push off your straps?' he asks. I think nothing of it. 'Don't want them to show.' And after all, he's my dad. Click, click, click goes the shutter. 'Okay now, honey, well maybe . . .' and he walks up to me and lowers the drape. Lower and lower. His hands tremble. The drape falls and he makes the breast comment. I start feeling sweaty, uneasy. Something feels wrong. Dad has not seen me naked before and yet here I am.

'Nude,' he says. Photographs of nude women are like paintings or pieces of art, he has said. He says a lot of other things. Things like 'oh, honey, you're really getting your old daddy worked up here.' I feel like throwing up. I just want this to end. Why do I feel like a bird caught in a trap, defenseless?<sup>21</sup>

Decades later when my father is ill and dying, Mom and I discuss this unsavoury memory when the photographs turn up in a chest full of old black and whites she has forgotten about.

'That son of a bitch, bastard, so and so—' Mom fumes.

'Where are the negatives?'

'I burned them, and I told him on the phone, "you *dirty* old man" he hated being called that, "what in the hell did you think you were doing?" You remember'.

Yes I do. I remember being numb. I remember wondering how this happened. It was supposed to be just a simple series of photographs in his portrait studio during one of my visits to San Francisco.

'I just found these pictures among all the others, in a drawer', said Mom.

'I thought you burned them too?'

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<sup>21</sup> Linda Rader Overman, *Notes for a Memoir* (unpublished memoir, 2003), n.p.

‘I thought so, but aren’t you glad I didn’t. That stupid fool of a man. What the hell was he trying to do, idiot son-of-his mother. I should have called the police on him like I threatened to do’.

‘Maybe you should have’.

‘Remember how he mailed me the negatives, immediately, *prontito*. Bastard, dirty old man’.

I remember his letter of apology that came twenty-six years later:

*If you had said stop while the pictures were being taken, that would have been the end of it and I would have pulled the film out of the camera. Believe me, the last thing on God’s green earth that I wanted to do was to frighten you at the time which you claim that I did.*

I suppose a fifteen year-old girl is supposed to handle these situations appropriately, supposed to know what to do, what to say when her father is behaving like a pervert. I remember Mom’s face when she saw this photo. I couldn’t hide anything from her. I never could for very long. I showed them to her after I returned from my annual Dad-visit. She sobbed. ‘He could have at least made you look innocent, beautiful, not like this, not like some cheap whore. So help me God I will kill him. Why, why did you let him do this?’

I know of no rule book in 1966 that tells adolescent girls what to do on such occasions. There are far more important things to consider like how to drop the right kind of LSD and not freak out so there is no possibility of coming down too soon; how to convince Mom to give me the money to buy the new Jimi Hendrix album; how to get my copy of *Valley of the Dolls* back from Debbie in physiology class; how to break up with Dave so I can start dating Pierre; how to extend my curfew until five o’clock in the morning so I can watch Pierre’s band play at The Whiskey a Go Go on Sunset



Boulevard and then go out to breakfast at IHOP (International House of Pancakes) afterwards with the band and all our friends. Important things to a fifteen year-old.

During this photo shoot everything will *seem* normal, at first. But my ‘normal’ gauge must have stopped working, gotten out of whack somehow. Maybe I never possessed one. Normal was my family life. During my adolescence my father’s tenor changed. He talked to me differently. It actually started when I was eleven or twelve, going up to San Francisco on those annual visits; he started sharing feelings about sex, about sex with other women, other men. Yes, sex and different positions. I never told my mother until it culminated in this photo session, where I look as if I am nailed onto the backdrop.

When he died of lung cancer in 1997, we hadn’t spoken in five years. I was the product of a marriage that did not last beyond my 4<sup>th</sup> year of life. Thus, I never really knew this handsome, dashing, World War Two hero who worked in the Office of Strategic Services (which later became the CIA) under the leadership of, Hollywood director, John Ford. My father captured installations, topography, and combat operations on film winning a Bronze Star for his unusual courage in actual combat during the battle of Florence by attaching himself to the armoured unit spearheading the attack where he was among a small group of photographers who obtained the only photographic coverage of the initial entry into the city of Florence. In a further display of superb daring and devotion to duty he went on several missions far behind enemy lines, contacting resistance groups, placing agents, and while under direct enemy fire photographing the operations.

This was the man I never knew and as I write these words the grief of not knowing this man of unusual courage still gnaws a hole in my heart. The father I grew up with contradicted the criteria in his citation for immense value to the victory of the

United Nations in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, the criteria for fatherhood and bravery under fire are dissimilar.

Rather, my father left me with distressing memories of being an object of his sexual desire pierced like a helpless pinned butterfly under his photographic lens. No, I was never molested physically, but with that footage taken of me as a young adolescent, naked, and vulnerable—emotional scars cut deep and remain. Those photographs have penetrated me all my life. And seeing those photographs still pierces me through the heart as the heart of the young innocent girl in the picture is pierced.

The *punctum* of those photographs wounds with so many sensitive points, and that, too, is no accident because ‘a photograph is a secret about a secret,’<sup>22</sup> as Diane Arbus observed. ‘The more it tells you the less you know’<sup>23</sup>. And ‘if photographs are messages, the message is both transparent and mysterious’<sup>24</sup> what I call Phase 1 and Phase 2, which I am using to distinguish between transparent and mysterious. And deciphering these different messages of the aforementioned photograph suggests a wrestling with darkness as follows.

Phase 1: The photographer poses the subject of the portrayal though there may be a degree of self-determination in the subject, it is the ‘artist’ who is viewing the subject who has the control. In this act of posing for a portrait in a studio even the air temperature is controlled. Within this arena of the usual technically controlled mechanisms a photographer will command total governance. He adjusts the lights, he poses the subject, he instructs/directs/guides with his own hands even the movement of her body, her gaze and its direction as he looks through his viewfinder, checks his aperture, checks his focus, checks his composition before speaking those two

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977.), p.111.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

authoritative words: ‘hold it’ and then clicks away. Due to his expertise and experience about this process nothing by chance or mysterious occurs, or does it?

Consider next what I refer to as Phase 2: again it is the photographer who is the main agent in this process though there are two actors for this type of portrait in a studio where not only the air temperature is controlled, but a secret agenda behind the photograph being taken perniciously lives. There is the desire for gratification via physical, psychological, and/or emotional penetration at the cost of all moral compass. Not only is a photographer using this session to sexually gratify his art (over which he has control), but he is pressing paternal power to dominate/conquer a young and trusting pubescent, his daughter, *purely in hopes* that she may be naïve/foolish enough to succumb to his perverted desires—no control here, in effect everything that is not in Phase 1.

The message? Some may say Phase 1 creates the mysterious message rather than one of transparency, because even with all those photographic controls in place, photographs sometimes (even if the photographer knows what he/she is doing) do not achieve the intended outcome. Thirty-five millimetre film, sometimes, goes wrong: heat, humidity, poor storage conditions can do their best to damage the film canister. The camera appears to function properly when the film advances with each shutter click, but sometimes the film does not really move. In effect a multitude of mishaps may occur, although, generally, they do not.

The end result of the printed photograph can still lend itself to the impression that against all malfunctioning mechanical odds, it is a mystery that the portrait sitting—the interplay between subject and photographer—all came together to produce a work of art. In addition, as a writer, drawing on photographs as inspiration, both of these levels come back into play, though the writer is now the reader/viewer of the

image and producer of the written imagetext and so in a very different position with reference to the making of the portrait. But we can't ignore the aspect of pictorial control held by the photographer or as Richard Avedon claims '[m]y portraits are more about me than the people I photograph'.<sup>25</sup>

But what about the message of transparency and the opposing idea that the more the photograph tells us the less we know as in Phase 2? To that I propose we consider what Diane Arbus means when she writes: 'How I really love what you can't see in a photograph an actual physical darkness . . . it's very thrilling for me to see darkness again . . . what moves me about it is that it comes from some mysterious deep place . . . But it comes mostly from some very deep choices that somebody has made that take a long time and keep haunting them'.<sup>26</sup> What haunted my father presses for life within me as my truth. So the message is a story pressing for truth even though Richard Avedon writes 'all photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth'.<sup>27</sup>

### Freeze Frame: Forgetting and Remembering

Perhaps it is for reasons of my own negotiation between what is truth and what is accuracy that I wrote this novel and scrutinized what was going on, the scrutiny being against many of my own instincts. For with each step of this work, I feel as if I am forced to strip naked and bare very private and intimate layers of my being. No differently than I was forced to do by my father in the previously described portrait

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<sup>25</sup> *Masters of Photography-Richard Avedon* (2008) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZOR-RZ2Xww&feature=related>> [accessed: 3 Nov. 2012].

<sup>26</sup> *Diane Arbus Documentary-Part 2* (2008) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfm304ZGczQ&feature=watch-vrec>> [accessed: 3 Nov. 2012].

<sup>27</sup> *Masters of Photography-Richard Avedon* (2008) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZOR-RZ2Xww&feature=related>> [accessed: 3 Nov. 2012].

session of my horrified fifteen year-old self. It would be far easier to embrace forgetting—‘the dialectical opposite of memory’<sup>28</sup> as Charles Baxter writes:

Forgetting is, it seems, often more fascinating than remembering. We can, after all, name our memories and locate them when we engage in negotiations with our past and our histories. . . . Our recollections are our familiars, both the good and the bad, even when we write them down and put them into a book. But forgetting as an act and a state of mind is harder to name, and its story is harder to tell. It is a haunted subject. Everything forgotten becomes ghostlike. To put it cryptically, we are never familiar with what we have forgotten. We are always alienated from it. What is forgotten is unnamable until the moment it becomes memory again, if it ever does. The forgotten resists narrative and confounds it.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore I have chosen the road of remembering to embrace what was once forgotten and unnameable and not let the narrative resist or confound what will no longer remain forgotten. Instead I have chosen to empower the narrative by telling a story using photographs that are neither, ‘a static gallery of framed pictures’<sup>30</sup> nor mute in any way. Rather through their own voices ‘ensure that even fictional characters are continually claimed by the “real world”, by history. In other words, photographs in creative biographies [or fictional memoirs] bridge reality and fantasy by serving as [some form] of documentary evidence’.<sup>31</sup> And through my novel, I choose to offer such a bridge by recognizing what hearkens back to the forgotten stories that the photographs/characters in my novel remember because ‘there is something special about photographs . . . a truth in photographs that transcends the image itself to include the very idea of photography’<sup>32</sup> and its ‘inherent objectivity, its particular ability to denote the real’.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Baxter, *The Business of Memory: The Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting*, (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1999), p. x.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Patricia Hampl, ‘Memory and Imagination’, in *The Fourth Genre*, ed. by Robert Root (New York: Pearson, 2005), p. 309.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Pedri, ‘Documenting the Fictions of Reality’, *Poetics Today* 29.1 (Spring 2008), 162.

<sup>32</sup> Linda Haverty Rugg, Cited in Nancy Pedri, ‘Documenting the Fictions of Reality’, *Poetics Today* 29.1 (Spring 2008), 161.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy Pedri, ‘Documenting the Fictions of Reality’, 161.

Curiously, Alec Soth, noted Magnum photographer, has said ‘what really frustrates [him] is that photography is not very good at telling stories. Stories are so satisfying. Novels and movies satisfy, but photographs often leave [him feeling] like something is missing’.<sup>34</sup> He states further that photographs are like ‘being frozen in time that means you can’t really tell stories, you know, it’s very fragmentary’.<sup>35</sup>

I beg to differ. Rather, I agree with actor-author-musician Steve Martin, during a recent fundraiser at the Hammer Museum in Westwood, California honouring photographer/artist Cindy Sherman’s oeuvre when he stated:

If I were Cindy Sherman, I know I would be a much better actor. The audience would grasp my character from a single frame . . . . They would understand entire plots from a sliver of film and extrapolate endings . . . . These one-still movies—with beginning, middle and end implied—are better than many full length features.<sup>36</sup>

Photographs, in other words, do not tell stories, they *show them and by doing so assault the viewer/reader with a novel or a movie to satisfy/disturb conventional notions of storytelling*. In each frame of a roll of film is a story with a beginning, middle, and end although not always in that order. We may not always see it that way at first, but upon a second or third gaze we can almost hear the photograph speak to us of its origin. Contrary to a sound of silence, within a photograph, when we truly look, we, just perhaps, can hear in our minds the pain, agony and fear about to pour out of the mouth of a young teenage bare-breasted girl. ‘Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism’.<sup>37</sup> We might then see the terror in her eyes and sense the cries of help that she is struggling to stifle in such a forced pose. Seeing this photograph or indeed any photograph

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<sup>34</sup> Aaron Schulman, ‘An Interview with Alec Soth’, *Seesaw*, (2004), <[http://seesawmagazine.com/soth\\_pages/soth\\_interview.html](http://seesawmagazine.com/soth_pages/soth_interview.html)> [accessed: 23 Sept. 2012].

<sup>35</sup> ‘Alec Soth: On a Life of Approaching Strangers’. *PBS Newshour*, (2011) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spn7JJSRng4>> [accessed: 23 Sept. 2012].

<sup>36</sup> Ellen Olivier, ‘A-list tribute to artists at Hammer’, *Los Angeles Times*, 8 October 2012, p. D2.

<sup>37</sup> James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*. (San Diego: Harcourt, 1996), p.12.

transcends just looking as it integrates hearing, feeling, comprehending the loud epiphany of life pictured, and more. Out of Barthes's punctum then we have what Homi Bhabha calls the

dynamic of displacement. An errant or marginal element within the main frame of the photograph, the blind spot (or blind field) turns viewers from passive recipients of the *truth* of the image, to active agents involved in various kinds of critical interventions: reading the picture against the grain, questioning the *framing* of the truth; interrogating the representational limits of the photographic medium.<sup>38</sup>

This sense of displacement or blind spot bears further examination and a new way of understanding the what, how, why, when and where of a history, familial or otherwise, that is captured on film.

At the intersection of self and history then, these aforementioned photographs of a terrified young adolescent resonate with a deep unrest, and the weight of it feels heavy. The huge burden of its meaning persists and will always impact not just the event, but the way I remember it. My adolescence was shredded and splintered with such emotional damage that often through the years, I imagined being my father's executioner to diminish the punctum of these memories, but his lung cancer did that for me. To release this burden I plunged into writing and found that my writing process paralleled that of memoirist Patricia Hampl who writes:

Our capacity to move forward as developing beings rests on a healthy relation with the past. Psychotherapy, that widespread method of mental health, relies heavily on memory and on the ability to retrieve and organize images and events from the personal past. We carry our wounds and perhaps even worse, our capacity to wound, forward with us. If we learn not only to tell our stories but to listen to what our stories tell us—to write the first draft and then return for the second draft . . .<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Cited in Taryn Simon, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* (Berlin: Gagosian Gallery, Wilson Center for Photography, and Neue Nationalgalerie, 2012), p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> Patricia Hampl, *The Fourth Genre*, p. 313.

This method certainly does have an effect on the writing process, and therefore may imprint the final draft in some way, but that is not to say that the reader is intended to recognize this in the reading. Any therapeutic dimension that may have existed in the drafting of the book is not the concern of the reader. Looking at the writing process, I am concerned with methods of distancing involved in fictionalization rather than offering a confessional.

Photographs mean a great deal to me, in part, because of my wounding, but also because I was surrounded by them in childhood. In discussing imagetext, I am showing how image and surrounding discourse can merge for the view of a photograph of strangers, just as in this work by presenting photographs of my mother taken by my father there is poignancy in these. However as strangers readers are likely to be moved, if they are, because of a connection they make with people who are close to them.

Similarly, in the case of the novel the reader will know nothing of the writer's wound but may—as a result of the writer's ability to distance herself from the moment of wounding while nevertheless writing in part out of that (distanced) moment—gain an impression or trace of something that went on in the process that might remain, or be detected, or might not. So it could be said that my psychotherapeutic approach was to construct a first draft detailing events in the life of my protagonist Lily Adams. Some mirrored disjointed fragments derive from the events in my own life. All the while I attempted to 'understand, account for, defend, reconcile, or otherwise deal with something difficult in [the] past'<sup>40</sup>, using storytelling as a recourse. Apparently this can be 'a medical prescription of sorts. According to [psychotherapist May Benatar], people who have experienced loss or trauma may find healing if they are able to turn

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<sup>40</sup> Flora Armetta, 'The Therapeutic Novel', *The New Yorker* (2011 Feb 25) <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2011/02/all-that-is-necessary-is-a-story-that-hangs-together-and-makes-sense.html>> [accessed 2 Dec 2013].



their . . . stories into a narrative that hangs together and makes sense'.<sup>41</sup> This psychotherapist 'assumes that analysis is the best way to achieve [a] coherent story. This is not surprising, but it's also not terribly appealing. It strikes me that literature can do a lot of the work for us, and do it much more enjoyably'.<sup>42</sup>

'Enjoyably' is not the word I would use to describe this road, but perhaps some fifty years hence a long ignored scream now be addressed. Only by the process of distancing through fictionalization am I given a language other than murderous wrath to express the wreckage inside me. And only by the critical distance theory permits (and by the practice of writing this investigation) am I enabled to reply and put a transformation into effect.

So what is mysterious to me and not so transparent are the hundreds and hundreds of 8 x10 black and white glossies that my father artfully shot and composed. Portraits of family members and this writer are in my possession and line the walls of my home. His portrait work was and is a thing of beauty and story. Each photograph of Mother as his ideal love, for she had movie star good looks, created an impression of more than just the standard photograph. There was something untold, something hidden within the frame. As the marriage dissolved, after my arrival, the focus of the photographs changed—no longer presenting an image of a lustful affair that smouldered on the print between them. The photographs showed Mother's forced smile, teeth clenched, bags appearing heavy under her eyes. Dad's inclusion in these later images showed no joy, or love, just the smell of wanting escape from the domestic life his portraits encapsulated. I am simply a little girl sitting between my parents in awe of the process. In the middle of my life now, I still am, however 'nothing is ever

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

the same as they said it was. It's what I've never seen before that I recognize'.<sup>43</sup> I see part of my task as deciphering claims of those who have told me about each photograph and what the image itself seems to say.

### Photographic Icons

Photographs of my intersection with self and history are images that have a profound impact on the way I remember my past. These images exist thankfully because of the photographs taken by my father, by my uncle (another professional photographer) and by photographers whose identities have long been erased from the memory of my family members: my elderly mother or my aunts and other uncles, repositories of my family history. Collected and stored by my mother—a woman who never threw anything away—thousands of pictures stuffed in albums, in envelopes, in dressers, and in boxes are now in my possession. The best I could gather over the past three decades line the walls of my home. These images of family members and friends, some long dead, some still alive, intrigue me. I wonder just who all these people and images I grew up with really were and what they were actually doing when the photographs were taken? Often there are no captions to inform the viewer of anything, so I wondered what had occurred just prior to the click of the shutter or just after. Why are the subjects in the snapshots positioned just so? What directions were the subjects receiving from the photographer? What responses were being directed back at the photographer? Were the subjects told to look just off-camera, put on lipstick, smooth a misplaced hair, or simply just told after a 1-2-3 count to 'smile'? What did the photographs so masterfully composed not show or tell about the people or events captured? Was the attention centred on the picture's real subject? What kind of

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<sup>43</sup> The Estate of Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus*. (New York: Aperture Monograph, 1972), p. iv.

statement was being made as a result? Was the photographer taking a kind of revenge on a particular subject or offering forgiveness?

During these moments of looking and recalling, I had many discussions with my mother about the treasure trove of photographs she so lovingly and caringly saved along with her idealized and/or perceived memories. Mother's descriptions often suffered from an occasional fuzzy memory exacerbated by poor eyesight. It was then that I would discuss these photographs with aunts and uncles who often affirmed or contradicted Mother's (re)memories of the very same images. As a result I could not deny Mother's attempt at 'imaginative re-creation in the remembering',<sup>44</sup> the revisiting of the photographs produced for her and for me. Therefore, I have called such contradictions a product of re-memory. Differing from the verb 'to remember', the noun has connotations of the repetitive quality of the memory. Patricia Hampl puts it this way:

Personal history, logged in memory, is a sort of slide projector flashing images on the wall of the mind. And there's precious little order to the slides in the rotating carousel. Beyond that confusion, who knows who is running the projector? A [writer] steps into this darkened room of flashing, unorganized images and stands blinking for a while. Maybe for a long while. But eventually, as with any attempt to tell a story, it is necessary to put something first, then something else. And so on, to the end. That's a first draft. Not necessarily the truth, not even a truth sometimes, but the first attempt to create a shape.<sup>45</sup>

Emotion is not just recollected in tranquillity,<sup>46</sup> but repeated recollections may subtly transmute an earlier memory in certain ways. And it is within the contradictions that misconceptions of memory arise and become apparent. Although photographs and their accompanying contradictory stories evoke memories, those memories do not

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<sup>44</sup> Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, "'Rememory': Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels', *Contemporary Literature*, 31.3 (Autumn, 1990),304. In JSTOR, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208536>> [accessed 1 Sep 2013].

<sup>45</sup> Patricia Hampl, *The Fourth Genre*, p. 313.

<sup>46</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads', In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol 2*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), p.151.

simply spring out of the images themselves; they generate meaning-making, traces, suggestions of something else—disagreements within family culture.

Moreover, any references to my parents' ultimately unhappy marriage, lasting only eight years and ending in divorce, were also cause for conflicting narratives and, at times, distorting the topography of remembrance. Looking back on realities and ideals shared between us, fuelled by countless 8x10 glossies, Mother (without realizing it) ended up assisting me in producing narrative complements or 'imagetexts',<sup>47</sup> which allowed me to fill in what the pictures left out.

To understand the genesis of the term imagetext rather than its other permutations we must consider that 'image/text' was first used by W.J.T. Mitchell in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994). It is an account of the interaction between the essential nature of pictures and their relationship to verbal language via the 'pictorial turn' and the complicated ways of comprehending visual literacy. Mitchell defines image/text as 'the heterogeneity of representational structures within the field of the visible and readable'.<sup>48</sup> He then explains his use of the term image/text with the 'typographic convention of the slash to designate' it as a gap in representation. He also defines its usage 'image-text with a hyphen . . . [that] designates relations of the visual and verbal'.<sup>49</sup> I am more inclined to extrapolate from his definition of the term "'imagetext" [as it] designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text'<sup>50</sup> and will use this version of that term throughout this investigation.

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<sup>47</sup>W.J.T. Mitchell 'The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies', In *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1994), p.89.

<sup>48</sup>*ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>49</sup>*ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>50</sup>*ibid.*

Photography, and the role of my father as photographer and my mother as photographic subject, plays a large part in this act of looking back. All over my home I have photographs displayed in which Mother is neither the only subject in the photographs, nor is Dad the only photographer of record. I am the subject in many of the photographs, but those are not as important as the images that preceded my coming into being.

A year following my father's death, on a rainy Tuesday morning as I walked down one of the longest hallways in our home, I suddenly realized that living within these images, nailed upon the wall in black, brown, brass and silver frames, are the journals/diaries of my parents. My father's diaries are his photographs so passionately composed and printed; my mother, who made no formal record of her life, nonetheless narrated it to me from the photographs she shared by describing, discussing, recalling, storytelling, and reinventing her past, their past and my own. The memory of this narrative constituted a journal of sorts.

This has remained a significant moment for this whole work because through various stages, the fictional memoir has come to be infused with this knowledge of the aforementioned intersection of self and history. This becomes the driving force of the protagonist, Lily Adams, and her understanding of the potentialities of the photographs and through this—the narrative is motivated and driven becoming an interface between theory and creative understanding.

Therefore, even though there may be a sense in this act of laying certain issues to rest—what is key is finding critical distance through theory and that critical term of ekphrasis is actually inextricable from some dimension of the creative process. This dimension is that of visual to verbal translation or transformation involving two verbal layers, the spoken and the written.

Memoir and fiction are different in a number of ways, and though they treat the material differently, they may draw on the same sources. So, for example, in memoir the photograph of the dead, as well as the feelings it evokes in the writer, has a place in the family tree and is a reference point in explaining a family member's appearance, behaviours and actions in relation to the writer. In fiction, on the other hand, the role of the photograph is as a prompt to the writer about a character and, in the case of this particular novel, has a life from the point of view of the feelings an identical fictional photograph evokes in a character. So as I searched through and gazed at my ancestral photographs in my mother's presence (and more often following her death) what became the *punctum* for me was the intersection of her voice, her narrative audio presence with my father's visual compositions of the past. Mother filled in where my father could not. He is dead, yet his pictures remain. His optical voice resonates in black and white in these photographs, gradations of grey living images from a dead man, but Dad is just as present as Mother was (while still alive) standing near me, as she sifted through the memories of their life before me:

The house shimmers with black and white photographs in old picture frames all over the walls. I look toward the hallway, where many of them hang—8x10 glossies hang together. What if each photograph could breathe itself into life, I wonder, awakening each subject inside of each photographic instant? Walking past, I think I hear a sound, a whisper, a murmur.

I walk beyond them all anyway, yet they summon me and the faces conjure up cries and smiles. Memories hover. Too many recollections echo in my head, in my head. My family, *la familia mía*, both paternal and maternal. Other generations pierce me, searching and scrutinizing, while pressing upon me for breath, for life.

I don't want to, not now. I have too much to do. I only wanted to frame you. Display you. I only wanted to inscribe you, it, me, my existence, so as not to forget just who you all are, what you really mean to me as I search for self-definition. But as a photographer frames the shot, now, I, as a writer-researcher am forced to frame the present world by means of a world of words and pictures from the past.

I put you on separate walls—my family, my husband's family—separate years, separate spaces. Days flashing backward, years flying forward, an accumulation that collapses and reconstructs itself. So many of you

are dead and gone. How will I know what to write? It's too long ago. All those emotions, acute and dull, heard, seen and unseen, through smiles, a stolen look and icing smeared across the face of a one year-old's first taste. Cakes, pastries, parties, drinks and evening gowns. Unwrapped presents. Babies, celebrations, deaths and ceremonies. Rectangular pieces of paper reveal telling details, yoke lives and stories out of so much laughter, so many tears, shaped by emigration, relocation, shattered relationships: a history burning for existence. I can't do it alone. I don't know if my mother even will. Will she talk about these lives lived, interrupted and dismissed, disappeared and rediscovered? Reconnecting them is almost too much. Where do I start?<sup>51</sup>

My first draft of this novel was originally written in third person omniscient point of view over a period of three years. The stories of the different female family portraits emerged, in part fictive, in part drawn from the many ancestral tales I often listened to in childhood. My mother, her sisters, my uncles, or my grandmother would tell their stories aloud to whomever would listen during family gatherings, or during work breaks over coffee and croissants (my grandfather, and later, my mother owned a French bakery where much of my family worked for decades).

Often these family sagas were told in third person as if they were descriptions about someone else. Usually they were being told about each other not necessarily about the person doing the actual telling. Thus, I created them as I remembered them—writing words that had been dictated to me. Drafting my first attempt in third person omniscient also allowed some distance from the recalled events. As a child I heard the contradictions each person added to clarify what another family member, supposedly and/or mistakenly claimed about another was lesson for a writer. A loud and lively discussion would ensue, voices would pique and rise in pitch and then laughter and

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<sup>51</sup> Linda Rader Overman, *Notes for a Memoir*, n.p.

then it was time to get back to work, until the next day at lunch or the next week, or next holiday at dinner.<sup>52</sup>

If what recently deceased Southern writer Harry Crews often stated is true that ‘the writer’s job is to get naked, to hide nothing, to look away from nothing’<sup>53</sup> then Mother’s conversations with me (along with those of other family members) enabled me to do the same a few years prior to Alzheimer’s obliterating any recognition of this writer as her daughter, or of any memories of the many truths and events she had once shared with me. Her death was a relief to a daughter’s agony of being forgotten and to the erasure of so many of Mother’s memories of a life she lived, bravely, tempestuously and with hopes and dreams of the beautiful young creature she had been dashed by single motherhood and the burden as sole support for a large family of siblings and cousins who depended upon her and her business for a livelihood. But that is another story. This one culminated in *Pictures on the Wall of My Life* and it is the technique of crafting that subsequent novel I will now address as a researcher foregrounding the issues relating to its theoretical notions of ekphrasis.

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<sup>52</sup> For reasons of total disclosure and comparison, I have provided the quoted sections used from the novel that eventually follow when commented upon in third person omniscient (italicised see pp. 262-289), and first person points of view (non-italicised see pp. 249, 262-289). Further when I share quotes from an article I published discussing particular selections from the third person point of view version, those will be cited from that article (see pp.260-268). Drafts from the initial novel chapters, in third person omniscient point of view that I have used to quote from are included in this work’s Appendix.

<sup>53</sup> Elaine Woo, ‘Harry Crews, 1935-2012’, *Los Angeles Times* (Obituaries), 1 Apr, 2012 p. A38.



## Chapter Two: Ekphrasis—as in painting, so in poetry, so why not photography?

*Photography is a record of what we see, or a revelation of what we cannot see, a glimpse of what was previously invisible.*<sup>54</sup>—W.J. T. Mitchell

### Background

This will be a theoretical chapter where I will now illustrate photographic ekphrasis by way of non-fictional and fictional texts going from imagetext to ekphrasis, the material demonstrating ekphrasis, and showing the relationship of the images to the stories surrounding them which permeate the writing. Note that this chapter is *not* to explore the personal, but to explore and illustrate the theory. I begin with some of the initial influences that carried me.

But first we must revisit the origins of the definition of ekphrasis. Ruth Webb in her study of ekphrasis recaps that it was taught to students in the Greek schools of

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<sup>54</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2005). p.274

the Roman Empire as ‘A speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes’<sup>55</sup> while they studied rhetoric. In western literature, James A. W. Heffernan explains in his study of the literary trope of ekphrasis, *Museum of Words* (1993), that one of the earliest examples ‘of ekphrasis . . . is the lengthy description of the shield that Haephestus makes for Achilles in the eighteenth book of Homer’s *Illiad*. Since Homer’s epics are generally dated to the eighth century B.C. . . . it is hardly an exaggeration to say that ekphrasis is as old as writing itself in the western world’.<sup>56</sup> Horace’s enigmatic phrase ‘ut pictura poesis’ (‘as in painting, so in poetry’) foregrounds the definition of ekphrasis as it heavily influenced centuries of critics in the comparison of verbal and visual representation. This definition has evolved over time to become ‘still movement’—as in painting is mute poetry, or poetry is a speaking picture, yet the art form of photography remains absent from this characterization.

### Literary Icons

My awakening to ekphrasis as more than just a literary trope ‘that searches for that common aesthetic bond between poetry and spatial arts’<sup>59</sup> as I have said before, drew me to privileging the photograph’s role in that bond. This path was slowly enlightened by other works, some I will touch upon here, others in more detail in the next chapter. I have always had an affinity to works utilizing photographs within them. As earlier indicated, much of this is due to being raised around a photographic culture enhanced by a father and uncle who were photographers by trade. Wading through the morass of works utilizing images and text, at first, I was drawn to literature that in

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<sup>55</sup> Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, imagination and persuasion in ancient rhetorical theory and practice* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1993), p.9.

<sup>59</sup> Mack Smith, *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition*, p.26.

some way valorised photographs ‘giving [them] voice and language’<sup>60</sup> as some memoirs often do, or so I thought. The authors of such memoirs usually included photographs or reproduced paintings of family, houses, grounds, children, ancestors, and at times, famous people, of course, depending upon the milieu of the author. However, what I discovered was that the photographs were merely complimentary appendages or documentary evidence for a life story enabling readers to ‘corroborate the narrative’s claims to truth and provide readers with a means to check and assess the historical accuracy of such claims. . . . [and confirm] the long standing contention that photographs provide a direct, straightforward, transparent image of the real world’<sup>61</sup> the author is rendering for her audience. Commonly, readers see in black and white reprints the person or place being referenced with captions under them giving dates, names, and, occasionally, very very short descriptive passages of a sentence or two perhaps.

In the memoirs of Doris Lessing, for example, *Under My Skin* (1994), its sequel *Walking in the Shade* (1997), and later her coupling of non-fiction and fictional memoir of her parents *Alfred & Emily* (2008), the family photographs are arranged like albums either clumped together in the midst of each book, or dotted throughout juxtaposed near text that refers to them or sometimes not. Each photograph has its caption of dates, names, and places. We are given photographic portraits of Lessing’s grandparents, parents, herself as a baby, as an adolescent counterpoised with her brilliantly narrated evocation of a writer’s life evolving into the Nobel Laureate that she eventually became: ‘Above: In Umtali . . . Below: Aged thirteen, I am in navy blue uniform of the Girls’ High School. The car is, I think, an Overland’<sup>62</sup> from *Under My Skin*. The photographs in *Walking in the Shade* number less for Lessing writes: ‘There are very

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Nancy Pedri, ‘Documenting the Fictions of Reality’, 162.

<sup>62</sup> Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin*. (New York, Harper Perennial, 1995). n.p.

few photographs in this volume. I hated being photographed . . . .<sup>63</sup> and the captions say even less: ‘The kitchen, Warwick Road . . . The Kitchen, Charrington Road’.<sup>64</sup> So in each memoir, Lessing’s ‘photographs accurately reproduce a perceptual experience familiar to most viewers, they provide “perceptual evidence” of what they depict’<sup>65</sup>.

By the same token, I looked to Lorna Sage’s memoir and winner of the Whitbread Biography Award, *Bad Blood* (2000), and I found a slightly different arrangement of the photographic portraits scattered throughout. None have captions under them. No dates, names or places indicated. However, more curious was that each piece of her family album was, more than once, placed many pages away from the verbal narrative directly addressing the photograph. ‘In the pictures of their austere wartime wedding’<sup>66</sup> Sage writes on page 186 about a snapshot of her parents wedding on page 114, ‘he has only just grown a moustache in order to look old enough to give orders and she is smiling like a star’.<sup>67</sup> So the reader has to search for the photograph (if the reader is so inclined and this reader is) to corroborate not just what we are seeing in the picture but the sense of being there with Sage as she writes about it. ‘Critical attention is directed not toward the photograph’s ontology but toward the historical context in which [her] photographs acquire meaning’.<sup>68</sup>

Calvin Trillin, a Thurber Prize for American Humor winner, splashes photographs in his *Messages from My Father* (1996) as accents to a verbal portrait of his father’s expectations of Trillin’s being not just a Jew, but an American. The captions in each of his family photographs are lifted from Trillin’s narrative verbatim and located a few pages away from the picture. In some cases they are presented even

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, *Walking In The Shade* (New York, Harper Perennial, 1997). n.p.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Nancy Pedri, ‘Documenting the Fictions of Reality’, 159.

<sup>66</sup> Lorna Sage, *Bad Blood* (New York, Harper Collins, 2000). p. 186.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Nancy Pedri, ‘Documenting the Fictions of Reality’, 159.

farther away: ‘You might as well be a mensch’<sup>69</sup> one of his father Abe Trillin’s regular sayings appears on page 25 of the text, yet it captions a youthful portrait of Abe at the very end of the short book after page 117. A typical family portrait of Trillin as a boy with his sister and parents in tow appears on page 28 with the sentence: ‘*It would no more have occurred to me to accompany my mother to a performance of “Carousel” than it would have occurred to Sukey to go with my father to the Golden Gloves*’ lifted from page 33. ‘Hence [the photographic] documentary force depends not on visual resemblance or similarity but on a real, actual contact with the object that the photographic image represents and points back to’.<sup>70</sup> These works, although edifying, were simply not striking the right chord in my search for works employing photographs as far more than just ‘images that are chemically and optically caused by the things in the world to which they refer’.<sup>71</sup> So out of frustration, I turned to novels in hopes of discovering works that employed photographs not just as ‘faithful pictorial records’<sup>72</sup> but rather ‘born of an interaction between photographic document and reader’<sup>73</sup> and verbal narrative bringing ‘that uncertain mixture of fact and fiction that moves readers to belief’.<sup>74</sup>

Thankfully I found the early mentor I was looking for in my ekphrastic compositional process—and that was W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* (1996) followed by my reading of *The Rings of Saturn* (1999). Unlike Blake Morrison writing in *New Statesman* that *The Rings of Saturn* ‘[was] one of the strangest books [he’d] ever read’<sup>75</sup>, Sebald’s hard to categorize works electrified me to remain steadfast in my own

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<sup>69</sup> Calvin Trillin, *Messages from My Father* (New York, FSG, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>70</sup> Nancy Pedri, ‘Documenting the Fictions of Reality’, 158.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Blake Morrison, ‘The Rings of Saturn’, *New Statesman* (1996), 45+. In Literature Resource Center, [accessed 7 Feb. 2014].

initial attempts at writing an ‘unclassifiable book, at once autobiography and fiction and historical chronicle’.<sup>76</sup> My reading of *The Emigrants* compelled me not to give up treading what I found to be a rocky rhetorical path of managing multiple genres, managing multiple memories—mine and those of my ancestors. The character of Sebald’s Great-Uncle Adelwarth struggles similarly when he proclaims ‘Memory . . . often strikes me as a kind of dumbness. It makes one’s head heavy and giddy, as if one were not looking back down the receding perspectives of time but rather down on the earth from a great height, from one of those towers whose tops are lost to view in the clouds’.<sup>77</sup> I too felt such giddiness, dumbness, and heaviness in crafting my novel. Words would fail me, especially, whenever I tried explaining to any of my writing colleagues just what I was attempting to accomplish.

I felt a small measure of relief when I read that ‘numerous commentators on *The Emigrants* have tried to explain the various genres it encompasses. A wide range of terms has emerged, including travel writing, meditative essay, documentary, scrapbook—all genres in which photography might more naturally be at home than in fiction’.<sup>78</sup> I so wished I could speak to ‘Max’ (or hear him read in person) as he was known to friends and colleagues. I was certain that he would not think me odd for wanting to do as he did and construct a literary text and bring to life ‘how the figures in these texts act and make sense of their world’.<sup>79</sup>

I almost had the opportunity, but missed it when I learned (too late) that Sebald had spoken at our local library in downtown Los Angeles. The event had been poorly publicized. Barely two months later, after he returned to his home in England, Sebald

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<sup>76</sup> Susan Sontag cited in Timothy Dow Adams, ‘Photographs on the Walls of the House of Fiction’, *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (Spring 2008), 182.

<sup>77</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse (New York, New Directions, 1997), p. 145.

<sup>78</sup> Susan Sontag cited in Timothy Dow Adams, 184.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Peter McIsaac, ‘W. G. Sebald (1944-2002451)’, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 296 (2011), 293, in *Literature Criticism Online*, [accessed 7 February 2014].

died in a tragic car accident. I felt the loss as if a long admired and inspiring teacher had been taken from me and the world. I would never have the opportunity to hear him read live, or obtain a signature for his books that I cherished as new found confirmations of my writer self. But I have his words that still grasp me as they did upon my first readings of his novels. Here, transcribed from an interview with Michaël Seeman, Sebald discusses ‘how he selects photographs and other items because he feels he can rescue them from the ravages of history’<sup>80</sup>:

I realize that, in prose, making a decent pattern out of what happens to come your way is a preoccupation, which, in a sense, has no higher ambition than to rescue something out of that stream of history that keeps rushing past, for a brief moment in time. . . . The photograph is meant to get lost somewhere in a box in an attic. It is a nomadic thing that has only a small chance to survive. I think we all know that feeling when we come accidentally across a photographic document being of one of our lost relatives, being of a totally unknown person. We get this sense of appeal; they are stepping out, having been found by somebody after decades or half centuries. All of a sudden they are stepping back over the threshold and are saying, ‘We were here too once and please take care of us for a while’.<sup>81</sup>

I, too, heard the same cry from the photographs of my ancestral past embellished by the voices of my family members. And so a collection of memories, stories, of and about a plethora of photographs emerged from the many conversations with my mother, aunts, and uncles. I felt as if the many participants, alive and dead, were asking me to rescue them from the ravages of family history and to take care of them—for a while.

In trying to do so fictively within the frame of the fantastical, I turned to Isabel Allende’s *House of Spirits* (1985) and *Eva Luna* (1987) for succour and guidance. I needed a conductor to aid my ability to tell a story about a family where the dead and unseen empowers the unknown. I took support from Allende in this conceit as her approach to the magical mirrors events in my own Latin American family as she

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*

affirms: ‘In Latin America, we value dreams, passions, obsessions, emotions, and all that which is very important to our lives has a place in literature—our sense of family, our sense of religion, of superstition too. . . . Fantastic things happen every day in Latin America—it’s not that we make them up.’<sup>82</sup>

In *Eva Luna* the passage describing Eva’s mother’s legacy echoes the legacy of my own mother and our many discussions about our family photographic heritage: ‘Words are free, she used to say, and she appropriated them; they were all hers. She sowed in my mind the idea that reality is not only what we see on the surface; it has a magical dimension as well and, if we so desire, it is legitimate to enhance it and color it to make our journey through life less trying’.<sup>83</sup>

Subsequently, as Allende does, in *The House of Spirits*, I wanted to demonstrate to my mother (and father) ‘that “spirits” of their life together’<sup>84</sup> and of my grandparents and great grandparents ‘would not be forgotten and, in the forgetting, “die” ’.<sup>85</sup> Like Allende, as a result of my own family collections and recollections, it was not I who chose the stories; the stories chose me just as the black and white photograph Mother chose to share with me spoke its story while she held it in her hands. ‘In a way, it isn’t just the characters or the plot; it’s there in the air. And it’s knocking at my door. And I just can’t refuse it any longer and [had] to sit down and write’.<sup>86</sup> And as Allende did, I could not refuse any longer and so I sat down and wrote, culminating in a fictional memoir that depends upon the belief that brings past, present, and future together as

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<sup>82</sup> Cited in Ann Charters, ‘Isabel Allende’, *The Story and Its Writer*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), p. 42.

<sup>83</sup> Isabel Allende, *Eva Luna*, trans. by Margaret Sayers Peden (New York, Dial Press, 2005), p. 22.

<sup>84</sup> Elyse Crystall, Jill Kuhnheim, and Mary Layoun, ‘An interview with Isabel Allende’, *Contemporary Literature* 33.4 (1992), 584+. In *Literature Resource Center*. [accessed 8 Feb. 2014].

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*



does *The House of Spirits* where ‘*todo ocurre simultáneamente*’<sup>87</sup>. Even Eva Luna’s pledge to herself as a committed writer rang with echoes of my own as ‘I poured a cup of black coffee and sat down at the [computer]. Then I felt something odd, like a pleasant tickling in my bones, a breeze blowing through the network of veins beneath my skin’<sup>88</sup> and all the conversations with Mother, and the many family photographs seized my genetic memory and I could not stop typing.

### Foreground

So what about the idea of photographs of people as characters? Not just two dimensional characters but the subjects of the photographs who live, breathe, speak, move, and effect palpable change on the environment and on the people/subjects who view them, and wonder about them. Perhaps they even remember who the photographic subjects once were. As three-dimensional memories move across the page meshing with that of a photographic subject and a viewing subject—new perceptions and accountability for new/revisionist histories take place. This new awareness fosters comments/queries/questions about each photograph begging for a further accompanying narrative. Seymour Chatman argues in *Story and Discourse* that ‘[c]learly a narrative is a whole because it is constituted of elements—events and existents—that differ from what they constitute’<sup>89</sup>. However, in *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*, narrative is clearly not a whole without its accompanying pictures as they are implicit behind the prose lines even though the reader does not have the pictures graphically reproduced in the novel. They are present to the writer and because of this the writing is affected stylistically as the present tense parts break down the component

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<sup>87</sup> Isabel Allende, *la casa de los espíritus*, (New York, Harper Collins, 1995), p.453.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, *Eva Luna*, p. 22.

<sup>89</sup> Chatman, Seymour, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978). p. 21.

parts of a photograph in order to build them up and send them rolling narratively in effect creating ‘prose pictures’<sup>90</sup> as seen below in Lily’s perception as first person narrator viewing her paternal grandmother’s portrait:

Granny’s face tilts up slightly looking camera left. Her eyes gaze beyond a light source that washes her skin with a youthful glow. Her salt and pepper short hair frames her face with curls that are swept away high off her forehead and tucked behind her ears. She wears a gold necklace with a clasp that resembles fingers grasping the other end of it and matching earrings. Her ample bosom is draped by a soft knit blouse with a draped neckline. She wears a gold bangle on her left arm and a gold watch on the right. Her hands rest on a lace handkerchief decorated with roses.

“It took me many weeks to sew that hanky and embroider the roses. Your daddy insisted I pose with it. He wanted me to look like a lady who never worked a day in her life. I think he was trying to provide me with a fantasy portrait—what my life might have been . . .” said Granny Flynn letting her voice trail off.<sup>91</sup>

This engenders a different label, that of imagetext, or ekphrastic narrative. A new whole, constituting events that were once thought to exist, but upon listening to these prose pictures/imagetexts a world is born for Lily Adams and perhaps for the reader/viewer.

How then does this deepen, strengthen, or complicate the composition process? Does it create more questions about the characters and the narrative that are paradoxical, or create a moral imperative for both writer and reader/viewer to press on in order to discover more answers? During the narrative unfolding of events in *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*, Lily learns from the many ancestral portraits in black and white that line the halls of her childhood home, that what they embody is indeed not visually representative of a past she has been encouraged to believe in, but rather one she is now forced to question as the pictures speak to her of a world re-focused

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<sup>90</sup> Hirsch, *Family Frames: photography narrative and postmemory*, p. 3.

<sup>91</sup> Linda Rader Overman, ‘Pictures on the Wall of My Life’: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Lancaster University, 2013) p.76.

through their own lens. These portraits indeed render a new truth, through voices of their very own, challenging what Lily has been told about her family, how it's been told, and through what medium she has relied upon to accept it. And so Lily's (and this researcher's) discovery process enables the writing of an ekphrastic narrative or an ekphrastic realism that occurs afterwards in the narrative causing further interrogations not just by those living within the novel, but also the reader/viewer without. 'In many cases, the presence of photographs within narrative result[s] in questions, not about the authenticity of the image but about the genre of the narrative'.<sup>92</sup> In my case, I am referring to the presence of images in the process of drafting the narrative rather than the final piece. This implies that photography/images, be it short captions that complement or enhance the photographic images, or long passages (some book length), and narrative are two discrete genres. I would argue however, that photography and narrative/text when they are placed together should not be considered separate genres. Side by side or encapsulated within each other, they are in fact a perfect union, a perfect marriage resulting in one genre: ekphrastic narrative, which is what I will continue to call it. Both the photographic image (I am using the metaphor of literary image) and the text do *not* appear in the final text instead, a narrative or ekphrastic realism does that is influenced by both. Coming to this conclusion, for me, is a response to James Agee's exigency when he writes: 'Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it'.<sup>93</sup>

We must remember that initially painting, not photography, has always been one of the major canons for visual representation. Further '[b]efore the 19<sup>th</sup> century, painting was the art of silence. Painters of antiquity . . . never envisaged the possibility

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Adams, *Why People Photograph* (New York: Aperture, 2005), p. 177.

<sup>93</sup> Cited in Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 290.

of rendering sounds, noises and smells in painting'.<sup>96</sup> Never, perhaps, in the way that photography eventually rendered the moments of such sounds/noises on film as a different medium—yet, still pictures can be given a soundtrack. Perhaps some paintings can evoke sounds: the sound of a knock, a breath, a cry, a touch, a smile, and a sigh in time (or even the smell of a feast). Never, perhaps, in the way photography evolved into a template or palimpsest, of sorts, for the art of painting.

A photographic image and surrounding discourse, however ideological and political in its production and placement in the media or a family collection, is connected to many possible realities and readings according to the situation of its being taken and the viewer—is a representation of actual lived reality. So I would contend that it is different from the painting in its power to move us. Even though the photographic portrait or photograph taken at a ritual, or symbolic moment—as the media photograph appearing in *People* discussed on page 216 of Chapter One<sup>97</sup>—may have a similarity to the tableau, or studio posed portrait, the public occasion of a flag planting, or funeral taking place outside the photograph, like family life in the taking of the photograph is an event, and so has special meaning for the family and the future.

The photograph itself is part of the flow of life and is a record of this. It is relatively quick and so it can be part of the ebb and flow of events rather than as often (though not necessarily) in the case of family painted portraits taken to show symbolic status, wealth, or power, etc. Photographs can be taken outside and do not need necessarily to be situated in a special room or studio surrounded by the professional paraphernalia of the trade, though they may be. And they can be worked on afterwards in the dark room to produce special effects.

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<sup>96</sup> Carlo Carrá cited in Huon Mallalieu, 'The sound of silence: listening to paintings', *Country Life*, CCVI.10 (March 7, 2012), 74.

<sup>97</sup> See previous discussion on p. 216

Therefore it can be argued that the imagetext and the ekphrasis in the resultant fiction may be different for the reader as well as the writer. The focus of the writer around photographic text is, at least to some extent, on that moment in time for a person who once inhabited that time and place, and cannot guard against certain things showing, and certain interpretations later. Whereas the ekphrastic narrative built on a painted portrait, as well as being about that general period of the person's life and their general character, is less likely to be about that particular day when the kitchen maid had run off with the gardener, or the subject of the painting was already contemplating leaving his wife/ her husband, etc. The photograph may seem to hold secrets for the descended family member about the people and the viewer her/himself at that time. If only we could get beyond the frame. The painted portrait, while it is a starting point, is not of the same nature.

We must consider a recent exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam closing May 6, 2012. This exhibition showed the influence of the box camera on artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was titled 'Snapshot: Painters and Photography, Bonnard to Vuillard'. The box camera was pioneered by George Eastman, as the first Kodak camera, in 1888. It obviated the need to carry a heavy tripod, a darkening cape, heavy plates or liquid developer. Simply hold the camera waist-high, aim, press the shutter release button, and send the box back to the lab to be developed. This revolutionized the process of point, shoot, and develop as Kodak then advertised, 'you press the button, we do the rest'.<sup>98</sup>

The genesis of this exhibition resulted in a treasure trove of photographs discovered in the archives of French painter Edouard Vuillard by curator Elizabeth W. Easton. What she found was not only Vuillard, but also many other painters such as

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<sup>98</sup> Stanley Meisler, 'Pretty as a picture—or a painting', *Los Angeles Times*. 25 March 2012, p. E8.

Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Félix Vallotton who embraced the cameras, using them to photograph families, vacations, or their city monuments. These snapshots then became, in some cases, the preliminary studies for their paintings or prints because ‘[p]hotos had an advantage over drawings because they caught a scene in an instantaneous moment of time . . . More often, the photo, rather than serving as a study, offered the artist a figure or vantage point for use in a larger work of art. . . . So, sometimes the photos create an atmosphere that also infuses the paintings’<sup>99</sup> because the photographs could not be separated from the sounds, smells, etc. experienced by the photographer out in the world.

Hence, I would claim that photographic images are neither mute nor still. And, to clarify, I am not referring to a photographic essay when I say photographic images. Whereas Mitchell claims that mixed mediums such as photographic essays contain a normal structure involving the ‘straightforward discursive or narrative suturing of the verbal and visual; texts explain, narrate, describe, label, speak for (or to) the photographs; photographs illustrate, exemplify, clarify, ground and document the text’,<sup>100</sup> I contend there is nothing straightforward about the imagetexts that I am proposing. By coupling photographs with corresponding prose captions or texts, and labelling them imagetexts (as Mitchell and Hirsch do) a life of their own follows provoking ekphrasis, which for me, becomes an act that hails the literary evocation of spatial art and the repositioning of (re)memory.<sup>101</sup>

Long prior to realizing this, a decade or so earlier, in fact, I was working on a piece of creative non-fiction for one of my graduate school classes centred on life writing. I have, as I said before, thousands of photographs of my family members. But

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 94.

<sup>101</sup> See previous discussion on p. 237.

those taken by my father of my mother have taken on the status of exquisite works of art. They almost appear as the noir studio portraits similar to those taken by Hollywood portrait specialist George Hurrell famous for sculpting ‘his subjects’ faces with light and shadow’.<sup>102</sup> I had forgotten about the importance of Hurrell’s work until I met a young relative of his at UCLA around the time a television special was about to air saluting his work. Several years after Hurrell’s death, the film *L.A. Confidential* was released in 1997 with its ‘amazing deconstruction of the noir genre . . . Not only [was] it a finely crafted film, but it explore[d] exactly what makes a noir a noir while deconstructing the classic tropes and characters from one of Hollywood’s most revered genres’.<sup>103</sup> I recognized the same photographic and filmic qualities in my father’s many glamour portraits of Mother. So in order to fulfil one of the many course writing tasks I was given in this life writing class, one morning I stared at a beautiful black and white portrait of Mother in her mid-thirties taken by my father during their early courting days:

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<sup>102</sup>Virginia Postrel, ‘Starlight and Shadow’ (July/August 2007), *theAtlantic.com*  
<<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/07/starlight-and-shadow/5978/2/>>  
[accessed: 12, May 2012].

<sup>103</sup> Matthew Razak, ‘Review: L.A. Confidential’ (2011), *Flixist.com*  
<<http://www.flixist.com/review-l-a-confidential-198886.phtml>> [accessed 12 May 2012].



As a result I wrote the following (in excerpt), which was later published in a literary journal based at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho:

Photo, Circa 1947 by Rader

Portrait of a beautiful woman, my mother, composed and caressed, shot and signed by my father, William Rader. The image shows Mother's waist-length upswept hair. She has it done weekly at Elizabeth Arden's salon in Beverly Hills. After working ten to twelve hour days, sometimes sixty hours a week for her pastry chef father—Henri Balagué in his French Pastry shop, Balagué, on Vine Street between Santa Monica Boulevard and Fountain Avenue in Hollywood, California—Tuesdays, from 9 o'clock to noon, are strictly for a body massage, a



manicure, a pedicure, a facial and elegantly coiffed long hair. After which Henriette Balagué, born in Mexico, of a French Basque father and a Spanish, Dutch, and Mexican mother (whose indigenous connections Henriette does not yet admit to) lunches with her girlfriends at the Italian restaurant next door. Mom clasps the photo momentarily. It quivers in her grasp. . . <sup>105</sup>

While writing this piece I could hear Mother's words echoing our past conversations about this and so many other photographs Dad shot of her. Her life, and the octogenarian speaking/standing before me relating this text, turned out to be a far different one than this and other photographs suggested. Even so I wrote it in present tense because the force of the portrait was so alive that it deserved speaking in the present because she/Mother/subject had yet to know in this very moment what the future held or what the blind spot would yet reveal.

This dynamic of displacement between my parents as young lovers and, later, the disjuncture of bitterly divorced angry parents jolted me. This photo particularly stood out, because it was clear that in that click-of-the-shutter moment the camera and the man shooting the photograph was deeply in love with Mother and she with him. Her energy and attraction to Dad smouldered off the page. I could almost hear Dad directing her, where to look, how high or low to hold her head, where to cast her gaze, interestingly enough not at him, but away from the camera. Some of the discussions they were probably having during this or other portrait sessions hover in the realm of intimacy between two people. I didn't wish to actually hear them indeed my imagination pixilates at the mere thought of eavesdropping on such tête-à-têtes but the dynamism from the photograph and mother's later narrative/text developed into an imagetext from her voice to Dad's optical voice to my mind and onto the page.

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<sup>105</sup> Linda Rader Overman, 'Conversations with Memory', *Talking River*, 19 (2005), 65-69.

This was different from anything I had ever written before indeed, I was very unsure just what this was that I was writing. I only know that I couldn't stop with one photograph. I continued to do this for the latter years of Mother's life while her mind was still alert. And so this formed a methodology for my thesis. Writing in present tense and indicating some foreknowledge of what was to come in the future after each photograph was taken in this and the many other similar prose pictures added to the immediacy and intensity of these works. Also, the use of future tense renders a powerful sense of the narrator's perception of the photograph while already knowing the outcome of that person's life. This enables a sense that the whole life is grasped and held still from a point at which the subject is being perceived long after the event, and in the light of its ending. Thus because of this type of writing act, I saw a strong connection emerging between photographic, memoir, and fiction writing techniques. In addition, I found, because of this connection, that technical photographic terms were useful to classify these techniques and relate them to ekphrasis. When using the term<sup>106</sup> aperture<sup>107</sup> which works in conjunction with depth of field<sup>108</sup> in the camera interestingly this also has a connection with tense and time in narrative—particularly in the use of an existential clause indicating existence or presence for the character perceiving a photograph at a moment in time.

When I presented some of these imagetexts at conferences and then published them later, Mother's memory regarding them had stilled. Alzheimer's had robbed her of the ability to communicate with me any longer, obliterating such memories along

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<sup>106</sup> These terms are discussed in more detail on pp. 261-69.

<sup>107</sup> Aperture is 'the size of the camera lens opening which controls brightness of light that reaches sensor/film. Like the pupil of an eye enlarging/contracting determines how much or how little light to admit', London, *Photography*, p.24.

<sup>108</sup> 'Depth of Field. (DOF). The range of items in focus in an image. This is controlled by the focal length and aperture opening of a lens. A large or wide aperture gives a shallow depth of field (not much range in focus) and a smaller or narrow aperture give a large depth of field (more range in focus)'. <<http://www.all-things-photography.com/digital-dictionary.html>> [accessed 2, April 2013].

with her ability to speak. She died not fully appreciating the legacy she had left me.

Hence, reading through this text comprised of Mother's memories while dialoguing with me and holding the image of her in my hand, afterward, affected me—*loudly*.

*This image has captured me through a voice of its own*, I realized, or as Ludwig

Wittgenstein writes, 'A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and [its] language seemed to repeat itself to us inexorably'.<sup>109</sup> It

has a story, a truth of its own, holding us captive, talking to us—

writer/researcher/reader/viewer. Indeed all the many images in my possession do. And

ekphrasis was being performed by this particular image and the particular text Mother

provided me, as did Dad, albeit his posthumous voice visually represented. This was

not the act of ekphrasis of a work of art that I had studied, as Keats had accomplished

with 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' with its description of an urn, as Leo Spitzer writes

belonging to:

the genre, known to Occidental literature from Homer and Theocritus to the Parnassians and Rilke, of ekphrasis, the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, which description implies, in the words of Théophile Gautier, '*une transposition d'art*,' the reproduction, through the medium of words, of sensuously perceptible *objets d'art* ('ut pictura poesis').<sup>110</sup>

No, this was an ekphrastic act unifying word and image not as a 'mirage because only

the illusion of such an impossible picture can be suggested by the poem's words'<sup>111</sup> as

Murray Krieger claims, but rather a self-determined creative response of verbal-visual

artefacts, conjoining aperture, oral storytelling and familial recall.

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<sup>109</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, (Reprint New York: Macmillan, 1953): p.115.

<sup>110</sup> Leo Spitzer, 'The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', or Content vs. Metagrammar', In *Essays on English and American Literature*, ed. by Anna Hatcher (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962), p. 72.

<sup>111</sup> Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992). p. xvii.

This imagetext I held and heard had an even greater aperture effect—similar to the way that the pupil of an eye enlarging/contracting determines how much or how little light to admit—this imagetext enlarged my perception of it. The events portrayed within it focused/narrowed my awareness by its own particular visual voice. The flat two dimensional image was subverted into a near three dimensional one rendering a complete new understanding of a life/lives lived, thought, or perceived to be lived in a certain way. The imagetext teases the notion of a narrow view dominated by assumption. And this threw me back to the more current definition of the act of ekphrasis, (derived from the Greek as in *ek* for ‘out’<sup>112</sup> and *phrazein* for ‘declare’ or ‘pronounce’) in effect is ‘to describe’ or ‘to tell in full.’

Hence, I found myself reflecting and analysing the subjects in each photograph that Mother and I were in as Roland Barthes does in his own analysis of the portrait-photograph as a closed field of forces. He writes, ‘In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art’.<sup>113</sup> And as Barthes reflects, Mother and I became forces in our particular reflections of certain photographs, ‘who oppose and distort each other’.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, existing within the field of opposition, for me, is ekphrasis, which allows me/reader/viewer/writer/researcher to fill in what the pictures left out.

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<sup>112</sup> ‘Ekphrasis’. *Reference.com*.

<sup>113</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 13.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

### Ekphrastic Conversations

In my article titled ‘Ekphrastic Narrative: a genre focalizing image and text’<sup>115</sup> published in the *International Journal of Arts and Science* (IJAS, 2012), I discuss the notion of the unsaid as what an image may provoke. ‘Lily Adams begins with a photograph and its implied declaration that it is telling “in full.” Or at least that is what she has been led to believe. But does it truly tell all in full by itself? A photograph looks real, but as much as photography has been about depicting reality, it is also about the distortion or the deception of reality. And just what that reality depicts remains for the viewer to decide’.<sup>116</sup>

So ‘take a moment, and look briefly at this photograph.

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<sup>115</sup> Linda Rader Overman, ‘Ekphrastic Narrative: a genre focalizing image and text’, *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*. 5.6 (2012), 687-694, <universitypublications.net>. [accessed: 29 Dec 2012].

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, 690



In attempting to describe what you perceive being depicted here this picture may evoke a number of responses, for example:

Oh, how romantic. They are at a crossroads. She is thinking about another time. He is wondering what comes next. A boundary separates them and they want to breach it. He is holding on to a fence and waiting. Will he have to cross those mountains, he wonders. She wonders where he is and what is beyond. Do they really know one other? Has he forgotten her, yet she thinks only of him.

Actually, this is one of my family photographs that is an inspiration for one that Lily Adam's finds in the novel, long after her parents' divorce. These comments are expressed in the form of existential clauses in present tense, which placed together begin to act in the way aperture on the camera does by creating a depth of field. These

stories of the past then illustrate a shifting from imagetext to memoir to ekphrastic realist fiction:<sup>117</sup>

*Following Leonard's departure, Dolores pretended like he'd never existed, but Lily knew that he had. There were very few photographs of him left hanging or on table tops, and there was an outline of one that used to be visible on the wall. Lily recalled that it was what Leonard called a double exposure and it had been her favorite. It captured Dolores and Leonard standing on either side of a fence with hills in the background. Each looks in opposite directions. He grasps a chain linked fence that sits on top of a concrete barrier with his right hand as he puffs on his signature pipe. His shirt with flap pockets on either side is unbuttoned exposing a bit of his t-shirt. Dolores is wearing a light soft linen dress with Juliette sleeves bolstered by small shoulder pads making her shoulders seem broader than they are. The folds of fresh-pressed linen softens the outlines of her breasts. Around her neck is a large gold choker of squared chain links intertwined with coral. Lily remembered that coral necklace as salmon in color, because once when she played with it as a child and the strand broke, Lily had to scurry to gather all the pieces up from the floor before her cat, Pancho, thought they were play toys. Then she put the necklace parts back in Dolores's drawer and pretended ignorance when Dolores asked about it. Dolores is resting her right arm against the concrete barrier portion of the fence. Leonard's face appears hauntingly inside of Dolores's face. Or perhaps he lives within hers, but what is odd is that Dolores's face is twice the size of Leonard's. Did he plan it that way? He must have as he was far too professional for this photograph to be a mistake, unlike their marriage. Taking this photograph must have been Leonard's way of accepting the world as his camera recorded it. And yet their marriage proved that they, or perhaps just he, could not accept it as it looks in this romantic moment: each inhabiting the other's thoughts as if one could not live without the other. So where in this snap of the shutter moment does the truth lie? Then again what is the truth? Lily considered all the voices in her mother's home that provided a map for her to maneuver through her younger years—weren't they then part of this elusive truth?'<sup>118</sup>*

First person POV version:

Following Leonard's departure, Mom pretended like he'd never existed, but I knew that he had. There were very few photographs of him left

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<sup>117</sup> A reminder that over these next pages, whenever I refer to the work in the IJAS article, the first quoted (italicised) selections from my novel are cited in the third person omniscient version, which is how I made my presentation during the 2012 International Journal of Arts and Sciences conference in Las Vegas and how they appear in the published article. The second same set of quotations from the novel is from the first person point of view (non-italicized), and latest version of the novel.

<sup>118</sup> Overman, *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 691.

hanging or on table tops, and there was an outline of one that used to be visible on the wall near Granny Flynn. I recalled that it was what Leonard called a double exposure and it had been her favourite. It captured Mom and Leonard standing on either side of a fence with hills in the background. Each looks in opposite directions. He grasps a chain linked fence that sits on top of a concrete barrier with his right hand as he puffs on his signature pipe. His shirt with flap pockets on either side is unbuttoned exposing a bit of his t-shirt. Mom is wearing a light soft linen dress with Juliette sleeves bolstered by small shoulder pads making her shoulders seem broader than they are. The folds of fresh-pressed linen soften the outlines of her breasts. Around her neck is a large gold choker of squared chain links intertwined with coral. I remembered that coral necklace as salmon in colour, because once when I played with it as a child and the strand broke, I had to scurry to gather all the pieces up from the floor before her cat Pancho thought they were play toys. Then I put the necklace parts back in Mom's drawer and pretended ignorance when she asked about it.

Mom is resting her right arm against the concrete barrier portion of the fence. Leonard's face appears hauntingly inside of Mom's face. Or perhaps he lives within hers, but what is unusual is that Mom's face is twice the size of Leonard's. Did he plan it that way? He must have as he was far too professional for this photograph to be a mistake, unlike their marriage. Taking this photograph must have been Leonard's way of accepting the world as his camera recorded it. And yet their marriage proved that they, or perhaps just he, could not accept it as it looks in this romantic moment: each inhabiting the other's thoughts as if one could not live without the other. So where in this snap of the shutter moment does the truth lie? Then again what is the truth? I considered all the voices in our home that provided a map for me to manoeuvre through my younger years—weren't they then part of this elusive truth? <sup>119</sup>

The second version shows how the work has moved on and been transmuted in its current version. From an observer of family photographs, the protagonist (and this writer who observed her own family photographs and then fictionalized them) has taken a step inside the photograph itself as a teller to create not just a variety of narrative voices but an overarching one—Lily's.

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<sup>119</sup> Overman, 'Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey', p.82.



‘Below is another family photograph that is an inspiration for one of the photos Lily sees in the novel, after her mother has died.



Again this might evoke response like:

She is about to clap for someone or something she likes. He is directing her to clap for him. But he is really not looking at her. She is looking up at the camera, not at him. It is some kind of optical illusion because he is a fantasy and she really wants to leave. He is tired. He is wearing his scarf because he is cold. He wants her to fix her scarf because it has fallen. She is just posing for a portrait for a professional

photographer. The light is too harsh. She does not like it. She is pretending. He is actually trying to control her.

This, too, is one of my family photographs—a further inspiration for one that Lily Adams sees in the novel and in the second version we see how her depth of field/range of focus is enhanced and sharpened:

*A black and white portrait of Dolores sitting on an antique sofa had been photographed by Leonard. In the picture, Dolores sits in the foreground in a strapless evening gown. “It was gold lame and I made it,” she had announced proudly when Lily was much younger. A green scarf—“I made that too,” Dolores would remind Lily—is draped around her and has fallen, leaving her shoulders bare. It lies in the crook of each bent arm. One hand rests upon the other, as if she is about to applaud someone or something. Her wedding ring is a band set against another with a stone, a diamond, maybe. Large earrings, gold flowers, adorn the elegance of her swept back chignon. Leonard is reflected in an elaborately carved wood and gold accented mirror behind her. His face is right next to the lens of his view camera. A scarf is draped over his neck. He squeezes the shutter button. A barrel spot light hovers above Dolores, showering light upon her chest and naked shoulders. Smooth, sleek, unequivocally soft. This image is Leonard’s self-portrait of their marriage. A photo of himself shooting a portrait of Dolores on this Louis XVI Neoclassical French furniture. It might appear in Vanity Fair or Vogue, but it doesn’t. It looks like something out of a film noir still photo, but it isn’t. Dolores had told a younger Lily that it was their Christmas card photo. They look so refined. They are still very much in love in this still life moment. This is early in their marriage. Since the portrait hangs in Dolores’s bedroom right next to her dressing table, Lily had not looked at it for a long time. She could barely bring herself to enter that room or look at the picture even now . . . so soon after her mother’s death.’<sup>120</sup>*

First person POV version:

Walking into Mom’s room, there it was, again that black and white portrait of the beautiful Dolores, sitting on the same antique sofa Granny Flynn had been photographed sitting on, shot by Leonard when I was still a baby.

In the picture, Mom sits in the foreground in a strapless evening gown.

“It was gold lame and I made it,” she had announced proudly when I was much younger. A green scarf—“I made that too,” she would remind me—is draped around her midriff, having fallen, leaving her shoulders bare. It lies in the crook of each bent arm. One hand rests

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<sup>120</sup> Overman, *International Journal of Arts and Science*, 693.

upon the other, as if she is about to applaud someone or something. Her wedding ring is a band set against another with a stone, a diamond, maybe. Large earrings, gold flowers, adorn the elegance of her swept-back chignon. Leonard is reflected in an elaborately carved wood and gold accented mirror (which now hangs in my apartment bedroom) behind her. His face is right next to the lens of his view camera. A scarf is draped over his neck. He squeezes the shutter button. A barrel spot light hovers above Mom, showering light upon her chest and naked shoulders. Smooth, sleek, unequivocally soft. This image is Leonard's self-portrait of their marriage. A photo of himself shooting a portrait of Dolores on this Louis XVI Neoclassical French furniture. It might appear in *Vanity Fair* or *Vogue*, but it doesn't. It looks like something out of a film noir still photo, but it isn't. Mom had told me long ago that it was their Christmas card photo. They look so refined. They are still very much in love in this still-life moment. This is early in their marriage. Since the portrait hung in Mom's bedroom right next to her dressing table, I had not looked at it for a long time. I could barely bring myself to enter that room or look at the picture even now . . . especially now, so soon after her death. At this time, however, I was far more interested in how much time must pass before Mom might be able to speak to me, or if she ever would be able to.<sup>121</sup>

In this second version, Lily's position is empowered as observer/teller giving the photograph the opportunity to address the reader directly rather than just through Lily. And in this instance it is as if the photo almost dissolves and is less present as a filter. At this point in the novel we understand more clearly that Lily is pained while waiting for this photograph (the dead) to talk to directly.

So what is happening here? The aperture (or metaphorical lens, as I conceive of 'aperture') when the photograph is captured, produces just how much of the photographic subject and its scene is revealed. So rather than the photographer actually trying to control her, or capture her, the image/subject captures/controls the viewer, or as Diane Arbus states 'I don't press the shutter. The image does. And it's like being gently clobbered'.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Overman, 'Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey', p.113.

<sup>122</sup> Elizabeth Sussman and Doon Arbus. *Diane Arbus: A Chronology*. (New York: Aperture, 2011), p. 26.

Subsequently, a photograph can become a verbal text just as ‘a verbal text can become a “photograph”’<sup>123</sup> and merging the two thereby renders agency to the imagetext itself. And that agency engenders ‘logic and ideas in photography and individual photographs’<sup>124</sup> affirming Barthes notion that ‘[p]hotography is subversive not when it frightens, repels or even stigmatizes, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks’,<sup>125</sup> or rather when it causes the viewer to think subversively.

As a researcher/writer I found that I had to remember that within the work of photographic composition and photographic how-tos, ‘looking through the widest aperture means that [we] see the scene with the least possible depth of field’.<sup>126</sup> Technically ‘depth of field is the area from near-to-far in a scene that is acceptably sharp in a photograph’<sup>127</sup>; however, the writer in me realized that while having a colleague read aloud what I had written while holding the previous photos in my gaze—depth of field transmutes into a scene which the photographic gazer thinks to be sharp. Yet, upon closer inspection in this approach to ekphrasis, depth of field, I contend, is how the *photographic subject allows itself to be viewed and heard* through the shifting of the narrative view in memory, spoken retellings, and written fiction. Thus it is the subject that claims agency over the photographic experience and the ekphrastic narrative that follows.

So, for example, the present tense sections of both novel excerpts below are the smaller/narrower aperture with sharper focus, enabling the reader/viewer to read, for instance, in the second aforementioned image that ‘They are still very much in love in

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<sup>123</sup> James Hugunin, ‘Photography and Language’, In *Photography and Language* (San Francisco: Camerawork Press, 1977), p.8.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Leverant, In *ibid.* p.11

<sup>125</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 38.

<sup>126</sup> London, *Photography*, p. 27.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.* p.26.

this still life moment'<sup>128</sup> and note its tremendous depth of field in the sense of going beyond the perception of surface objects and stepping back from the subject makes the scene sharper. Perhaps depth of field here depends upon *penetrating* to gain a deeper study of the surface objects with the intersection of narrative (wider aperture) upon the detail of the subject's pose/costume (narrow aperture):

*A green scarf (narrow aperture)—“I made that too,” (wider aperture) Dolores would remind Lily (wider aperture)—is draped around her and has fallen, leaving her shoulders bare (narrow aperture). It lies in the crook of each bent arm (narrow aperture). One hand rests upon the other (narrow aperture), as if she is about to applaud someone or something (wider aperture).<sup>129</sup>*

First person POV version:

A green scarf (narrow aperture)—“I made that too,” (wider aperture) she would remind me (wider aperture)—is draped around her midriff, having fallen, leaving her shoulders bare (narrow aperture). It lies in the crook of each bent arm (narrow aperture). One hand rests upon the other (narrow aperture), as if she is about to applaud someone or something (wider aperture).<sup>130</sup>

The notion then of aperture remains in both versions however in the second version Lily appears more in control by enabling the photograph to penetrate the view for the reader/viewer more adroitly by replicating a conversation between mother and daughter rather than a static telling. This is reminiscent of the conversation my own mother and I had while she held this actual photograph in her hand and told me its tale.

In the case of this view, the reader/viewer sees the extent of depth of field either when the lens is stopped down to its smallest aperture enabling depth of field to increase, thus making background and foreground sharper, yielding sharper images even of others in the shot as well: ‘His face is right next to the lens of his view camera’

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<sup>128</sup> Overman, [\*International Journal of Arts & Sciences\*](#), 693.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Overman, ‘Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey’, p.113.

or at its widest aperture enabling only one point to be sharply in focus producing an image that is not sharp enough overall: 'it was what Leonard called a double exposure and it had been her favourite. It captured Dolores and Leonard standing on either side of a fence with hills in the background. Each looks in opposite directions'. This more heightened approach of reading/viewing a prose picture embodies the act of analysing/interpreting an ekphrastic narrative or image (photograph) and text (narrative)—as a *whole new imagetext*.

And so Lily Adams slowly discovers over her life and within the life of this novel that a photograph is never closed or in the power of the photographer, but always open to reinterpretation through time, especially, by its 'subject'. Thus if a 'subject' steps into the role of interpreter, this can be as empowering as the subject of the novel stepping out into the person of the narrator.

Thus I assert that photographs *can* do the very thing that Susan Sontag argues photographs cannot do, 'no photograph can ever . . . –speak'.<sup>131</sup> Photographs *can* do what viewers, readers, artists, admirers and theorists demand from them and that is—to speak. An accompanying text or caption is not merely 'the missing voice'.<sup>132</sup>

But even an entirely accurate caption [or prose picture] is only one interpretation . . . of the photograph to which it is attached . . . It cannot prevent any argument or moral plea which a photograph is intended to support from being undermined by the plurality of meanings that every photograph carries . . .<sup>133</sup>

What it can be, however, is a voice of a truth that carries, supports, subverts, and opens up all the stops<sup>134</sup> to narrative interpretation which is compelled by the act of ekphrasis

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<sup>131</sup> Susan Sontag. *On Photography*, p.108

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.* p. 109.

<sup>134</sup> 'F-stop is the 'common term for the aperture setting of a lens'. (London, *Photography*, p.400).

that now creates a voice that has located itself with a focal length<sup>135</sup>—focused with clarity, sharpness, and a de-familiarizing profundity.

Although ‘focalize’ denotatively means to bring into focus (and it also has its association as a technical narrative term<sup>137</sup>), I use the term in a photographic context throughout this work as in ‘by controlling focus, photographers also can control where people look when an image is viewed’.<sup>138</sup> I wondered about whether there were any further correspondences between the work of the photographer and the work of the storyteller and/or fiction writer. Coming up with the aforementioned terms from photography pressed me forward to discover the way any/all of these types of text can misrepresent. In fiction and in memoir, the writer knows the end of the story. Within the photograph merged with either or both of these genres—the reader/viewer can’t help but be drawn in by the juxtaposition of what we hope might happen with what does happen.

The *focus lock*<sup>139</sup> is about making a type of record of moments in time. There is an interface between it (the photograph) and the storytelling of people (my own family members and the characters in the novel) who witnessed events and moments of the past, but who necessarily have their own angle. Of course, some might say, that this must be done in fiction without the use of a photograph as a starting point, but I am describing a particular process of arriving to that kind of stylistic outcome and how it works for this writer in order to understand and develop as a writer.

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<sup>135</sup> Focal length ‘. . . the longer the focal length the greater the magnification of the image’, *ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> As in Gerard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* trans. by Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell UP, 1980). or Mieke Bal’s, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1985).

<sup>138</sup> London, *Photography*, p. 27.

<sup>139</sup> Focus lock means ‘pre-focussing the subject and re-framing by moving the camera. This is done by half pressing the shutter to focus and fully pressing to expose. Done to ensure crisp, sharp eyes for example’. *All Things Photography*. <http://www.all-things-photography.com/digital-dictionary.html> [accessed 3, Mar 2013].

## Tilt & Depth

My focus here is on the position of writer/narrator and Lily Adams with reference to ‘tilt’ and ‘depth’ and then I will go on to discuss re-positioning/re-framing of both Lily and Angelita through the movement of the narrative.

The writer tilts the frame in the process of drafting, as does the photographer in the composing/framing process. The term ‘frame’ here is used not just in the photographic sense, as in edges of an image or a single image in a roll of film<sup>140</sup> or a ‘tactic of using natural surroundings to add more meaning to your subject . . .’ where ‘[i]n the process of doing this you need to be careful that you don’t only focus on what’s framing your subject’, and ‘make sure you focus on the main subject . . .’<sup>141</sup> ; rather, frame is also about the role and position of the narrator and the characters in the photographs and choices made in narrating. Further, I am using it to explore this writer’s placement within the frame of my own life in this exploration—that which helps me to work on my writing, or what helps me as a writer to understand how I might take my work forward in any way.

The photograph in the coming pages (275) of my mother at seventeen is the inspiration for the character of Angie/Angelita’s photograph in the novel, in addition to the previously discussed photographic subjects/objects. It places her within an ekphrastic frame as I do in the novel (in third person omniscient):

*As the weeks, then months and a year passed, Lily would stop and play a staring game with that portrait: sometimes one minute full elapsed, then two, then five minutes—an eternity for a girl of seven—and eight, then nine, but Aunt Angie remained frozen in profile. She did not, would not, turn to look at Lily. Even though she thought, once or twice, there had been a wisp of movement because a few strands of hair looked out of place in the photograph—didn’t they? . . .*

*“¿A dónde vas Lily?” Where are you going, she asked simply. Lily*

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<sup>140</sup> London, *Photography*, p.400.

<sup>141</sup> *Photography: The Rules of Composition*. <http://www.picturecorrect.com/tips/photography-the-rules-of-composition/> [accessed 5, April 2013].



*stopped and turned because the voice still sounded a bit like Dolores's. But no, it was Angelita in profile, her long mane fluttering as if by someone's gentle breath. . . .*<sup>142</sup>

First person POV version from the speaking voice of Angelita's portrait:

Weeks, months, then some years passed during which Lily would stop and play a staring game with my portrait. Sometimes one minute elapsed, then two, then five minutes—an eternity for a girl of seven, eight, then nine, but I had to keep frozen in profile. I did not, could not, turn to look at her. Once or twice, I know she thought there had been a wisp of movement because a few strands of my hair looked out of place in the photograph, but rules are rules. We pictures can speak and move within the print we inhabit. Sometimes, we can even emit sounds from the settings we occupy in our portraits. And sometimes, not often, we release a slight scent, but only when the occasion or the need calls for it. Yet never, never can we breach the in-between: that dimension between second and third. This is not allowed and all of us know better than to attempt it. We have spent our lives observing the many rules and boundaries burdening the women of our generations, and so often we just obeyed what was without question. Some of us paid for it too, but not our *preciosa* Lily, no indeed. . . .

“¿A dónde vas Lily?” Where are you going, I asked simply. Lily stopped and turned. I am positive she thought it was Dolores, at first. But no, it was me yet in profile, but this time my long hair fluttered as if by someone's gentle breath. I did not look at Lily directly. . . .<sup>143</sup>

The second version provides the portrait an opportunity to speak for itself.

Angelita can explain the rules that each portrait must abide by earlier in the novel, something which had eluded me in the third person attempt. In addition, that each portrait's unspoken edict is to empower and guide Lily is stated by Angelita, the portrait forced to hide the secret of Lily's heritage by the others. In the third person omniscient draft it took me far longer to address this.

The uniqueness of the experience confronts Lily. It also confronts the reader/viewer. It is as if the viewer sees a re-constructed/new image with the power of the one assaulting not just the writer, but they, the readers/viewers as well. Lily's

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<sup>142</sup> Overman, 'Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction', *An Ekphrastic Journey*, p.353.

<sup>143</sup> *ibid.*, p.30

placement in the composition as subject (both looking–gazing/reading–and acting) and Angelita’s movement across the landscape of the composition sets in motion a repositioning of all the characters and thus the reader’s view changes. Lily, the framing narrator, has allowed herself to be seen from the point of view of the image, the photographic subject tilted out of one time and projecting into another. Angelita has taken over the narration and made Lily a character in her story.

James Elkins says it like this, ‘every object sees us; there are eyes growing on everything . . . . To see is to be seen, and everything I see is like the eye, collecting my gaze, blinking, staring, focusing, and reflecting, sending my look back to me’.<sup>144</sup> Further, with first person point of view it is far clearer that ‘[t]he subject staring out of this photograph that has time-trapped’<sup>145</sup> her, ‘has projected herself forcefully across time, hurling [her] self-image towards [not just the] emulsion that lies behind the shutter in the camera, but in the assertion of [her] presence’<sup>146</sup>. By doing so the distance of generations between Lily and Angelita, as well as for we in-lookers, has been erased. Lily and readers/viewers are pulled ‘towards comprehension of the rich manifold of past, present and future in which [she and we] are embedded, of which this image is but an infinitesimal time-slice’,<sup>147</sup> and that is yet to come from the other portraits as well.

The image to follow captured of my mother with a slight tilt up or down (from the angle that a young child standing below it might see) voices its need to be ‘seen’ far more successfully and even dramatically. Lily as a child glances at the photograph at first, waiting for the subject to stare back. It does not, at first. Yet over time when Angelita is ready and posits a question, Lily then hears her and reacts as she must. A

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<sup>144</sup> James Elkins. *The Object Stares Back*, p. 51.

<sup>145</sup> Anthony M. Penwill. *It Has To Be This Way*. (London: Matt’s Gallery, 2010). p. 32.

<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*

simple question, Where are you going? demands a response. Lily must move in order for Angelita to move. Angelita represents movement even in the photograph. Her speech brings movement. And both women are forced to 'look' –Lily up at Angelita from her little girl height, Angelita at Lily circuitously—at each other in this encounter. Sharing a collective gaze, blink, stare, they stop to reflect and engage. They are positioned within the frame of this moment across time, across space, sending their looks back to each other and to the reader.

Composing or properly framing a shot/image, just as in conventions for narrative, entails adhering to certain photographic rules known as 'The Rule of Thirds'.<sup>152</sup> These basic rules in photographic composition date back to the nineteenth century dictating that placing a subject within the frame can indeed strengthen an image. Rules, used by some in the painting community of the time, proposed drawing an imaginary set of lines that divide a picture into thirds horizontally and vertically. Intersections of lines designate important subject areas,<sup>153</sup> just as intersection of photograph and text, and of narrator and narrated, designate important subject areas. A face located on the upper left intersection with a horizon line might hold the strongest placement. The horizon line, or what we might refer to as the division between land and sky dividing a scene in half, is usually one third of the way up or down in the frame in this compositional formula. Similarly, the subject of a narrative may be the agent of a series of actions. Thus 'she impresses her governing role onto the scene',<sup>154</sup> which changes the placement to her liking. Actions are narrated by a narrator (1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person) whose voice tells those actions, while 'photographs are clear glass

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<sup>152</sup> London, *Photography*, p.336

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Penwill, *It Has To Be This Way*, p. 32.

windows. Their frames, not their centers, produce their art'.<sup>155</sup> A narrator may place the subject moving from left to right of the composition, or right to left, or lying below the horizon line.<sup>156</sup> Both viewer and reader are placed by camera and narrator in a position from which they must view; this may be at a distance or close up, they may look obliquely or see the face straight on.

If we apply The Rule of Thirds to Angelita's/Mother's photograph (at right) the face in profile shows an amount of space in the right hand top and centre thirds and this is reflected in the narrating of the aforementioned scene.<sup>161</sup> The intention of the photographer and of the writer and narration of the



scene 'impl[y]ing movement . . . requires space because a viewer[/reader] tends to follow that direction to see what the person is looking at',<sup>162</sup> or where the action is going. I have learned from my own photographic attempts that tilting a camera will create misalignment in the finished photograph which could strike the viewer as an

<sup>155</sup> Mary Warner Marien, 'Photography is Another Kind of Bird', *Afterimage*. (Sept/Oct 1995): 11.

<sup>156</sup> No differently than you are while reading/viewing this composition at the moment.

<sup>161</sup> See page 271-2.

<sup>162</sup> London, *Photography*, p. 336.

error, but looking at it more deeply may create a new discovery of the subject matter along with the viewer's consideration of it. Considering this is a two dimensional medium alluding to a three dimensional one, 'tilt' in one context becomes metaphorical for the camera moving up/down/sideways/upside down in its composition of the subject or the viewer leaning/sloping/inclining vis a vis reframing the image as it is being viewed.

A different known-world of information may even result, providing the viewer with a new sense of agency. Viewers are privileged to enter the many lives reflected within the frame of the photograph. So the first encounter between Angelita and Lily enables us to reconsider what is emphasized by the subject's strongest placement within the frame confident in that agency. This in turn empowers the vantage point of the viewer who determines the authority of the image and the way in which it speaks from that position. Here Lily questions her Aunt Angie's portrait about a mystery surrounding a bracelet encompassing her dying mother's last words and Angelita refuses interruption from the other portrait hanging nearby, that of her own mother (third person omniscient):

*"Let me begin," said Angelita, "mi amor, by telling you about the man whom I loved, the man who swept me away. The force of him was stronger than I could resist. Arturo also fell in love with a girl who papá did not approve of. This all happened at about the same time and well, that made papá furioso . . ."*

*"Angelita," interrupted Amadita, "your papá wanted the best for you and for Arturo, even though he was already lost to us . . . how could he have known that—"*

*"Mamá basta, not another word!" screamed Angelita.<sup>163</sup>*

First person POV version:

**Angelita/Angie**

**1989**

"Let me begin," I said, "*mi amor*, by telling you about the man whom I loved, the man who swept me away. The force of him was

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<sup>163</sup> Overman, 'Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey', p. 395.

stronger than I could resist. Arturo also fell in love with a girl who *papá* did not approve of. This all happened at about the same time and well, that made *papá furioso* . . . ”

“Angelita, “ interrupted *mamá* Amadita, “your *papá* wanted the best for you and for Arturo, even though he was already lost to us . . . how could he have known that—”

“*Basta mamá*, not another word!” I screamed.<sup>165</sup>

The second version highlights the fact that a conversation ensues between the two worlds each voice inhabits. And rather than the need for exposition to move the plot along, Lily, Angelita and Amadita govern the scene. A series of frames within frames are produced, tilting the characters in their stories this way and that as they, too, will be tilted by those who, like Lily, view, frame, and author their stories. Each of the three acts as narrator, though in the case of Amadita, here, she is cut off and reframed by her daughter. Each positions and allows space to another character(s). ‘The man whom I loved’ is given the dominant position in sweeping Angelita’s former version of herself off, while *papá* watches this and other events from the sidelines. Lily, as reader, will hold this scene side by side with other versions and make up her own mind.

Perhaps the viewer needs to see an image that says something about life, or about where she is, or what she is thinking about, and what is going on around her at the stage of this act of viewing? Lily is about to learn the truth of her own genesis from Angelita at a moment when she has just discovered Angelita is not her aunt, but in fact her very own grandmother (in third person omniscient):

“*Tell me about, tí—abuela—tell me more?*”

*Silence.*

“*Angelita, I need to know and you know I do!*”

“*Your mother was a gemela,*” *whispered Angelita.*

“*A what?*” *Lily had forgotten the meaning, or she simply did not want to recognize its implications.*

“*A twin,*” *answered Lola.*<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> *ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*, p. 414.

First person POV version:

*Lily Adams*  
1989

“Tell me about, *tí—abuela*—tell me more?” Silence. “Angelita, I need to know and you know I do!”

*Angelita/Angie*  
1989

“Your mother was a *gemela*,” I whispered exhausted.

“A what?” Lily must have forgotten the meaning, or she simply did not want to recognize its implications.

“A twin,” replied Lola who should have let me answer,  
*¡Jesucristo!*<sup>168</sup>

In the second version, Lily’s command for an answer to her ‘reading the picture against the grain, questioning the *framing* of the truth’<sup>169</sup> is clearer. We get a better sense of her moving within her surroundings. And we hear Angelita’s indignation over being interrupted, again, rather than it being buried in exposition.

Consider this—that rather than dividing a picture in thirds, rules of composition do reflect the notion that *visual asymmetry is far more interesting*. Complexity is what calls out to us when this occurs, that feeling of profundity draws us in. That pull attracts our eye into a world we think we know, but then again we realize we do not. We have never looked or approached this photographic image in quite this way. Voices and images proliferate the narrative which becomes decentred across time and space in its form and content.

Lily Adams encounters a similar moment, as does the reader, discovering that life has been captured on film framed in black and white and after the death of her mother, she seeks out the colour of the past that may help her get closer to something like the truth. The viewer (and the reader also) decides just what this new meaning/colour is between Lily Adams, and the many photographic subjects and the

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<sup>168</sup> *ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>169</sup> Cited in Simon. *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*. p.13.

frames each subject lives and breathes within. Tilt then takes on a multiplicity of meaning.

One might be that of a kind of connection between the character, narrator, teller of stories (Angelita, Dolores, my own mother) and writer where tilt is some kind of physical manifestation of an emotional transformation. If Lily sees the photograph tilted, or peeling or, a physical/chemical change in the surface of the photographic material itself, or sees a photograph has actually fallen/jumped off the wall and attributes it to the people in the photographs making an angry leap, aging etc., then the reality that Lily is experiencing (like the reality I experienced as a child—and perhaps still do) is one in which actual physical objects can become animated things if there is extreme emotion around them (in third person omniscient):

*Angelita wished she could extend her arms around her granddaughter as Lily's sobs grew more muffled. She ached to hold her granddaughter in her arms, stroke her forehead affectionately. But this was not something any of the portraits on the wall could do. . . . In earlier years, Angelita, when enraged to such a degree at something her mother, or grandmother had said, or not said to Lily, had only succeeded by agitating the air around her with such force that it blew their photographs, at different times, off the wall and onto the carpet. Occasionally her power would crack or shatter the glass that caged them in.<sup>170</sup>*

First person POV version:

**Angelita/Angie**

**1959**

...

And so, once in a great moment, I have been enraged to such a degree at something *mi mamá*, or *abuela* Lola has said (or not said to Lily), my fury agitated the air around me with such force that it blew their

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<sup>170</sup> Overman, 'Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey', p. 419.



photographs, at different times, off the wall and onto the pale green carpet. My power can crack or shatter the glass that cages them in, nonetheless the edicts of the hall demoted me back to a merely hanging two dimensional likeness . . .

. . .

### 1989

I told her how I wished I could extend my arms around her, my beloved granddaughter as her sobs grew more muffled. I ached to hold, I said, hold my granddaughter in my arms, stroke her forehead affectionately.<sup>171</sup>

In the second version, Angelita, herself, describes her fantastical ability to shatter glass and fling portraits off the wall, which enhances the magical realism of her power among the portraits and appears in Part One of the novel rather than in Part Six. Also the depth of Angelita's pain and desire to comfort Lily is more heartfelt rather than being told via exposition.

This could be seen as a magical realist way of expressing how the world can be lived or experienced for magical realism enables us to 'recognize the world, although now . . . we look on it with new eyes'.<sup>172</sup> However, 'the magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things'.<sup>173</sup> On the other hand, tilt, too, is almost the textual version of the earlier mentioned 'punctum'— a jab, a prick, a physical sensation caused by one time and one activity actually wounding someone at a distance in place and time—a viewer of a photograph or reader. So the writer may have been wounded by an event captured by a photograph in a different, but just as painful manner as the original time at which the photograph was taken.

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<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>172</sup> Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism' In *Magic Realism: Theory History, Community*, ed. by L. P. Zamora and W. B. Faris. (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 17.

<sup>173</sup> Luis Leal, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature' In *ibid.* p.123.

Here Angelita describes her father's cruelty, the death of her new born niece, and the debilitation of such a loss on her brother, Arturo. The image tilts and like a weapon has the power to wound (in third person omniscient):

*"Sí, amor," Angelita continued, "she died as did her mother. The baby was ¿cómo se dice?, still born, and Petra had gained so much weight during her pregnancy everyone thought she was having twins, but in those days high blood pressure was rare for a girl her age . . . She had a stroke. The labour was too much for her, I suppose. Arturo was away when it happened, papá, made sure of it, but when Arturo returned he . . . well . . . he started drinking and everything else and . . . papá was furious with Arturo for besmirching the family name, not because of poor Petra's death but because of the way Arturo responded to it. He fell apart . . ."*<sup>174</sup>

First person POV version:

*"Sí, amor," I continued "she died as did her mother. The baby was ¿cómo se dice?, still born, and Petra had gained so much weight during her pregnancy everyone thought she was having twins, but in those days high blood pressure was rare for a girl her age . . . papá was uncompromising with Arturo for besmirching the family name, not because of poor Petra's death, but because of the way Arturo responded to it. He fell apart . . . but I told you about that."*<sup>175</sup>

This second version shows the first person narrator is the tragic sister soon to die herself so her words about her brother, his lover and child are freighted with her own feelings and what is to happen next and she is telling this to her grandchild on the way to revealing the truth about their relationship. The, I, is about confessing what has been withheld for so long. It is about the silencing of people this writer has now given a voice. It feels inherently different from the third person version.

Tilt is also about looking through the viewfinder as well as seeing how and what is reflected back. The position and composition of the portrait as in the following excerpt at a slightly downward angle dictates the nature of the shoot and the perspective

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<sup>174</sup> Overman, 'Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey', p. 411.

<sup>175</sup> *ibid.* p. 140.

the resulting image takes. This goes back to my discussion of phase 1 and phase 2 and Arbus claiming that ‘photographs are messages, the message is both transparent and mysterious’. Phase 1 affords a measure of transparency that of a portrait session where all mechanical/technological elements are in somewhat of a balance within the confines of a portrait studio, whereas phase 2 has a message/agenda of its own beyond what the mechanics of a photo shoot require and work must be done to clarify the mystery. Angelita’s photo looks down on her subject, Lily, as a child who is not quite tall enough to see Angelita straight on; hence she appears in a position of power as she interacts with this younger Lily. As she grows, Lily has observed Angelita’s photograph and all the others who have spoken to her as grownups in positions of authority. Whatever direction they are looking, the younger and shorter Lily must look up to take them all in. Once Lily matures and reaches an eye-level view of each portrait, under a glass that encases each ancestral frame, she discovers what the glass has been reflecting: Lily the little child, later a budding teenage Lily, and then a fully imaged woman. Whereas if Angelita’s photo were just looking up then powerlessness is reflected because it then tells us that the power position is from the locus of the photographer who could either be towering over his subject, standing on a ladder holding a light, or up close a few feet away, as Tomás appears to be, and instructing her to look camera right creating a delicate and sensory profile shot.

As the novel shows there is even more to that position and it begs the question of who really does have the power as the adult Lily listens to Angelita detail a very sensual portrait sitting with Tomás, her soon-to-be-lover (in third person omniscient):

*“Then he moved a light near me then farther away or opened the curtains . . . I can’t recall, exactly, I suppose to make shadows appear behind me. . . Tomás . . . kneeled down to arrange my hair away from my face for I had worn it loose into the studio remembering how I had not that first day I posed for him. But this time I felt the need to let my hair fall. This time I also felt the need to let my soul breathe.”*

*Lily watched the scene grow more heated as Tom gently and slowly put one hand on Angelita's shoulder and gathered her hair up in his other to move it away from her face and in this swift and supple moment, their lips met.*<sup>176</sup>

First person POV version:

**Angelita/Angie**

**1989**

... This time I also felt the need to let my soul breathe.” ...

*Lily Adams*

**1989**

I watched the scene grow more heated as Tom gently and slowly put one hand on Angelita's shoulder and gathered her hair up in his other to move it away from her face and in this swift and supple moment, their lips met ...

... As Tom continued to kiss Angelita, he lifted her up and her legs wrapped around his waist as he carried her off into another room. The movie suddenly fell away. I almost fell off my chair catching the near empty coffee cup from falling instead.<sup>177</sup>

In the second version rather than told in exposition, Lily takes us along as we watch with her the scene Angelita has just unfolded before Lily's eyes. We feel the impact or 'tilt' that Lily feels while watching forcing her to organically react and look away from what is almost titillating fascination. While writing it from Angelita's voice, there was a power in it by giving Lily a space to reflect on it and draw us in to the palpability of what she is watching that is not present in the third person version.

Suffice it to say that the tilt in anger or lust, or the deterioration of the condition of a photograph so that it fades has its resonance in the language of the fiction. Rather than being just 'indeterminate'; the same picture can convey a variety of messages under

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<sup>176</sup> *ibid.* p. 409.

<sup>177</sup> *ibid.* p. 137.

differing presentational circumstances'.<sup>178</sup> So 'tilt' is a literal off-cantering cut/shift/puncture from this writer's memory through texts read by the writer, to pen/keyboard to text produced and for the reader's experience. It connects memory with memoir with fiction and so with the reader—as though the reader were seeing the original image, not as an outsider but as an insider who is prepared to be wounded by it.

Perhaps that is another part of the readers' work of—not only suspending disbelief, identifying, perhaps empathising (seeing from the other's shoes putting themselves imaginatively in the other's shoes)—but allowing themselves to become vulnerable, to be pricked and therefore moved (or perhaps this is an aspect of empathy—with an application in fiction that can at times be immeasurable). Perhaps readers seek this out in a literary novel? This reader/writer/researcher certainly does.

Along with Lily then, the photographs in the hall might conclude among their tilted selves as Roland Barthes writes, 'once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image'.<sup>179</sup> Lily can transform as a result into 'that of the observed subject and that of the subject observing',<sup>180</sup> because what stands out is that framed on the wall of Lily's childhood home are the many photographic characters as they appeared in their early/youthful days. Lily is not seeing those photos eye-to-eye at first, but she is communicating with those hanging—all family, all blood relatives directly or tilted, but reflecting versions of herself whether she is conscious of it or not. So the notion of the self being reflected by the glass covering the photograph hanging in a frame affirms that for Lily all the photographs are potential mirrors. And as such they are shining their experience of the

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<sup>178</sup> Alan Sekula, 'Reinventing Documentary', In *Photography and Language*, (San Francisco: Camerawork Press, 1977), p. 13.

<sup>179</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 10.

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*

world back to her. They are giving back something of themselves in the shape of their story reframing Lily's story as well. So, again, 'ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer'.<sup>181</sup>

### Chiaroscuro

My focus now is to discuss another emotional connection within this ekphrastic act, that of chiaroscuro and how it relates to tone and mood in its affect upon Lily, the narrative, the photographs and the reader/viewer. Rather than just as a way to express our visual experience alone, there is

still another meaning which, although difficult to define exactly, is often distinctly grasped, and constitutes an important aspect of art [and photography]; the meaning may be that of a "mood" or "expression" . . . degrees of luminosity frequently seem to be imbued with a specific mood; transmitting feelings and of evoking emotional responses.<sup>182</sup>

We cannot ignore this facet of the relationship between the photographs and the emotional response, or contrasts of light and dark, they imbue in Lily as well as the reader.

'The three fundamental tones of white, grey, black or, light, medium, dark',<sup>183</sup> that govern chiaroscuro—or those graduated tones in a work of art from light to dark—are in partnership with black-and-white photography in each family portrait. Nevertheless they are not apparent to Lily's innocent eyes in the beginning of the novel. She cannot appreciate the impact that any of the black-and-white prints will have upon her as of yet, nor the labour involved in printing them. She cannot appreciate how these photographs hold a place of importance no differently than fine

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<sup>181</sup> James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, pp.11-12.

<sup>182</sup> Moshe Barasch, *Light and Color in the Italian Renaissance Theory of Art* (New York: New York UP, 1978), p. xi.

<sup>183</sup> Giovanni Civardi, *Drawing Light & Shade*, trans. by Linda Black (Reprint, Kent: Search Press Ltd. 2010), p. 6.

drawings or sketches for in time it will be apparent to her, and us, that although ‘photography is inherently an analytical discipline. Where a painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a picture, a photographer starts with the messiness of the world and selects a picture’.<sup>184</sup> The messiness that Angelita’s photographer initiates via her portrait creates even more in Lily’s life and the lives of her family. Yet, initially, we are introduced to the portrait as Lily has been by Dolores’s vague description regarding its background (in third person omniscient):

*The family history maintained that [Aunt Angie as Dolores would often call her] . . . had died young, right after she’d birthed an adorable baby girl. The two of them had been in heaven for many years, Dolores had always said. Angelita had been known for her long and wiry mane of unruly hair, until she’d chopped it off in a revolt against being shut inside her room. At least that is what Dolores always claimed about her dead aunt whom she had never met. And Dolores said that she had been raised hearing cautionary tales about Angie’s comportment not becoming that of a lady of her station.*<sup>185</sup>

First person POV version:

The family history maintained that she had died young, right after she’d birthed an adorable baby girl . . . At least that is what Mom always claimed about her dead aunt whom she had never met. And Mom said that she had been raised hearing cautionary tales about Angie’s comportment not becoming that of a lady of her station. But that’s what I loved about her . . . that and her exotic beauty.<sup>186</sup>

The second version shows how Lily is interpolated into the paragraph responding to her mother’s anecdote, which makes it qualitatively different from the third person version. And by being in Lily’s head referring to Dolores as ‘Mom’, which is more commonplace for Lily when discussing her mother, the opportunity to clarify why Lily is so attracted to Angelita is also clarified.

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<sup>184</sup> Stephen Shore. *The Nature of Photographs*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 2007), p. 37.

<sup>185</sup> Overman, ‘Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey’, p. 352.

<sup>186</sup> *ibid.* p. 32.

These words, like the many a mother repeats hundreds of times over the life of a child, have become out-of-focus to Lily, no differently than instructions to ‘go brush your teeth,’ or questions like ‘what did you do in school today, dear’ elicit a rote reply of ‘nothing’, all melding into the white noise of an everyday upbringing. Lily has become deaf to them in effect. They are greyed out to her until Angelita pulls Lily closer and closer over time.

Often viewers/readers ‘tend to look at the sharpest part of the photograph’<sup>187</sup>, however the light that illuminates Angelita’s face provides contrasts even more sharply with shadows falling behind it (in third person omniscient):

*... the shadows of light outlining Angelita’s profile duplicated the outline from the top of her head to just under her obviously rouged lips in repeats of two and three silhouettes on the white wall behind her. Her hair brandished its waves and fully engulfed the sides of her neck and shoulders. There was just a hint of a silver cross positioned below the hollow at the base of her throat.*<sup>188</sup>

First person POV version:

*... I loved the way the shadows of light outlining Angelita’s profile duplicated the outline from the top of her head to just under her obviously rouged lips in repeats of two and three silhouettes on the white wall behind her. . .*<sup>189</sup>

In the second version there is a greater sense of closeness and endearment that affirms her adoration of Angelita’s portrait. By reading the observation of the portrait in Lily’s voice there is a deeper personal layer invested in the tale. Too being that the portrait is actually that of my seventeen year-old mother taken by her fiancé at the time, steered me to suffuse the ekphrasis with more of a tantalizing rhetoric.

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<sup>187</sup> London. *Photography*. p. 332.

<sup>188</sup> Overman, ‘Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey’, p. 356.

<sup>189</sup> *ibid.*, p. 42



So in order to provide proximity and power Bob Capa, noted war photographer, always exclaimed ‘If your pictures aren’t good enough, you aren’t close enough’.<sup>190</sup> This begs the question how close does photographer/viewer have to be to see the light/dark of the truth captured by the shutter button. American photographer, Lee Friedlander, who addresses urban social landscape with a visual language of his very own puts it another way ‘the camera is not merely a reflecting pool . . . . The mindfinger presses the release on the silly machine and it stops time and holds what its jaws can encompass and what the light will stain. That moment when the landscape [or subject] speaks to the observer’.<sup>191</sup> However, in one sixtieth of a second Lily’s and the reader’s mindfinger presses the release, stopping time, and expanding their quick glance at Angelita’s portrait, beyond being seen.

We now realize this image has gained motion sharpness in a way that leaps out to the viewer/reader beyond the frame even though the laws of photography dictate that ‘a larger aperture gives less depth of field, you may have to decide whether the motion sharpness is more important than the sharpness of depth of field’.<sup>192</sup> And we soon hear, as Lily does, how that motion elevates the photograph’s sharpness into a living breathing spirit.

As we saw in the previous section, and recall from the novel, the truth of Lily and Dolores’s identity are revealed by Angelita’s portrait removing the gradations of grey of the past, erasing the diffused light despite the protestations of the other maternal family ancestors on the wall. She is determined to cast a direct light and sharpness, on the truth. Now as an adult Lily presses for more (in third person omniscient):

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<sup>190</sup> Cited in London, *Photography*, p. 320.

<sup>191</sup> *ibid.* p. 321.

<sup>192</sup> *ibid.* p. 332.

*"You mean, wait a minute—"*

*"You are my granddaughter, hija, and Dolores was my daughter."*

*Lily just sat there saying nothing for a full five minutes. And no one else said anything either. It was as if the portraits had never spoken. They looked perfectly normal. No sense of movement from any of them. Not even a momentary whiff of life or breath. Lily's childhood began to flash before her. All those times Dolores kept saying her mother had died in childbirth. She even referred to Angelita's portrait on the wall as Aunt Angie and had taught Lily to call her tía. What else had Dolores lied about?<sup>193</sup>*

First person POV version:

### **Angelita/Angie**

**1989**

...

*"You mean, wait a minute—" Lily placed her hand upon her forehead as if to cushion a blow.*

*"You are my granddaughter, hija, and Dolores was my daughter." There, I said it.*

*Lily Adams*

**1989**

*I sat there saying nothing for a full five minutes. And no one else said anything either. It was as if the portraits had never spoken. They looked perfectly normal. No sense of movement from any of them. Not even a momentary whiff of life or breath. My childhood flashed before me.*

*All those times Mom kept saying her mother had died in childbirth. She even referred to Angelita's portrait on the wall as Aunt Angie and had taught me to call her tía. What else had Mom lied about? In an instant the past, as I knew it, was tumbling into a faint memory of reality. Were all these people inside the frames in the hallway of my life a lie then? My imagination? And their stories—false memories, perhaps? Had these portraits all mislead me on purpose?<sup>194</sup>*

In the second version Angelita's voiced rendering of this truth and her relief in doing so is far more evident. Her portrait chooses to no longer obscure the nature of the actual event. So tone and mood become highly fraught defined as black and white with the

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<sup>193</sup> Overman, 'Pictures on the Wall of My Life: Photographs to Life Writing to Fiction, An Ekphrastic Journey', p. 412.

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.* p. 140.

stark eventual truth of Lily's incestuous origin—that her biological parents were twins, though unaware of it. The diffuse shadows of the past are now sharp, intense, and in focus. The ekphrastic experience, for Lily, is keener and essentially glaring as she ponders a new awareness of the radical change in the tenor of her background.

I see this juxtapositioning of layers in the narrative by using past, present, and future in the writing of imagetexts about my own family in direct parallel relationship with the many layers afforded by this fictive depth of field—between the nearest and farthest points from the camera that are acceptably sharp. It is that sharpness that draws us to this relationship because of the illusion that the fiction is truthful (merely a handful of one or more possible truths)—perhaps it is simply one developed version of a supposedly finished print even though Edward Steichen says 'Every photograph is a fake from start to finish'.<sup>195</sup> This is an important point about the relationship of writer and reader/viewer, writing and reading/viewing. Consider this quotation from American photographer Sally Mann:

When the good pictures come, we hope they tell truths, but truths 'told slant,' just as Emily Dickinson commanded. We are spinning a story of what it is to grow up. It is a complicated story and sometimes we try to take on the grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality, and beauty. But we tell it all without fear and without shame. Memory is the primary instrument, the inexhaustible nutrient source; these photographs open doors into the past but they also allow a look into the future.<sup>196</sup>

This relationship between the representation of the visual image in the novel *Pictures on the Wall of My Life* and the way in which the figures in the fictional photographs are brought to life create what Claus Clüver contends is an 'interpenetration of visual and verbal signs [so much so] . . . that the meaning constructed from the text as a whole will

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<sup>195</sup> Edward Steichen Cited in Nancy Pedri, 'Documenting the Fictions of Reality', *Poetics Today* 29.1 (Spring 2008), 155.

<sup>196</sup> Sally Mann, *Immediate Family* (New York: Aperture, 1992), p. 11.

be quite different from the meanings derived from the signs alone'.<sup>197</sup> Hence the integration of the verbal and visual signs merge into 'one artefact and thus urge, if not force, [viewers/readers] to consider their union when engaged in the negotiation of new meaning'.<sup>198</sup>

'In effect, then, because of this interaction/conversation we have been having about the photographs and the conversation Lily Adams is also having with them, I would still like to reapply the definition of ekphrasis to some of the most effective works of art—in this case photographs and their narrative complements—which I see as genuine works of art on works of art'.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Cited in Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri, 'Introduction: Photographic Interventions', *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (Spring 2008). 5.

<sup>198</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>199</sup> Overman, *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 693-694.

### Chapter Three: Ekphrastic realism

*You can look at a picture for a  
week and never think of it again.  
You can also look at a picture for a  
second and think of it all your life.*  
<sup>200</sup> – D. Tartt

#### Background

Literary genres remain the monoliths they have been for generations and yet now maintain a multiplicity of epicentres<sup>201</sup> in the literary canon. Novels of an ekphrastic and magical realist nature have also competed for a position within it ‘simultaneously exploring and erasing the boundaries of those genres by creating fiction of remarkable depth and power’.<sup>202</sup> We can even agree that we have all but forgotten they were ever contested. Thus they continue to maintain a multiplicity of placements within the canon of literature.

More such texts remain exigent than the scope of this work can fully address, those that were springboards for this writer entered the conversation earlier in this

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<sup>200</sup> Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch* (New York: Little Brown, 2013). p.707.

<sup>201</sup> Chris Gavalier, ‘Is and Isn’t: Literary Upheavals in the Post-Real Landscape’, *The Writer’s Chronicle*, 46.5 (2014), 97.

<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*, p.98.

work, but what can be addressed now are those that may still enable a negotiable space somewhere in the literary intersection of ekphrastic works and magical realism for *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*. Although my novel might be regarded as having magical realistic elements, I prefer the term ekphrastic realism as capturing something of its origin and writing process more specifically.

The ensuing works will be discussed not necessarily in chronological order of publication, but in the order this writer/researcher adopted them as literary beacons in a darkened room of flashing and now re-organized imagetexts. Of course, one of the bastions of magical realism and another godparent to my writing self is Gabriel Garcia Márquez and his marked style of writing within

its imaginative content, vivid effects, and lingering mystery. In combining fantastic elements with realistic details, a writer like Garcia Márquez can create a fictional ‘world’ where the miraculous and the everyday live side-by-side—where fact and illusion, science and folklore, history and dream, seem equally ‘real,’ and are often hard to distinguish.<sup>203</sup>

Key for my own novel straddling this genre, in part, is the acceptance by the reader of the quotidian occurrences of the fantastical and magical that envelope and live side-by-side with my characters—photographic subjects—in *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*. Explanations for photographic subjects contained in a two dimensional world/frame on a wall able to also reside and communicate in a three dimensional world are somewhat necessary, but also accepted. Finding a place on the gamut between magical realism and ekphrastic realism that suggests ‘some elements of the [work] seem meant to be approached with the simplistic “logic” of fantasy, while others are depicted with all the

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<sup>203</sup>Tom Faulkner, ‘An overview of “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”’, *Gale Online Encyclopedia*. In *Literature Resource Center*, 25 Mar. 2014, < <http://go.galegroup.com> > [accessed 28 Mar 2014].

complexity and imperfection that mark “real life”<sup>204</sup> is also significant in finding acceptance for a novel such as my own. However, there is a genesis that cannot be ignored in locating ekphrastic narrative that stimulated my beginnings of grappling with this subject matter.

### Foreground

In my family record, I can track connections between private and public history examining the shifts of leftover debris from competing perspectives, perspectives that I am often told by my family never existed in the first place. But then I read *The Kiss* (1997) by Kathryn Harrison who did not really meet her father until she was twenty. She takes the reader on a difficult excursion into her loveless childhood, her bouts with anorexia and bulimia, and, eventually, an incestuous four-year adult affair with her father. The punctum of her ekphrastic work, for me, is her descriptions of a photographic session in which her father ‘wants to take pictures. *Naked ones*, I call them, as opposed to the word on which he insists: nudes. But *nude* implies art, and without my clothes the photographs my father makes of me have the same quality as those documenting medical anomalies’.<sup>205</sup>

After reading this passage, I wonder whose life I am really reading, Harrison’s or my own. I gaze at the 1966 photographic image of myself at fifteen years of age posed in a state of undress again and ponder Harrison’s world. Ponder my own. Harrison’s prose so complex in its simplicity; her choice of present tense to describe events that occurred so many years ago forces an immediacy upon the reader which heightens both revulsion and compassion:

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<sup>204</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> Harrison, Kathryn, *The Kiss* (New York: Avon, 1997), p. 159.

I'll show you who you are,' he said to me when he took those . . . pictures. In these . . . images the expression on my face, [fearful] and dispossessed, is one I see years later in a museum exhibit of pictures taken of soldiers injured during the Civil War. Undressed and propped against walls or on crutches, the veterans reveal those places where bullets entered and, perhaps, exited.<sup>206</sup>

Who is reflecting whom? I might have written these very words, for the images of me at fifteen years-old are indeed paradoxes of misguided love, revulsion and compassion. These words echo Marianne Hirsch's assertions that 'the conventions of family photography . . . are designed to keep the family's secrets and to protect it from public scrutiny'<sup>207</sup> in her book, *Family Frames: photography narrative and postmemory* (1997), which discusses how photographs permit false readings and impressions. And in the naked adolescent picture taken by my father of me, the expression on my face, the punctum of the picture, is indeed like that of a dispossessed soldier injured, undressed and propped against a wall, awaiting being shot through the lens of my father, the photographer, my exploiter, my executioner.

This was not Harrison's first attempt at dealing with such a topic, as neither is this my first attempt at dealing with such a topic. My first attempts were far from successful and left to the vestiges of forced forgetting for decades. Harrison's novel *Exposure* (1993) dealing with sexual abuse, voyeurism and trying to come to terms with it is very familiar to this writer as it was to Harrison evidenced by her memoir *The Kiss*. The protagonist of *Exposure*, Ann Rogers, flashes back to being the subject of sexually exploitative photographs taken of her in preadolescence by her late photographer father now critically acclaimed for such work: "Ann could not see where her father kept his camera, and the pounding of her heart, the wind in the leaves, the

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<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: photography narrative post memory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), p. 53.



voices of distant children, all conspired to obscure the one clue to his presence, the click of the shutter's instant theft'.<sup>208</sup> As a result, these memories trigger 'a frightening pattern of self-destructive behavior'<sup>209</sup> of drug abuse endangering her diabetic condition, and intensifying Ann's compulsive shoplifting. Although the novel includes no actual photographs the descriptions of each photograph expose an ekphrastic realism that chafes against what should be appropriate exposure of children and family photographed in simple acts of growing up. My strong placement inside of an analogous frame and being a victim, even photographically, to a similar theft is undeniable.

Like Harrison commenting on writing *The Kiss*: 'I had the guts to do it—as nonfiction—that I didn't have before [when writing *Exposure*]. I gave myself permission . . . Writing is an amoral process—it takes what it needs—and everything is permitted'.<sup>210</sup> Even though critics such as Jill St. Charles writes:

This book can leave the reader feeling a little soiled and out of sorts . . . [it] is a powerful indicator of how much impact the subject retains in a culture where nothing is shocking . . . If nothing else, it serves as cautionary tale about the extraordinary ways children will compensate all their lives for affection and love not given when it mattered,<sup>211</sup>

Harrison gave me permission to stare directly into the centre of one of the photographs that is among the many impetuses for this work. Harrison propelled me to position myself in the role of writer/researcher and confront a place, a past, a long hidden away photograph that resulted in 'a sensation not unlike that associated with phantom limbs; [I] felt pain where there could be no pain; what had been amputated began to throb'.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Kathryn Harrison, *Exposure* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks 2006). p.65.

<sup>209</sup> Michiko Kakutani, 'Growing Up Abused: A Painful Then, a Painful Now: Exposure by Kathryn Harrison', *New York Times*, 16 Feb 1993, C:15, in ProQuest [accessed 8 Mar 2014].

<sup>210</sup> Cited in Joe David Bellamy, Kathryn Harrison and Colin Harrison 'An Interview with Colin and Kathryn Harrison', *The Iowa Review*, 37.1 (2007), 171.

<sup>211</sup> Jillian St. Charles, 'Who else could tell Kathryn Harrison's incestuous story?' *CNN - Review*, 20 Aug 1998, <<http://www.cnn.com>> [accessed 27 Mar 2014].

<sup>212</sup> Kathryn Harrison, *Exposure*, p. 174.

In part this obliged me to empower photographs to voice opposition to such painful events in my own novel. Photographs/images like these demand a representative voice.

### Literary Icons

Canonically, such enunciative voices have been in place for centuries, as stated earlier in this work, with authors employing ekphrasis as a trope in representing the ‘aesthetic bond between poetry and spatial arts’.<sup>213</sup> Reading Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) readers will recall Lucy Snow, Brontë’s narrator, visiting a gallery in Brussels:

I found myself nearly alone in a certain gallery . . . this picture, I say seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection.

It represented a woman, the considerably larger, I thought, than the life. . . . She was extremely well fed: very much butcher’s meat—to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids—must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. . . . She lay half reclined on a couch: why it would be difficult to say . . . She ought to likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material—seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery—she managed to make inefficient raiment. . . . On referring to the catalogue, I found that this notable production bore the name ‘Cleopatra’.<sup>214</sup>

And so Lucy sits looking not just at the painting but ‘watching the respectable bourgeois’<sup>215</sup> onlookers gathering round ‘relishing its near-pornographic allure’.<sup>216</sup> Brontë renders this painting of Cleopatra with enough agency to consider *itself* in control of its position in this frame, and this ‘Lioness’<sup>217</sup> is empowered almost magnetically to draw a viewing public directly to her. To this extent a professor, M.

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<sup>213</sup> Mack Smith, *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition*, p.26.

<sup>214</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Herbert Rosengarten, and Margaret Smith (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1853; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 284-85.

<sup>215</sup> John Mullan, ‘Review: Ten of the Best: Examples of ekphrasis’, *The Guardian*, 14. Nov. 2009, p. 13, in *Proquest*

<<http://libproxy.csun.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/244467637?accountid=7285>> [accessed 7 Mar 2014]

<sup>216</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> Charlotte Brontë, p. 288.

Paul, a colleague of Lucy's, banishes her from the gallery Cleopatra hangs in because no "demoiselle" ought to glance at it'.<sup>218</sup>

In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) we discover a painting with a far grander and pernicious ekphrastic power. Indeed as a character unto itself, we find this painted portrait of the protagonist, Dorian Gray, retaining an almost otherworldly beauty that mesmerizes its painter, Basil Hollward, as well as other characters in the novel: 'In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary physical beauty . . . "this young Adonis, . . . looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves"'<sup>219</sup> pronounces Basil's comrade Lord Henry Wotton. Over a period of time this beauteous painted Dorian changes noticeably 'Gold hair. Blue eyes, and rose-red lips—they all were there. It was simply the expression that had altered. That was horrible in its cruelty'.<sup>220</sup>

Ultimately, driving Dorian to commit unspeakable acts—murder among them—this portrait keeps a record, as Dorian proclaims to Basil: 'I keep a diary of my life from day to day, and it never leaves the room in which it is written'.<sup>221</sup> Ultimately, 'each ekphrasis keeps pace with Dorian's corruption, as the beautiful young man himself remains unblemished'.<sup>222</sup> In the end, however, the portrait, rampant with sinister agency, is Basil's and, of course, Dorian's complete undoing: 'It had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work . . . It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. He seized it, and stabbed the canvas with it . . . There was a cry heard, and a crash'.<sup>223</sup> An unrecognisable Dorian Gray 'withered, wrinkled and

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<sup>218</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Donald L. Lawler (New York: Ward Lock, 1891; repr. New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1988) p. 7.

<sup>220</sup> *ibid.* p. 236.

<sup>221</sup> *ibid.* p. 260.

<sup>222</sup> John Mullan, p. 13.

<sup>223</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 280.

loathsome of visage'<sup>224</sup> lies dead yet the 'splendid portrait . . . in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty'<sup>225</sup> survives.

Virginia Woolf's experimentation with ekphrasis survives in her novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *Between The Acts* (1941). In this last of her novels, Woolf's ekphrastic revelation is by a painting itself as Mrs. Swithin, a widow, living on in the family estate called Pointz Hall, which is on the verge of hosting an afternoon pageant, shows a guest around the premises. There are several portraits in the home, but in this ekphrastic conversation this particular painting explains its own provenance:

Two pictures hung opposite the window. In real life they had never met, the long lady and the man holding his horse by the rein. The lady was a picture, the man was an ancestor. He had a name. He held the rein in his hand. He had said to the painter:

"If you want my likeness, dang it sir, take it when the leaves are on the trees." There were leaves on the trees. He had said: "Ain't there room for Colin as well as Buster?" Colin was his famous hound. But there was only room for Buster. It was, he seemed to say, addressing the company not the painter, a damned shame to leave out Colin who he wished buried at his feet, in the same grave, about 1750 . . . .

He was a talk producer, that ancestor.<sup>226</sup>

Woolf is already creating an almost 'ekphrastic suspension that seeks to translate the visual representations of plastic art into a verbal representation'.<sup>227</sup> We see this again as Woolf gives voice further to other works of art that inhabit the same space, singing and commanding silence and by doing so appearing to take dominion of not just the surrounding landscape but of the house and its members as well:

. . . the lady was a picture. In her yellow robe, leaning, with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence. The room was empty.

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<sup>224</sup> *ibid.* p. 281.

<sup>225</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Between The Acts* (New York: Harcourt, 1941; repr. New York: Harvest Book, 1969). p.36.

<sup>227</sup> K. Stelmach, 'From Text to Tableau: Ekphrastic Enchantment in "Mrs. Dalloway" and "To the Lighthouse"', *Studies In The Novel*, 38.3 (2006), 305, Academic Search Premier, in EBSCOhost [accessed 30 March 2010].

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence.<sup>228</sup>

Woolf offers an ‘innovative angle on the . . . notion of ekphrasis’<sup>229</sup> as her characters ‘revivify scenes suspended in the mind’s eye, often envisioning the scenes as paintings and reading them as texts’.<sup>230</sup> She continues to create such moments that suggest ‘a living fluidity rather than a frozen density’,<sup>231</sup> as Lucy, Mrs. Swithin, does whilst ‘stopped by the great picture of Venice—school of Canaletto. Possibly in the hood of the gondola there was a little figure—a woman, veiled, or a man? . . . Lucy returned from her voyage into the picture and stood silent’.<sup>232</sup> Woolf engaged in this ‘spatiality that situates ekphrasis within a moment’<sup>233</sup> much earlier by reframing dramatic representations of the spatial-temporal as we see when Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway* pronounces ‘What a lark! What a plunge!’<sup>234</sup> after insisting that it is she who will buy the flowers for her party. Woolf then uses a ‘framing technique [that dissolves] all barriers between interior and exterior . . .’<sup>235</sup> enabling Clarissa to remove the doors off their hinges and bursting

open the French windows . . . . How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course the air was in early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was); solemn, feeling as she did standing there at the open window . . .<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Between The Acts*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>229</sup> K. Stelmach, 305.

<sup>230</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> *ibid.*, 304.

<sup>232</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Between The Acts*, p. 214.

<sup>233</sup> K. Stelmach, 307.

<sup>234</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p.3

<sup>235</sup> K. Stelmach, 305.

<sup>236</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p.3

Mrs. Dalloway wants free movement for her partygoers, by opening ‘a window upon the past and upon a new day’<sup>237</sup> as Woolf wants to ‘create a frame within a frame at the beginning of’<sup>238</sup> Clarissa’s journey.

In more recent times it is inarguable that these literary forbearers who crafted such aesthetic bonds between prose and paintings laid the groundwork for a plethora of later novelists in their experimentation with ekphrastic narrative/ekphrastic realism. They have been and continue to be, guiding lights for this writer in leaning towards the etymological definition of ekphrasis meaning ‘simply “speaking out” or “telling in full”’<sup>239</sup> coupled with my discussion, in earlier sections of this work, motivated my value of imagetexts—the aesthetic bond between photography and narrative.

In the same way, the ekphrastic novels that have had a marked influence upon my attempt to situate *Pictures on the Wall of My Life* tend toward those that employ photographs and further what Susan Sontag asserts how:

photographic images . . . now provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present. What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.<sup>240</sup>

Miniatures of reality are just what André Breton’s *Nadja* (1927), a novel of fictionalized diary entries relating the narrator’s short lived encounter with the eponymous title figure appear to be. In it Breton juxtaposes authentic events about his relationship with ‘Nadja . . . actually Leona-Camille-Ghislaine D., whose last name still

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<sup>237</sup> K. Stelmach, 306.

<sup>238</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> James A. W. Heffernan, ‘Ekphrasis and Representation’, *New Literary History* 22.2 (Spring, 1991), 302, in JSTOR [accessed 4 Apr 2010].

<sup>240</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 4.

remains unverified’<sup>241</sup> documenting their brief and unfulfilled love affair. Breton’s chronic attraction to her leads to his final realization that although she is mad and ultimately institutionalized, his pursuit of Nadja is frustrated by his pursuit of an answer to his opening line in the novel, ‘Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to know whom I “haunt”’.<sup>242</sup> We eventually come to understand that Breton’s quest of Nadja ‘is a pursuit of [not just] “what, I do not know,” but a pursuit designed to stimulate “all the artifices of intellectual seduction” (108)’.<sup>243</sup>

Employing a good many photographs and drawings, Breton’s haunts of this pursuit are accentuated for the reader. Each adds a layer to the ekphrastic conversation. One of the first photographs or Plate One (as Breton identifies them in his List of Illustrations in the first pages of the novel) is a photograph of the Hotel des Grands Hommes. ‘On the facing page, Breton writes, “My point of departure will be the Hotel des Grands Hommes, Place du Pantheon, where I lived around 1918” (23). The photograph has a dual effect. It both disrupts the flow of the narrative, by diverting attention from the text, and draws the reader further into the story’.<sup>244</sup>

This was my goal by giving voice to the photographs in my novel, to disrupt the family narrative Lily has heard for much of her life and give agency to the photographs themselves who draw the reader more closely into the pursuit of a different story associated with each image’s version of events.

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<sup>241</sup> Alex McAulay, ‘Abusing surrealism: Pynchon’s v. and Breton’s Nadja’, *Pynchon Notes*, 46-49 (2000): 133, In *Literature Resource Center*, [accessed 5 Apr. 2014].

<sup>242</sup> André Breton, *Nadja*, (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1928; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1960), p.11.

<sup>243</sup> Alex McAulay, 135.

<sup>244</sup> *ibid.*, 138.

Breton explains that the effect of aligning the reader more closely with the narrator is just what he intended.<sup>245</sup>

I have begun by going back to look at several of the places to which this narrative happens to lead; I wanted in fact—with some of the people and some of the objects—to provide a photographic image of them taken at the special angle from which I myself had looked at them.<sup>246</sup>

Some three quarters of a century hence, a very special angle from which to view one special photograph rather than many begins the novel by Penelope Lively, titled *The Photograph* (2003). A husband, Glyn Peters, comes across an envelope with ‘DON’T OPEN—DESTROY’<sup>247</sup> written in his dead wife’s handwriting. Glyn is a landscape historian who ‘deconstructs the physical evidence of work done by generations of nameless people’.<sup>248</sup> The snapshot inside of this envelope shows Glyn another kind of physical evidence he must deconstruct over the course of the novel, that of his wife, ‘Kath . . . holding hands with a man whom closer inspection reveals to be Nick Hammond, her sister Elaine’s husband’.<sup>249</sup> As Glyn scrutinizes the photograph he sees

[a] group of five people; grass beneath their feet, a backdrop of trees. Two members of the group, a man and a woman, have their back to the photographer. Of the other three, Elaine can be identified at once, visible between the two whose faces cannot be seen. Near to her stand another man and woman whom Glyn does not recognize. . . . That someone else, the man, is at first a bit of a teaser. Familiar, surely—the rather long dark hair, the height, a good head taller than Kath.<sup>250</sup>

The entire novel is the ripple effect from *one* photograph ‘which is first ekphrastically described and then mentioned repeatedly, thus punctuating the narrative up until its

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<sup>245</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> André Breton, *Nadja*, p. 151-52.

<sup>247</sup> Penelope Lively, *The Photograph* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2003), p. 10.

<sup>248</sup> *ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>249</sup> Merle Rubin, ‘An Image that Alters; the Photograph: A Novel, Penelope Lively, Viking: 240 Pp., \$25.95.’ *Los Angeles Times*, 29 Jun 2003, In *ProQuest*. [accessed 6 Apr. 2014 ].

<sup>250</sup> Penelope Lively, *The Photograph*, p. 8.



end, [and] literally “haunts” the text’.<sup>251</sup> Each character in the novel tells Kath’s story from his/her perspective as the photograph’s contents are revealed. When Glyn confronts Elaine (his sister-in-law) with the snapshot: ‘Elaine looks back at the photograph. Something strange is happening—to her, to the figures that she sees. She sees people who are familiar, but now all of a sudden quite unfamiliar. It is as though both Kath and Nick have undergone some hideous metamorphosis’.<sup>252</sup>

Shifting back and forth similarly are the other characters special angles of the photograph which foreground the psychological impact of Kath in each of their lives. This adds to the novel’s ekphrastic realism and power as the picture is never reproduced materially in the novel. Deceased Kath becomes, in fact, a medium in the story by the very nature of the photograph speaking for her—an imagetext in effect. Lively’s novel gave me that extra push I needed along the many pathways of my own work. She bolstered the idea I had of the power of images and texts when merged ‘evok[e] photography’s nature as [a gateway] enabling a deceased character to step out of the petrifying image and become alive again’<sup>253</sup> as I have with the many deceased photographic characters in my novel.

When I purchased Carol Shield’s Pulitzer Prize winning *The Stone Diaries* (1993) off the shelf I expected photographs of characters within it to also become alive again. A fictional biography ‘though it is still a matter of debate whether Daisy [the protagonist] writes her autobiography or whether an anonymous biographer writes her life’,<sup>254</sup> chronicles of Daisy Goodwill’s life are rendered from the point of view of several narrators. Daisy is a surprise to her mother as the little ‘bloodied bundle

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<sup>251</sup> Laurence Petit, “Specters of Kath”: Negatives and Negativity in Penelope Lively’s “The Photograph”, *Narrative*, 18.2, (2010): 220-228, In *JSTOR*, [accessed 7 Apr 2014].

<sup>252</sup> Penelope Lively, *The Photograph*, p. 63.

<sup>253</sup> Laurence Petit, 221.

<sup>254</sup> Brenda Beckman-Long, ‘The Stone Diaries as an “Apocryphal Journal”’, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 35.1, (2010):127, In *Free E-Journals*, [accessed 8 Apr 2014].

pushing out between [her] mother's legs'<sup>255</sup> onto the kitchen floor in 1905 in Tyndall, Manitoba leaving her mother dead from eclampsia as a result. Daisy goes on to marriage, motherhood, a career, and ages. The novel is 'richly textured and recounted with wry wit [and] also shows a woman not at peace with herself; defined by all the female conventional roles'<sup>256</sup> that leave Daisy somewhat dissatisfied. Carol Shields use of this genre of 'fiction dressed as autobiography'<sup>257</sup> echoes my own desire to experiment with it and encouraged me that there is indeed room on the shelf for me to write in a similar genre. As some writers often do the photographs are inserted in the centre of the book representing a family album 'to underscore the tangibility of her characters'.<sup>258</sup> Interestingly Shields 'included photographs of her characters, [by] gathering shots from museums, antique stores, and a Parisian postcard market'.<sup>259</sup> Also included is a genealogical chart of several generations accompanying this slew of photographs.<sup>260</sup> And, of course, 'the photographs automatically become fictional because they do not always match her prose descriptions'.<sup>261</sup> Daisy describes her parents wedding portrait early in the novel: 'the one photograph I possess, her wedding portrait, tells me . . . my mother was large-bodied, heavy fleshed. My father in contrast, was short of stature, small-boned and neat with a look of mild incomprehension flitting across his face'<sup>262</sup>, but it does not appear exactly as defined and not until after page 176 as the first in a fictional assemblage of portraits

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<sup>255</sup> Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*, p. 23.

<sup>256</sup> 'A Prairie Pulitzer (for the Stone Diaries)'. *Maclean's* (1 May 1995): 76, in *ProQuest*. [accessed 8 Apr. 2014]

<sup>257</sup> Gail Caldwell, 'Imaginary Acts in Recipes and Horticulture, Carol Shields' "Stone Diaries" Conjures Up a Fictional Life of Hauntingly Ordinary Detail', *Boston Globe*, B38, 6 Mar 1994, in *ProQuest* [accessed 8 Apr. 2014].

<sup>258</sup> Gussow, Mel, "'Stone Diaries" Author Shields Views Quiet Life Crises Series: The Latest Word', *Austin American Statesman*, 9 Jul 1995, in *ProQuest*, [accessed 8 Apr. 2014].

<sup>259</sup> Tom Cohen, "'Carol Shields, At 68; Novelist Wrote 'The Stone Diaries'", *Boston Globe*, 18 Jul 2003, In *ProQuest*. [accessed 8 Apr. 2014].

<sup>260</sup> Gail Caldwell, *Boston Globe*, B38.

<sup>261</sup> Timothy Dow Adams, 'Photographs on the Walls of the House of Fiction', 180.

<sup>262</sup> Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 17.

underscoring Daisy's life chronologically. Among them Daisy's photograph is absent, but her daughter Alice's photograph appears three times as Alice may be 'argued . . . is the biographer-narrator . . . although she is not always represented in a favourable light . . . suggesting she herself is not the narrator of the text'.<sup>263</sup>

This struck me because in my novel Angelita's portrait is one of the vital narrators of the story. She speaks often to Lily, who also narrates her own story and that of the others, but who also spends much of the novel looking/describing Angelita's portrait and listening to its tale, but Lily herself is not represented as a photographed portrait in the work anywhere until the end and then obscurely. Given that the portrait of Angelita is one of my own mother taken by her fiancé when she was seventeen, would this work in *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*? It concerned me. However then I read that

Shield's own life is incorporated into the text. Shields includes in the family album photos of her daughters and the sister to whom the novel is dedicated. Together with a photo of Shield's son, these images fill the final page of the family album. The photo of the toad-like Harold Hoad, Daisy's first husband, is ironically a baby picture of Shields's husband, Don Shields.<sup>264</sup>

Carol Shields's work enabled me to create a family narrative from each of the women in my novel, whether alive, or deceased and framed on the wall, spanning over half of a century, they reveal the historical forces that shaped their female lives using my personal gallery of portraits, as Shields does, empowered me to further blur the boundaries between fiction and fact.<sup>265</sup>

In the third person draft of my novel, even though Lily was the protagonist she was only being acted upon. She did little. She just sat there, listening while the

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<sup>263</sup> Brenda Beckman-Long, 142.

<sup>264</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> *ibid.*

photographs spoke. Lily needed to act, breathe, and move, not just sit like a statue. Too much was unclear, too static, and took too long to discover in this first draft. The reader needs to know what the protagonist's problem is early on.

Lily's struggle having to do with the underlying truth of her identity did not appear until chapters five and six, at the end of the book. The main character must have a problem initially that forces her to find some kind of a solution (and forces the reader/viewer to follow along and want to turn the page). So why not let her speak directly to the photographs and let each of the portraits speak for themselves. I had let the portraits speak for themselves in my first draft, albeit diffused via Lily's perceptions. This latest draft of the novel in this work could combine first person points of view. That gave more potential in awakening and enlivening both Lily and the characters that she, as the protagonist, sees in the photographs. Also this allowed each character her own voice, which allows the reader to see into more of their lives.

Subsequently, the portraits have it in their power to tell more of a story at any given stage, but it becomes evident early on that they are withholding information about matters that were not spoken about in life. There are other fascinating characters to get to know, as well, rather than just the portraits with their fragmentary surrounding storytelling. Those fragments of the past are now mediated more carefully through the photographic images. They are holding back from spilling out and overwhelming the present time of the main narrative and slowing down the revealing of it. There is also more of a tactile and material reality in the narrative. Each of the portraits that speak is presented in a different graphically presented frame to give the reader more of a delineating mental picture of the frame each photograph inhabits so as not to intrude upon the reader's willing suspension of disbelief.

Lily now reads as a more of a concrete fully rounded character who moves and breathes, my readers claim. They can see her walk and gesticulate, through her various stages of childhood, nubile adolescence, as a young woman whose hair consistently falls down from its upswept pencil-held-bun, as a tragic widow, and as a confused adult desperate for the truth of her identity. I needed, as any writer does, to work through the first version draft in order to arrive at the understandings about ekphrasis that informed my writing of this final or latest draft version.

In this latest version, I want to make it clear that Lily is interpreting combined sources (the photographs, and her mother Dolores' carefully reworked stories) and is responding to what lies between these. Similarly, the portrayed subject is having to interpret and re-interpret the words of the photographer and the levels of 'posing' through which she is manipulated while also engaging in the photographic studio.

Throughout this inquiry into ekphrastic narrative or ekphrastic realism and where my work belongs within it, allusion to Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames: photography narrative and postmemory* (1997) becomes even more luminescent for this writer. Hirsch explores the notion that when we capture our family photographically, we are often responding to an idealized image while providing a powerful means for shaping personal and cultural memory. However, Hirsch emphasizes 'the picture exists, because something was there, and thus, in my own family pictures, I . . . can hope to find some truth about the past, mine and my family's—however mediated'.<sup>266</sup> Thereby I have drawn even more strength from Norma Cantú's book, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera* (1995) which won the 1995 *Premio Aztlán*. In it Cantú seizes upon Roland Barthes's writings on photography, all the while reconstructing her childhood on the U.S./Mexican border,

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<sup>266</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 6.

teaching us that the border itself is an artificial barrier. However the work is not necessarily nonfiction rather Cantú calls it a fictional autobioethnography because as she states:

the story is told through the photographs, and so what may appear to be autobiographical is not always so. On the other hand, many of the events are completely fictional, although they may be true in a historical context. For some of these events, there are photographs; for others, the image is a collage; and in all cases, the result is entirely my doing. So although it may appear that these stories are my family's they are not precisely, and yet they are.<sup>267</sup>

No differently than Carol Shields's novel 'basking within the reveries of an ordinary existence',<sup>268</sup> Norma Cantú gives us a fictionalized memoir filled with 'actual snapshots and [her] recreated memories . . . of this world—births death, injuries, fiestas and rites of passage'.<sup>269</sup> Keeping in the spirit of verisimilitude, some of these photographs show evidence of age with scratches or folds. And like Shields, Cantú's family photographs do not always match the descriptive prose that corresponds to them, and even reproduced documents show some form of alteration.

In the prose segments that structure the novel, some a paragraph and some longer, one is titled 'Bueli' and below it we read: 'In the photo, Bueli sits in her high-back rocking chair, her sillón where she'd rocked all of us to sleep, surrounded by Tino, Dahlia, Esperanza, and me . . .'.<sup>270</sup> Yet in the photograph above it there are three people only. The prose below the photograph titled 'Dahlia Two' reads: 'In the picture Tía Nicha walks down the front steps of the house on San Carlos Street, and Dahlia

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<sup>267</sup> Norma Elia Cantú, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood EN LA FRONTERA* (Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1995).p. xi.

<sup>268</sup> Gail Caldwell, B38.

<sup>269</sup> 'Canícula: Snapshots of Girlhood En La Frontera' *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 19 Jun 1998, 30, In ProQuest [accessed 9 Apr. 2014]

<sup>270</sup> Norma Elia Cantú, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera* (Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1995), p.24.

stands by the round table that holds her chocolate birthday cake, three candles lit'.<sup>271</sup>

The photographic evidence indicates four candles. On Cantú's purported immigration card, as she is a Mexican national, there is indication of tampering with the signature, which she has signed Azucena Cantú.<sup>272</sup> The name Norma seems to have been covered over on the document. Nena, a typical nickname for Azucena appears often in the novel, the name Norma (an Anglicization of Nena) never does, if only on the cover as indicated by the author's name.

These purposeful anomalies in *Canícula* do not jar this reader, rather they excite me and spur me onward. As guideposts for my novel, they continue to underscore the nature of blurring reality and fiction as fictional autobiography does. Is it autobiography? Is it fiction? Is it autofiction? In a book shop where I purchased it this novel rests on the fiction shelf. Cantú, herself, comments on the link between genuine photographs and her fictional memoir:

all I can answer is that my book is about memory and photos are one way of 'freezing' memories, just like words are one way of 'freezing' thoughts—and yet both are tenuous and fleeting. We remember differently from what the photo 'freezes' and our words often don't quite express what we think/feel. I work with the ideas of memory and writing—but all in a cultural context of the border which itself is fleeting and fluid.<sup>273</sup>

My approach in *Pictures on the Wall of My Life* wants the same: an authentic representation of Lily's childhood being reared by photographs of important women who love her as she loves them, no matter that I am often told by my family that my 'frozen' representations of a parallel childhood are inauthentic or that my ekphrasis of family photographs never existed in the first place.

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<sup>271</sup> *ibid.*, p.105.

<sup>272</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>273</sup> Cited in Adams, Timothy Dow, "'Heightened by Life" vs. "Paralyzed by Fact": Photography and Autobiography in Norma Cantú's *Canícula*", *Biography* 24.1 (Winter 2001), 58, In *Project Muse* [accessed 4 Oct 2009].

The end result is that Cantú has successfully straddled her own literary borderland, and by doing so has aided me in finding an effective way to straddle my own border between fiction and nonfiction.

The central character of Lily Adams in *Pictures on the Wall of My Life* is me and not me. She is a composite of many parts of my mother and me—we are enmeshed and neither our differences nor similarities can be compartmentalized. In Lily Adams we are one. The characters of Dolores, Leonard and Granny Flynn are discrete aspects of my parents and my beloved paternal grandmother, and yet they are not. Angelita's speaking portrait as one of Lily's great ancestors on the wall of her childhood home, is based upon a portrait of my teenaged mother and the many stories told to me about one of my many favourite and wildest aunts named Angelita or Angie—and yet she is not. And does any of this matter in this compositional process that I am looking at? Well, any writer would argue that it does not because what works on the page is what matters and—as long as it creates a narrative arc that readers can follow, or even better, must follow—then keeping the reader or viewer engaged in the story, whether full of memories or harsh truths, is what matters and what sells books, after all.

To freeze memories and meet harsh truths head on is another juncture in this busy intersection of magical realism/ekphrastic realism taken by Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). Published in response to the horrors of 9/11, the novel has 'photographic and historic nodes'<sup>274</sup> that have imprinted an overwhelming amount of 'freezing thoughts' in our collective consciousness, perhaps even an untreatable gash in our literary imaginations.

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<sup>274</sup> Aaron Mauro, 'The Languishing of the Falling Man: Delillo and Jonathan Safran Foer's Photographic History of 9/11', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 57.3 (2011), 585, In *Project Muse* [accessed 9 Apr 9 2014].



The narrator Oskar Schell, a nine-year-old, is coping with the traumatic loss of his father in the terrorist attacks. He does not understand how his father died and suffers great guilt by not picking up the phone during his father's final calls from the burning towers in the early morning of September 11:

I went to the phone to check the messages and listened to them one after another.

Message one: 8:52 a.m.

Message two: 9:12 a.m.

Message three: 9:31 a.m.

Message four: 9:46 a.m.

Message five: 10:04 a.m.<sup>275</sup>

Just the poignancy of this simple and unassuming list of calls from a father, soon to die, attempting to say goodbye to his family is stark and powerful in its minimalism and that is how Oskar sees it 'I knew I could never let Mom hear the messages, because protecting her is one of my most important *raisons d'être*'.<sup>276</sup> Considering the horrendous ordeal that frames the novel, 'when faced with a subject almost too great to manage or confront, the mind wants to organize, to categorize, to simplify'.<sup>277</sup> But discovering a key in his father's things along with an envelope with the word 'Black' written in his father's hand, Oskar journeys all over New York City to ultimately comprehend this clue and its need to find a lock that fits to resolve Oskar's puzzled state of mind. He also tries to come to terms with this suffering from the epistolary voices of his grandparents' letters relating the loss of their own families in World War Two as German emigrants and during the bombing of Dresden.

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<sup>275</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), p. 68.

<sup>276</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> Mason, Bobby Ann, 'On Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried"', *The Story and Its Writer*, ed. Ann Charters, 8th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 201), pp. 1514-1516.

The trauma and its resonance in the novel are undeniable, but what stands out to me is the following passage detailing Oskar's internet search for the meaning of these found items:

I printed out some of the pictures I found—a shark attacking a girl, someone walking on a tightrope between the Twin Towers, that actress getting a blowjob from her normal boyfriend, a soldier getting his head cut off in Iraq, the place on the wall where a famous stolen painting used to hang—and I put them in *Stuff That Happened to Me*, my scrapbook of everything that happened to me.<sup>278</sup>

Three pages later we have the actual reproductions or a series of images intercut within the novel allowing us to be as visually bombarded<sup>279</sup> as Oskar is till the novel's completion when these images outlast the written text. Among the many are photographs of famous people he admires: Laurence Olivier, Stephen Hawking, others are pages of stationery with colourful doodles, snapshots of revolving doors, keys, a lock, fingerprints, a video screen grab from CNN, a design for a paper airplane, a picture of a falling cat, typescript pages so overtyped that the pages are blacked out and unreadable and there are others. Foer, in a sense, gives us a means to voyeuristically peek at some of the images 'that Oskar [seems] to have taken himself with his grandfather's camera'<sup>280</sup> that accompanies him on his forays around the city. 'The major part of the novel displays single images from "*Stuff That Happened to Me*" that stand in direct relation to what is related in the adjacent verbal narrative',<sup>281</sup> unlike Shields and Cantú.

Foer's approach to magical realism and the fantastic appear to reinforce the novel's ekphrasis as Oskar narrates 'intermittent episodes of realist narration that relate

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<sup>278</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 42.

<sup>279</sup> Aaron Mauro, 597.

<sup>280</sup> Siegel, Elisabeth, ' "*Stuff That Happened to Me*": Visual Memory in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*', *Current objectives of postgraduate American studies*, 10 (2009) n.p. [accessed 8 Apr 2014]

<sup>281</sup> *ibid.*

extraordinary or supernatural events and circumstances as they were probable and plausible'.<sup>282</sup> One image is spread over two pages so that we may understand how Mr. Black who has had his hearing aids turned off, 'A long, long time go!'<sup>283</sup> hears again when 'Oskar turns the hearing aids on slowly, and as he does, a flock of bird flies noisily by the window. Here, with the birds, Foer interrupts his text . . . [which] unifies the sights and sounds that Oskar and Mr. Black are simultaneously experiencing and reexperiencing'.<sup>284</sup> Thus, we have graphic interruptions meshing with text that 'are neither distracting nor random gimmickry but, to the contrary, indispensable for the novel's verbal narrative'.<sup>285</sup> And some of these many images and texts/imagetexts emit audible sounds that we also hear, the juxtapositioning of the noisy birds from which 'Mr. Black grabbed at his ears . . . He started crying',<sup>286</sup> and so do we.

I would argue then that is audibility ratchets up the ekphrastic conversation to a profoundly heard scream alluding to a similar scream discussed in Chapter One alluding to a particular photograph discussed there also. Hence, I must admit that Foer's work became one of the more important benchmarks for influencing and locating my novel. Foer 'relates his use of images to the experience of national trauma and at the same time highlights the influence of images on the construction of a collective memory when he claims that an event is remembered by its images'.<sup>287</sup> And I, too, want the events in Lily's life along with the ekphrastic conversations engaged in with the photographs to render a similar collective memory in her world.

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<sup>282</sup> Elisabeth Siegel, n.p.

<sup>283</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 165.

<sup>284</sup> Matthew Mullins, 'Boroughs and Neighbors: Traumatic Solidarity in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*', *Papers on Language & Literature* 45.3 (Summer 2009), 320, in *General OneFile* [9 Apr 2014].

<sup>285</sup> Elisabeth Siegel, n.p.

<sup>286</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 165.

<sup>287</sup> Cited in Elisabeth Siegel, n.p.

As *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* comes to a close, we have come to an understanding how Oskar's flipbook has become his talismanic collection of comfort, horror, and hope. Initially when Oskar pulls '*Stuff That Happened to Me*' from the space between the bed and the wall, and [he] flipped through it for a while, wishing that [he] would finally fall asleep'<sup>288</sup> we see exactly what he sees and come to realize how its importance foreshadows the end of the novel with a final set of photographs. Again Oskar needs his touchstone, his flipbook:

I felt in the space between the bed and the wall, and found *Stuff That Happened to Me*. It was completely full. I was going to have to start a new volume soon. I read that it was the paper that kept the towers burning . . . Maybe if we lived in a paperless society, which lots of scientists say we'll probably live in one day soon, Dad would still be alive. Maybe I shouldn't start a new volume. . . . Finally, I found the pictures of the falling body.  
Was it Dad?  
Maybe.  
Whoever it was, it was somebody.  
I ripped the pages out of the book.  
I reversed the order, so the last one was first and the first was last.<sup>289</sup>

This series of photographs is based on the controversial Richard Drew photograph of a man falling out of the World Trade Center towers at fifteen seconds past 9:41 am on September 11, 2001.<sup>290</sup> It appeared in the *New York Times* to great public outrage and was eventually withdrawn as a result. Foer claims he relied on 'a photo illustration'<sup>291</sup> and did not use Drew's photograph. What Foer does with these last set of images of a body falling is place them in reverse as Oskar announces. 'He reverses the order of the images and this leads to a daydream in which the events of his father's experiences of September 11 are reversed'.<sup>292</sup> As we thumb through these

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<sup>288</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 52.

<sup>289</sup> *ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>290</sup> Aaron Mauro, 584.

<sup>291</sup> *ibid.* 597.

<sup>292</sup> Elisabeth Siegel, n.p.

final pages we are left with the perception of a man flying upward to a place where Oskar and his father “would have been safe”.<sup>293</sup> And ‘only in the realm of the visual—where images can be recycled and replayed in a continuous loop—is the fantasy of turning back time possible’.<sup>294</sup> Only in the realm of the visual can one enter a darkened room of flashing and now re-organized imagetexts and embrace the fantastical.

One might say that it is not farfetched that, at times, magical and ekphrastic realism is required of such works using photographs where the subjects within the various images spring to life and we hear them/imagetexts tell a story just as Ransom Riggs has illustrated in his book, *Talking Pictures* (2012), a compilation of old and forgotten photographs, ‘some scratched and out of focus’.<sup>295</sup> Riggs spends hours in flea markets searching through giant bins. They talk to him, he claims. ‘Old photos are a bit like old records, like messages from another world, each one a little mystery’.<sup>296</sup> He says he always looks at the backs and sometime he finds clues hidden there, and ‘sometimes, if you’re lucky, you discover that a picture that seems so ancient, so indecipherable—can talk’.<sup>297</sup> His novel *Miss Peregrine’s Home For Peculiar Children* (2011) came about just because of such a collection of vintage photographs. ‘I got bit by a photo collecting bug’<sup>298</sup> he says, ‘before I started the book, and they seemed to be pocket-size mysteries that cried out for a story’.<sup>299</sup>

Jacob Portman, sixteen, doubts the stories his grandfather (who was saved from a Nazi death camp) has told him as he doubts the authenticity of the sepia-toned photographs he finds of the people in Grandpa Portman’s tales. But after he turns up

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<sup>293</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, p. 326.

<sup>294</sup> Rosemary Hathaway cited in Elisabeth Siegel, n.p.

<sup>295</sup> Ransom Riggs. (2011) *Talking Pictures*, *YouTube* [accessed: 20 Oct. 2012].

<sup>296</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>297</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> Piper Castillo, ‘Ransom Riggs’, *St. Petersburg (Florida) Times*, 26 June 2011, 9E, in *LexisNexis* [accessed 10 Apr 2014].

<sup>299</sup> *ibid.*

dead, killed by ‘monsters’ Jacob journeys to a small Welsh island in search of answers where, like the photos sprinkled throughout the book, magically, the actual subjects—children and Miss Peregrine herself are alive and well at a home of sorts, in a time warp decades earlier—1940—among other peculiar people. ‘At this point, the story shifts to a fantastical mystery mixing the past with the present’.<sup>300</sup> Jacob’s confusion about just who these people are and what decade they are residing in is not exactly clarified while speaking with ‘Miss Peregrine, the headmistress:

“Just to make sure I understand,” I said. “If today is September third, 1940, then tomorrow is . . . *also* September third?”  
 “Well, for a few of the loop’s twenty-four hours it’s September second, but, yes, it’s the third.”  
 “So tomorrow never comes.”  
 “In a manner of speaking.”<sup>301</sup>

Riggs’s novel foregrounds ekphrasis in not so much a peculiar way, but to be a success it depends heavily upon magical realism hand-in-and with ekphrastic realism as the people in the photographs literally walk out of the frame each with horrific tales grounded in escape from Nazi persecution in Poland. ‘The mysterious photographs add to the bizarre and slightly creepy tone of the book’.<sup>302</sup> Miss Peregrine explains to Jacob the nature of a menacing creature called a ‘wight’ which keeps the peculiar children in great fear if found by one:

Miss Peregrine reached for a photo album she’d brought from the house and began to flip through it. “These have been reproduced and distributed to peculiars everywhere, rather like wanted posters. . . .” She flipped the page again, this time to a picture of a little girl cowering before a looming shadow. “This is Marcie. She left us thirty years ago to live with a common family in the countryside. I pleaded with her to stay, but she was determined. Not long after, she was snatched by a wight as she waited for the school bus. A camera was found at the scene with this undeveloped picture inside.”

<sup>300</sup> Alexander, Karen, ‘Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children’ Audiobook Review, *School Library Journal* 58.10 (Oct. 2012): 65, in *General OneFile*, [accessed 10 Apr 2014].

<sup>301</sup> Ransom Riggs, *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2011), p.159.

<sup>302</sup> Misti Tidman, ‘Riggs, Ransom. Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children’ *School Library Journal* 57.6 (June 2011), 132, in *Infotrac* [accessed 10 2014].

“Who took it?”

“The wight himself. They are fond of dramatic gestures, and invariably leave behind some taunting memento”.<sup>303</sup>

The ekphrasis often matches the photographs placement accurately as they are grouped near it either in the immediately preceding or following pages. These ‘creepy Victorian pictures’<sup>304</sup> create an enhanced otherworldliness. Apparently they come from a collection on loan of found photographs from a host of people all thanked individually by name at the back of the book in honour of their ‘countless hours hunting through giant bins of unsorted snapshots at flea markets and antique malls and yard sales to find a transcendent few, rescuing images of historical significance and arresting beauty from obscurity—and most likely, the dump’.<sup>305</sup> Riggs attests to the authenticity of the photos while at the same time admits, that ‘a few . . . have undergone minimal postprocessing’.<sup>306</sup>

Although this work would be located on the young adult novel shelf, it garnered enough attention to be the first in a trilogy (apparently Riggs had too many left over photographs not to), a recently released graphic novel adaptation (2013) of the same name, as well as a movie deal, which in part is why I chose it. Nonetheless the power of a photograph to literally cry out for its story to be told also has deep resonance for this writer as it does for Riggs. Even though he claims that ‘when you collect photographs, you’re at the mercy of the gods. . . . It’s a lot easier to tweak a story to fit the photos you have than it is to find the exact image you need’,<sup>307</sup> I can’t help wondering if Jonathan Safran Foer might disagree.

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<sup>303</sup> Ransom Riggs, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, p. 257-8.

<sup>304</sup> James D. Watts “‘Peculiar Children’ Author Ransom Riggs on the Odd, Old Photos that Inspired Series’, *McClatchy - Tribune Business News*, 16 Jan 2014. n.p., in *ProQuest*, [10 Apr. 2014].

<sup>305</sup> Ransom Riggs, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, p. 350.

<sup>306</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> James D. Watts, n.p.

These more recent aforementioned novels seem to solidify the idea that imagetexts are indeed worthy of serious consideration in this fast moving continuum of magical realism and ekphrasis as others continue to prove it.

Similarly, Lily Adams, as the protagonist of *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*, (and I, as a writer/researcher) searches to find power and meaning in imagetexts and truths that have not been revealed—especially those that have been put into question by the whispers from the walls where her family portraits live in her childhood home. To collect those photographs and the history they provide is to collect the world that Lily Adams now finds herself wanting to join. Her heightened awareness of self and her off-centred and slightly tilted position within the family frames enable Lily (and this writer) to cast off the discordant shadows of the past generation, embrace a new terrible reality, but not break from the burden of it.

We are reminded of the importance of seeing and believing the stories that those pictures and others tell and what an omnipresence they are for Lily (and for me) when Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography* (1977):

Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern. Photographs really are experience captured, the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood. To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.<sup>308</sup>

Power is a way for Lily to be in control of her life. Her past as she believed it to be true has been put into question upon the death of her mother. She has no other channel or realistic way back into her own history unless she can now interrogate the past foisted upon her by the obfuscations of her storyteller mother.

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<sup>308</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 4.



This notion of putting one's life into proper and sensible context through the medium of image and text—which is certainly not free from some form of confederacy through manipulation—puts Lily Adams into some degree of doubt about what she knew, what she learns, and what she wants to remember and must re-remember once the pictures of her world are re-focused through a different lens. That lens brings up the way in which stories are rendered and how Lily negotiates what has been told about her family, and how it's been told.

This brings me to one last work that might find difficulty being placed on just one shelf in a library, which is a similar challenge, I trust, any librarian might have faced upon the publication of the aforementioned novels, as well as my own.

*Storyteller* (1981) by Leslie Marmon Silko is considered a hybrid work and a part of many genres in all of its 278 pages which encompasses fiction, short stories, poetry, and photographs. Some critics have called this work photojournalistic even though the pictures were taken by herself and her father. However, the work is personal and based on the oral traditions within Silko's Native American culture as her dedication indicates: 'This book is dedicated to the storytellers as far back as memory goes and to the telling which continues and through which they all live and we with them'.<sup>309</sup> Silko's use of photographs sets itself apart from the previously discussed novels by its grounding in an age-old oral tradition coupled with her poetic mastery of the written word and the circular design of the book. The first photograph that opens the book is that of her great grandparents 'holding [her] grandpa Hank'.<sup>310</sup> Shortly after is a snapshot of her beloved Aunt Susie and herself at around the age of two. What struck me is how 'these photographs do not merely locate Silko within a genealogical context . . . but within a continuous generational line of Laguna storytellers as well. The last

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<sup>309</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller*, (New York: Arcade, 1981).p. v.

<sup>310</sup> *ibid.* p. 2, 269.

three photographs in the book bring us full circle'.<sup>311</sup> Silko explains the significance of these images in the beginning poem in the book:

Photographs have always had special significance  
with the people of my family and the people at Laguna.  
A photograph is serious business and many people  
still do not trust just anyone to take their picture.

It wasn't until I began this book  
that I realized that photographs in the Hopi basket  
have a special relationship with the stories as I remember them.  
The photographs are here because they are part of many of the stories  
and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs.<sup>312</sup>

The reader cannot help but become enmeshed in these elements of image and text by which our understanding of the landscape and the community is furthered from their merging of the present and past, creating a harmonic union of 'the ongoing flux of life'<sup>313</sup> as is expressed in this work.

The photographs are not lumped in the middle of the work as an amass of images too tightly packed, but by placing them as poetic stanzas among verses of an oral tradition, and episodic narrative enabling a deep appreciation, and privileging of the cultural/communal over the individual. Those last three photographs are comprised of an adult Silko sitting on the rocks with the Tucson Mountains in the background. She smiles. She is a glorious young woman, then Grandpa Hank appears again as an adult and the last photograph is that of her father as a boy, Grandpa Hank's brother and Silko's great-grandfather. This telling of her portion of the story by Silko and the 'individual stories which comprise, involves, like all oral storytelling, a teaching process, one in which the varieties of genre and voice Silko uses is essential'.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko and Bernard A. Hirsch, "'The Telling Which Continues': Oral Tradition and the Written Word in Leslie Marmon Silko's 'Storyteller'", *American Indian Quarterly*, 12.1 (1998), 2, In *JSTOR* [accessed 10 Apr 2014].

<sup>312</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller*, p. 1.

<sup>313</sup> *ibid.* and Bernard A. Hirsch, 2.

<sup>314</sup> *ibid.* 3.

It is this same essential storyteller tradition that calls to Lily Adams who cannot ignore the stories her mother has told her (as this writer cannot) and after her death, Lily must not ignore the stories that call into question the past that she was brought to believe in. After all, this too is part of her teaching process.

Through the medium of the photographs that magically speak to Lily about the past, she creates a new set of portraits of the life she was born into, one she thought had vanished when her mother's narratives ceased as she took her last breath. This approach continues to take inspiration from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'invocation of the unimaginable as a reality which redefined the basis for that opposition between real and imaginary',<sup>315</sup> something magical realism demands from its readers. Marquez call it the marvellous real—*lo real maravilloso*.

Both Lily and I, as the creator of Lily and this work, have travelled *lo real maravilloso*, and in doing so have looked back for more of a focus on translating the visual representations of photographic art into verbal representation of textuality bathed with salient tones and shapes within the frames of her and my familial memory. This is a world this writer chooses to inhabit and like the man falling upward in Oskar's flipbook, I am propelled and upheld on the canonical shelf by those members of the literary community who have come before me.

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<sup>315</sup> Elizabeth A. Spiller "'Searching for the Route of Inventions': Retracing the Renaissance Discovery Narrative in Gabriel García Márquez." *CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*, 28.4 (1999), 378.

## Conclusion

Feeling very much as if I have bared all of myself in the buff, metaphorically and otherwise, I feel it is time to put my clothes back on and bring this work to a close. My writing process has been based on ekphrasis, which has guided the process of arriving where I am now able to talk about readers' responses and even the marketplace for such a work. So much so that this ekphrastic process has become embedded and has liberated me in this latest draft of the novel to talk in the voices of the photographed people themselves and to step back (not painlessly) with critical distance. I did use personal material by a series of distancing techniques which allowed me to explain theoretical concepts. However, this was not to explore the personal, but as a means to illustrate the ekphrasis.

I have discovered that perhaps ekphrasis is not necessarily most useful as a generic term for a reader, but more useful as a technical term for writers identifying the type of writing process that draws inspiration from photographs though it may, in the end, become less evident in the actual narrative texture that the novel is ekphrastic. And I do not expect the reader to want to know anything about the writer. If the writing has been therapy in any sense this is nothing to do with the reader. However, the writing will have been affected by the fact that the writer can read a photograph—from

the technical ways in which the camera has been set up, through the interpretation of the family-historical context, the stories told as well as the wider historical context of the photograph to the storage and deterioration of the surface of the image. In a sense, the apparently still photograph, because of its technical and chemical processes, is working as a metaphor for the way a story has angle, perspective, and alters, or is gradually transmuted or lost through the generations. By means of this metaphor, as a writer, I have found my way back into the past and in doing so I have written about two different things—the drafting of the novel and the finished text.

It may be that one very key part of the subject matter of my novel is a gallery of photographs, but that the terminology relating to tying camera work to narrative is actually about the practices of this writer and to some extent less about the genre of the eventual novel. The concepts that I have worked with such as ‘tilt’ and ‘aperture’ in this work have become a means by which I have come, as a writer, to wrestle with my material. Observing myself doing these things as a writer has made me more aware of how to work my material in various ways.

This discovery has been realized, in part, because of the transition of the initial draft of the novel (excerpted in the following Appendix) and its transition to this current draft, one that is more about voices at the time of their purported existence, and less about the conversations of someone actually looking at the photographic artefacts as in its earlier iteration. I have also discovered this through being so conscious of myself doing this writing, something I have struggled, resisted and yet set about accomplishing with determination to adapt and to look at things in way that has felt alien, yet for a practical purpose and to achieve this culturally endorsed outcome. To travel this road has become a journey into myself. And so I leave you where I started . . . with an idea about the photograph, imagetexts, and ekphrasis:



(Photographs of my intersection with self and history are images that have a profound impact on the way I remember my past. Searching for meaning within and without these images—frames my life. At times, they are a burden, at other times, they release me to dream.)



when mother died a few years ago, I hung her mirror in my dressing room. Yet sometimes if I look into it at a certain time of day, her beautiful gaze manifests itself. My father likes to peek at me too. My father made this self-portrait during the first year of their marriage in 1948. Later, an artist my daughter dated blew it up and created this collage.  
 Dear Mom and Dad,  
 I miss you both.

- LOVERMAN 2010

(When Mother died a few years ago, I hung her mirror in my dressing room. Yet sometimes, if I look into it at a certain time of day, her beautiful gaze manifests itself. My father likes to peek at me too. My father made this self-portrait during the first year of their marriage in 1948. Later, an artist my daughter dated blew it up and created this collage.

Dear Mom and Dad,  
 I miss you both.)

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## Appendix

The following chapters are extracted from the first full draft, which is the third person omniscient version, of *Pictures on the Wall of My Life*. These are provided to give context to the excerpts quoted during comparison of the two main drafts of this work:

Chapter One	342
Chapter Two	364
Chapter Three	381
Chapter Four	397
...	...
Chapter Six	415

## Chapter One: Death and Deception

The pictures spoke to her. They had as far back as she could remember, only she had never said a word about it. She didn't think she had to. It was her secret—a little one at first—but as she grew, it became bigger, and later, larger than life. As a child Lily felt those photographs in black and white had one purpose, as guardian angels. The faces in gradations of grey comforted her. They whispered that there was nothing to fear in the dark when a nightmare sent the five-year-old child running toward her parents' room.

Usually a dark figure of someone Lily couldn't make sense of reached out to her. No perceptible face just what looked to be a large hand attached to an even larger arm pulling her toward him, her, it? Lily didn't know. That was when she would scream, but no sound exited her mouth. Awake and shaking in her bed, Lily would run like hell to the opposite end of the long hall.

Lily Adams had grown up in a house full of women. That was all she knew: women laughing, crying, screaming and swearing to never trust another man again. Her father, Leonard, had been around, in the early days. He'd even taken some of the first photographs of Lily as a baby since, that was his job—shooting photographs of stars and starlets while chasing after them at movie premieres, or hired as an on-set photographer to document those moments before and after a director yelled “Action” and “Cut.” But after one particular argument with Lily's mother, Leonard left, never to return. Lily heard it, late one night, and thought it was the radio at first, but when she heard Daddy say: “Dolores, I will not and you cannot expect me to. I can't do this

anymore.”

“What! I trusted you . . . So you just plan to—” Lily heard Dolores say, but since Lily had already pulled the pillow over her head, she never quite heard the end of that sentence and fell asleep forgetting about what Daddy couldn’t do anymore. Then Lily noticed a week later that Leonard didn’t come home from his photographic studio like he usually did. As the night grew darker, and Lily sat eating her dinner alone with Dolores at the dining table, she suddenly insisted Lily go to bed earlier than usual. Daddy never came in to say goodnight that night like he had every night. Even when Lily was sleeping, she knew Daddy had been there because she smelled him—cherry tobacco—and knew he had kissed her on the cheek, because sometimes the tobacco landed underneath her pillow. Luckily it didn’t catch on fire. That next morning, Lily did not smell his pipe tobacco and never did again.

Dolores told Lily after picking her up at the Little Red School House in Hollywood the following day that Daddy had to go on location far away in Mexico, or maybe it was Texas, and she wasn’t sure when he would be back. Lily didn’t really understand why Daddy would be gone so long for some movie. He had normally preferred accepting jobs closer to home because he didn’t like being away from Dolores, but it was Lily he really missed and she him.

“Gotta be home to tuck my favourite daughter in,” he assured her drawing on his pipe from the corner of his mouth. Then he’d chuck Lily under the chin. They had joked this way often because Lily *was* his only daughter. But somehow reassuring her that indeed if she wasn’t, she would be, made her feel special.

The curious thing was that soon after Leonard moved out, Lily didn’t miss him as much because Granny Flynn, Leonard’s mother, moved in “just to help yer Dolores out, honey darlin’ ,” Granny would say when Lily asked her: “Granny Flynn, how



come?”

Lily was happy to have Granny in the house, because Dolores had to work later and later at a restaurant owned by a friend who hired her the week after Daddy’s departure, and she found getting up early more and more impossible. Granny Flynn filled a gap that soon became invisible. She drove a big black Buick Roadmaster Riviera, top of the line when it came off the assembly line. Lily felt like she was being swallowed by a whale when she rode inside of it. And Granny Flynn always told her when she dropped her off at school, “Sugar plum, you’re top of the line, just like this car.” It was a comforting substitute for not hearing whose favourite daughter she was anymore.

Lily must have been six and a half, but maybe more like five and a half, yes, it had to be, because it was in kindergarten where Lily met her first crush, Jeff, with the blonde hair and white teeth that sparkled like sunlight when he smiled. He had kissed her on the cheek one day when they were both hanging upside down on the jungle gym. Luckily none of the teachers saw because most of the kids were playing hopscotch on the opposite side of the play yard and the adult eyes were therefore distracted when Jeff made his move. But that was a secret. Lily liked to keep secrets. After all, if she told anyone about them, she wouldn’t have a collection of secrets to keep.

The collection had started about three months before Daddy walked out on Dolores; that was when the pictures on the wall had started talking to Lily.

Thinking back on those bad dreams, Lily decided that the someone chasing her in them was not an *it*, not a creature. That was just too terrifying, like in the frightening films Dolores wouldn’t allow her to see—*Creature from the Black Lagoon* or *Them*. Leonard used to like to see those movies with Dolores, but she refused to go any more because she said they were *estúpidas*. So he would retell a watered-down version of the

stupid movie plotlines to Lily until Dolores made him stop after Lily woke up three nights in a row screaming. Something about that kind of fear terrified and tantalized Lily and she missed Leonard's tales of film-land terror once he'd left.

It was the sound of running, like footsteps on stairs that got Lily's attention that one night. Her house didn't have any steps to speak of, not a second storey anyway. The stepping sounds started slowly, like the noise of Dolores's heels on the wood floor in her bedroom when she was walking around trying on different dresses in front of her full length mirror before going out for dinner with Daddy. But then the pace picked up and the noises accelerated as did a voice: "Lily . . . Lily . . . Lilyyyyyy." Someone was calling her name as if from a long way away. It was spoken so softly that Lily thought it was part of one of her dreams, but when she awoke, she still heard it. Even when she ran to her parent's bedroom at the end of the hall, they would protect her, plus, she had to let them know someone was trying to get her. Yet, the voice flowed in a pleasant sort of way and it had an accent similar to Dolores's. It reminded Lily of the sweet and yummy molasses that dripped down her finger after she'd poke it into her warm bowl of oatmeal on cold mornings. Dolores always said blackstrap molasses was better than honey because of its iron and other curative properties. "It's even known to cure cancer" she'd announced. Sadly, a short time after moving in, it didn't cure Granny Flynn's.

*"Hola Lily, don't be afraid, niña."* Lily stopped that first time and stared at the wall of Dolores's family photographs. Why she looked at that wall she wasn't sure, but something was happening on that wall.

"Mommy, Mommy, Mommeeee!"

*"¿Oye qué pasa, m'ija?"* Dolores said as s

he lifted Lily up in her arms. Lily's crying had startled Dolores right out of her room.

“She . . . she said something,” Lily mumbled between sobs.

“Who said something?” Dolores patted Lily’s head as she whimpered. Then Lily pointed at one of the photographs. It was an eleven-by-fourteen black and white in an old oak frame: A profile of a sixteen-year-old girl with long black hair. The only perceptible makeup she wore seemed to be on her lips because they looked black also.

“Ay, *m’ija*, you’re having a bad dream, *mi amor*.” Lily assented with an up and down movement of her head. Dolores assured Lily, “*Tía* Angie can’t talk to you now” .

“Uhh.... huh,” Lily insisted. “She did, I heard her.”

“Let’s go back to bed,” Dolores said.

“Mommy, no, she wants to say—”

“Hush, *mi cielo*, you have school in the morning.” Dolores tucked Lily back into bed and sat with her until she fell silent. Then Dolores walked back to her bedroom and smiled to herself, thinking about Lily and her overactive imagination. Dolores assured herself Lily was having just another of her scary dreams, yes that’s all it was, that’s all it could be. Dolores stopped for a moment in front of *tía*’s photograph: so young, so beautiful, so high-strung, so inflexible. Dolores wondered what Lily could possibly have thought she heard? The portrait of this dead aunt had been taken over fifty years ago.

*Ay mi familia*, Dolores thought, so much drama. What was I thinking, hanging all these photographs together on these walls like this?

...

The call came late, or perhaps it was just too soon. At four o’clock in the morning the ring felt sharp like a blade skimming her cheek or an ice chip shoved in her mouth when she didn’t want it.

“Hello,” Lily yawned after picking up the phone.

“Missus Dolores’ breathing very shallow, very irregular, around six respirations per minute,” said the night nurse.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” said Lily. The nurse said Lily could wait until another call came to let her know how her mother’s dying progressed. She didn’t describe it that way, and yet that’s the way Lily heard it. However, she did not want her mother to die alone. And dying was a process Lily knew about: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance or DABDA as the hospice personnel had informed her. But none of it had to do with Dolores. Dolores welcomed death, when she remembered what it meant—before Alzheimer’s settled a mist of forgetfulness inside her brain. It had not dissipated as mists generally do, but rather turned from a haze before the eyes that blurs the vision to a vague obstruction. It prevented any measure of recognition to any who came before the moment-by-moment existence that Dolores inhabited these days. Her mother had been gripped by this blockade of her memories and her ability to speak for over a year now and at what was tragically far too early of an age—that was the only phase Dolores knew—a phase between depression and acceptance: one of limbo. Sleeping all day and eating little for months, even that was considered part of a progression. Lily found this word “progression” in relation to dying a little bizarre. How was it that death and its stages were considered progress? As if along the way the sojourner was sending postcards from some sort of state known as Pending:

A bit past Denial now, crossing the intersection between Anger and Bargaining.

Wish you were here!

...

Oh look, there’s Depression, says the sign...well I have to catch a plane for that

little hop but my flight for Acceptance got delayed. Will let you know when I get there.

Can't wait!

...

Dolores was indeed making progress by dictionary definition: “a movement toward a goal or to a further or higher stage”; she was indeed going toward that final step. Things had evolved so quickly that Lily thought Dolores would have leapt toward death by now. All Dolores used to say, when she could still speak was “Why haven’t I died?” She was not afraid of death, she’d embraced it. It was just another rung on the ladder of life. Yet when she entered the nursing home all she did was yell for help. The staff would find her on the floor in front of her wheelchair because Dolores had inched herself out of it once again. That was when the attendants realized she had to be medicated. She was bothering the other residents and bothering the attendants, which was worse.

But now the medications to calm her down had ceased as they were no longer needed. Dolores had not called for “Help!” in months. Earlier, she’d stopped announcing that she wanted to die and stopped insisting that she wanted to “Go Home!” The medications kicked in; a white pill to calm her, a blue pill to soothe her, a green pill to make her sleep. Different doses had to be attempted even if Dolores sat limp all day in her wheelchair with her head slumped to the side. No matter, at least she was quiet. All those meds to make elderly demented patients shut up for the convenience of others—and ultimately the palliatives had stopped being administered when Dolores’s Alzheimer’s robbed her of not only her memory, but of her voice.

The home had a staff of about a dozen people during the nights; after all it was only a fifty-bed facility. Now, just before an early sunrise, Lily wanted desperately to

hold Dolores's hand one last time. It had always been the two of them in those early years after her parents' marriage ended. Now it was just the two of them again—one last time. No need for Lily to call her daughter . . . no point in waking Alexis just now. She'd be up soon enough.

Lily stroked her mother's sunken cheeks. Dolores did not respond at first. She was pallid and her four-foot, ten-inch frame was a mere seventy-five pounds. She appeared like a sleeping child, only her arthritically boned hands, flaccid skin, and thin greying hair betrayed her mere seventy some years.

"*M'ija*," Dolores actually recognized Lily using the name, daughter, in Spanish, which she had called Lily all her life until these last few years.

"*Sí, mamá*," Lily said in shock, but whispered so as not to destroy that unbelievable moment. Dolores looked at her through glazed half-opened eyes and said, "The bracelet, *m'ija* . . . Lola in the photog—" and closed her eyes and was gone. That fast. Silence.

It was not quite dawn and the other patients slept, as did Dolores's roommate behind the curtain on the opposite side of the room. This elderly wheelchair-bound diabetic roommate who at first disliked Dolores because of her middle-of-the-night calling out for God to "take me, please take me," or for someone to "get me out of here," later became a comfort to Lily when she visited her mother who no longer recognized her.

Lily's tears ran down her face. She wanted to run to find that photograph of Lola, Dolores's great grandmother, wearing that bracelet, but that would have to wait. What story did Dolores not tell her this time? Where was that bracelet? That, too, would have to wait as there was much to be done. Yet—even as Lily suddenly recalled a small voice calling out to her when she was a little girl walking down the hall to her

room one day after school.

*“Acuérdate de mí, hija, no me olvides.”* The smallest picture on the wall and the little old lady trapped inside of it standing in front of a staircase wanted Lily to stop and take notice. “Remember me, don’t forget me,” Lola had said from her picture frame.

And now Dolores had left her with a similar charge. Lily would never forget how that bracelet and its whereabouts had been lost for a while...and then Dolores had called her years earlier out of the blue saying, “I found it, I found it!”

“Mom, what are you talking about?”

“The bangle from Lola, you know, in the photograph.”

“Oh yes, the gold one with the Greek key design carved all around?”

“Yes, it belonged to Lola and it had been given to Aunt Angie.”

“Yes, I remember that photograph. Where is it now? Didn’t the glass break a long time ago?”

“Yes, dear, it did, I had it replaced and left it in the hall closet for your father to hang up, of course you probably don’t recall, you were quite little then.” Actually, Lily did recall. There was much she wanted not to recall, but this was not the time.

“Mom, where are they now?”

“What, dear?”

“The photo, and the bracelet.”

“Oh, don’t worry, dear, the photo is here in my den behind some boxes and the bracelet turned up in one of those boxes, you know, with a bunch of family letters I’ve saved for years.”

“Okay, Mom. Shoot, I have to go, Alexis is calling, can I call you back?”

“Yes, dear.” But Lily didn’t, at least not that day, and then the subject was

forgotten. Lily had spent so much time in the past with her ancestors and they had contradicted Dolores so often that as Lily grew she only wanted to focus on her life in the now. She had avoided going over to her mother's because she wanted a break from seeing the pictures. Actually, they hadn't spoken for many years . . . not since that one day. A day Lily preferred not to recall just now. All that talking. Lily just wanted silence.

"Well, now I've got it," she thought to herself.

...

It took some time, but a conversation and then more conversations eventually ensued. Little Lily learned, after crying to her mother that night about *tía*'s portrait speaking out to her, that it would be a long time before *tía* spoke again. As the weeks, then months and a year passed, Lily would stop and play a staring game with that portrait: sometimes one minute full elapsed, then two, then five minutes—an eternity for a girl of seven—and eight, then nine, but Aunt Angie remained frozen in profile. She did not, would not, turn to look at Lily. Even though she thought, once or twice, there had been a wisp of movement because a few strands of hair looked out of place in the photograph—didn't they? Lily had lost count how long it had been since *tía* had called to her that first time. It had frightened her, yes, but now she wanted to hear *tía* call her name again. She wanted to hear what she had to say. Dolores usually referred to the many portraits on the wall with interchangeable names, *tía*, *tío*, aunt, uncle, great aunt, great uncle; or she just called them by their first names. It should have been confusing to Lily, but it wasn't. She understood who all the *tíos*, *tías*, *abuelos*, *bisabuelos*, great and great greats were, but her favourite picture was that one of Aunt



Angie, or as she was sometimes lovingly called—Angelita—little angel, a typical diminutive of the word angel in Spanish, something Angelita certainly was not.

The family history maintained that she had died young, right after she'd birthed an adorable baby girl. The two of them had been in heaven for many years, Dolores had always said. Angelita had been known for her long and wiry mane of unruly hair, until she'd chopped it off in a revolt against being shut inside her room. At least that is what Dolores always claimed about her dead aunt whom she had never met. And Dolores said that she had been raised hearing cautionary tales about Angie's comportment not becoming that of a lady of her station.

Apparently, Angelita's beauty coupled with her rebellious ways or unladylike behaviour such as sneaking out just before dawn on her favourite horse, a mustang named *Macho* (she'd named him that because of his oversized cock), and riding at full gallop with her chestnut hair flying in the wind. All undone, she wore her night-time chemise tucked into her brother's trousers, which when windblown would expose her bosoms—a scandal for her well-to-do father, *Julián* and a terrible upset for her grandmother Lola. This and other out-of-hand infractions aggravated *Julián's* fragile heart condition, in addition to exacerbating Angelita's mother Amadita's regular fainting spells.

“*Qué mentira* (what a lie)! *Mamá* secretly wanted the quiet young and handsome family doctor to see *her* naked bosoms, Lily, don't believe a word of it,” Angelita announced to Lily's inquiry one morning when Dolores was out of earshot. Earlier that same week Angie had finally spoken to Lily again when she rushed by and forgot to have the staring contest.

“*¿A dónde vas Lily?*” Where are you going, she asked simply. Lily stopped and turned because the voice still sounded a bit like Dolores's. But no, it was Angelita in

profile, her long mane fluttering as if by someone's gentle breath. Angelita did not look at Lily directly, but those luscious darkened lips were moving. There was no mistake about that.

“*Tía* Angelita, where have you been?”

“*Aquí, hija.*”

“But . . .but why haven't you talked to me? I've been right here too.”

“You were too frightened, *hija*, and that is not our purpose. And only you can hear us, not your *mamá*. *¿Me entiendes?*”

Lily was about to answer, but Dolores was calling her from outside. “Lily, *dónde estás, vámanos, mijita*, it's time for school.”

“*Corre*, go, go!” Angelita insisted. So Lily did. Yet, she was sure as she dashed off that she heard other voices, of other long-dead family members, talking about something she didn't quite understand.

“Why . . . she was just a little baby, *apenas ayer*,” marvelled Amadita, whose portrait hung above her daughter's, Angelita's. Amadita was thinking that yesterday was really just yesterday rather than almost a decade or more earlier. But she never saw life in its raw reality, only in its formalities and obligations.

“No,” said Lola, Amadita's mother, “Lily looks so much like her *mamá*, Dolores, and like her *abuela* and *abuelo*—”

“*Ay sí, tienes razón*,” Yes, of course, assented Amadita proudly.

“Shhhh . . . *oye cállate, estúpida, qué dices*” hissed Angelita. “Not yet . . . she's too young, *pobrecita*.”

“*No me hables así*, I am still your mother, so don't take that tone with—”

“*¡Basta!*” Angelita shushed. As in real life Amadita always tried to control her little wayward angel. However, she couldn't then and she couldn't now because if

Angelita was angry enough she would, somehow, vibrate her mother's portrait right off the wall, but it usually took something profound for this event. Only a few times since, Lily could recall, had a framed photograph been discovered lying on the floor, the glass broken. A warning? A protest? Lily wasn't sure, but she remembered that only a very few of the other portraits had been able to replicate such an outrage. None of the other portraits had Angelita's temper which even death could not still. But this tale can't be rushed. So where were we? Oh, yes—

Angelita had been the wild child insurrectionist against her family's overly restrictive rules. These were initiated by her Mexican General grandfather Antonio Escárrega, rumoured to be of *mestizo* heritage. His father had married a Zacapoaxtla Indian beauty who died giving birth to him. No one ever referred to her as his father had remarried within a year to a Spaniard who'd brought a large dowry with her when she'd landed in Veracruz. Antonio became a local hero at twenty, who supported Benito Juarez and had distinguished himself in the Battle of Puebla. During the fifth of May, Antonio held the passages to Puebla against the French invaders from two stone-walled forts with a force of *indios* only using machetes who fought fiercely for their land. With help from bad weather and poor strategizing by French commanders, Antonio repelled them. He was heard rallying his men forward: "*Nuestros enemigos han llegado a tener este país alejado de nosotros, pero somos los primeros hijos de México!*" Our enemies have come to take this country away from us, but we are the first sons of Mexico! And the battle ended shortly after it started, with many dead on both sides and Antonio and his men the victors. He allowed his doctors to treat the wounded without discriminating as to French or Mexican, and so the people of Puebla followed suit by inviting the defeated French who wished to remain to do so and live with them in peace.

Antonio's wealth was based on riches in gold and silver mines that he had inherited, collected, and hoarded through means that were never really explained. Rumours of treachery, bribery, and murder had been whispered, but never proven as those who tried had a curious habit of *desaparecer*. And when they did disappear no one tried to look for them. However, Antonio was later honoured for his vicious bravery as a fighter and commander and the fact that he always had enough money and food to provide for his men. No matter that his loyalty blew in whatever direction was convenient; whether government soldiers or rebels, it merely depended upon which side was in charge on any given month of mayhem. His orders were neither questioned by them, nor his family. When Antonio proposed marriage to a beautiful young wraith of a virginal girl named Lola with her dowry of 4,000 acres, she could say nothing but *sí* as everyone else did. On their wedding night, when he insisted Lola put on his trousers as she lay naked and shivering from nerves under the bridal bed covers awaiting her groom's every command, she flushed with shock and shame at such a request. Throwing off her modesty momentarily, she protested, "*Pero no son míos!*" But they are not mine!

"*Y no lo olvides, mujer.*" And don't you forget it, woman, he demanded.

And when he insisted his firstborn would be a boy because only the second could be a girl, lovely budding and broadening Lola would only assent with her usual *sí*, never questioning her ability to deliver anything but. It was not until decades later, when his little angel of a granddaughter Angelita could utter her first words, and she was put into *papá Toño's* arms, as he was called by his family, during a visit one day, that he heard the word—*No!* The shock from it caused his heart to stop, or at least that is how the story went, and what Dolores always believed.

When Lily was a child, she knew there was something extraordinary about

Angelita and the baby story that wasn't right, but Dolores reminded her that Angelita and the baby had simply died in childbirth, which was not so uncommon in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lily grew to love that special photograph of Angelita taken at sixteen, about two years before her death. Lily loved the way the shadows of light outlining Angelita's profile duplicated the outline from the top of her head to just under her obviously rouged lips in repeats of two and three silhouettes on the white wall behind her. Her hair brandished its waves and fully engulfed the sides of her neck and shoulders. There was just a hint of a silver cross positioned below the hollow at the base of her throat. "Actually, it was gold *mijita*"—Angelita later informed Lily one afternoon—"he gave it to me." He took such a long time to take this picture, I kept giggling, but he told me I mustn't . . . " Lily always wondered who *he* was, but Angelita would just clam up and pretend that she could not speak any longer. Then Lily would have to wait a week or longer before Angelita continued, and it was from this photograph that Angelita always promised little Lily—when she was ten years-old traipsing off to grammar school with her book bag slung over her shoulder—that when she was older and more mature, she, Angelita, would explain about the baby and who *he* was. Until that time she would continually call from the wall, "*Lily, ¿a dónde vas?*" Where are you going? And when Lily answered "*a la escuela, tía,*" Angelita would usually respond, "*¡Ay niña, pórtate bien!*" Behave yourself, child—something Lily sensed Angelita had readily avoided.

As Lily grew, this family of photographs of her dead relatives brought comfort, questions, consolation, and sometimes confusion, but she was bound to silence about her special bond with all of them. Lily was afraid that if she ever again divulged any of the tales shared, the voices might again stop. Testing this notion further was something she promised them and herself she would never try.

“Oh why can’t y’all just talk in English like some of the rest of us?” whined Granny Flynn’s photograph, the one of her at fifty-eight, not the one of her at nineteen years-old. “If you ladies are going to keep hangin’ around this wall, how do you expect our little one to know what you are sayin’?” Lily often had to remind Granny Flynn that she did, in fact, understand Spanish, though later, as an adult, Lily had forgotten much of it.

Lily loved Granny Flynn when she was alive and even more after she’d died. Granny Flynn was born in Maysville, Arkansas near its border with Indian Territory, which later became Oklahoma. Lily loved to hear her tell about swinging on her front gate as a child—a swing to the left pushed her into Arkansas, and a swing to the right found her in Indian Territory. One of the Indians on a nearby reservation, Charlie Squirrel, crippled from birth and walking on his knees, would bring little Flynn pets to play with: a pair of crows who loved to swoop into the house and eat everything in the kitchen, much to the unhappiness of Flynn’s mother. And there was Ricky the flying squirrel, but Flynn’s favourite was a raccoon named Tommy. She loved running races with Tommy and he always outran her. Flynn didn’t mind because Tommy would roll over on his back and let her scratch his belly, and “How many raccoons do you know that let you do that?” she said.

Granny Flynn’s photograph couldn’t tolerate any dampness whatsoever; none of the pictures on the wall could. So Granny tried hard to never really let tears flow, but her voice usually choked up recounting her girlhood with Charlie Squirrel and the array of pets he’d bring for her. If the subject or subjects of a photograph were not careful, it, and they, might start cracking and flaking. “And then where would we be?” wondered a distant boy cousin aloud, whose connection to the family Dolores had glossed over

and Lily had had a hard time remembering. “Oh yes, Dick, a cousin of your grandfather’s sister’s son’s wife” reminded Granny Flynn, but Lily was still confused as Dick hardly ever said much. One day he appeared to smile, and then another he looked angry. Lily guessed he was about fourteen in the black and white picture, with penetrating saucer-shaped eyes that seemed to follow Lily’s every move. “No honey, they were big, but they were potent amber, almost green,” said Granny Flynn, but Lily still couldn’t figure him out. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, Dick was never one for much talkin’, so don’t take much notice of him for now.” So Lily didn’t.

Granny Flynn’s father, William Stanley, was a Vanderbilt University-trained country doctor who took little ten-year-old Flynn along on his horse and buggy while he tended to the many patients neighbouring far and wide. He delivered many of the babies in the county. Young Flynn’s job, she’d told Lily, was to hold a lantern high to help find their way in the dark in the days before streetlights. Flynn learned early in life that in order not to let women die of childbed fever, her doctor father scrubbed himself clean and made sure that all birthing beds and anything around them were as spotless and germ-free as possible, but he never taught Flynn just where babies came from, only how they arrived. This lapse in her education would bring many surprises in her adult life, Granny Flynn explained. When young Lily asked for more detail, Granny Flynn said, “Now, honey, that will have to wait till after that Angelita across the hall has had her say, she’s been promising you longer than I have.” Dolores had the photographs arranged across the hall from each other based on whether they were paternal or maternal relations.

“But Granny Flynn, I am almost ten and three quarters now, pretty *please*?” Lily could hear her mother calling her to “Hurry, *m’ija*, time for school!”

“You go now sweetie, Granny will be waitin’ right here.” Lily always wished

Granny had waited to die till she was a big girl, but recently cancer had decided things differently.

“I love you Granny,” Lily said, skipping down the hall, “I love you Angelita, Amadita Lola and everybody else.” Assurances of love echoed back to her, but one always stood out.

“I love you more, darlin’ ” said Granny Flynn. Granny Flynn was Lily’s paternal grandmother—the mother of a father who Lily had not really understood as a child. And when she wanted to understand him—he was already dead.

And later, Lily discovered voices of contradiction; to the family tales Dolores always insisted were the absolute truth, from the youthful photographs of her grandmother, and her great-great grandmother, aunts, and even uncles when the men could get a word in.

Dolores’s version of these tales always made the ladies in the pictures laugh and snicker. Dolores, the pictures said, was only repeating a reality that some of them had told her in person when she was a child, but that reality wasn’t necessarily the truth of the real past. It was only after death that they themselves comprehended the complete truth about their own lives and that of each other’s. And now—over a half a century later—Lily wanted the truth.

Little did younger Lily know what to believe as she grew, although later she would discover more than she wanted to. But one thing she always knew—how she had treasured her talks in the hallway in the hours before her mother came home from work, or in the early hours of the morning when Lily could not sleep or sought advice beyond what Dolores was capable of discussing.

Dolores had always insisted that, when Lily was a teenager she should keep herself pure for the right man. He should be an older man, Dolores had said, preferably



one who could love her, cherish her, teach her “things” that only maturity and wisdom could provide. This was after Lily shared tales of her friends in high school losing their virginity. Lily could always ask Dolores questions other girls couldn’t ask their mothers. Dolores was never angry about questions presented involving sex or the personal hygiene issues that girls encounter in adolescence. Dolores always did her best to answer any of Lily’s inquiries even when the topics were considered awkward. It was unconventional, Lily recalled, that Dolores could be so forthcoming in that way—but not so where family history was concerned.

So one night when Dolores came into to kiss Lily good night, she inquired of her mother about a particular act the girls at school had snickered about earlier that day in the school bathroom while sharing a cigarette during nutrition break. The bell had rung in the middle of a conversation between Debbie, fifteen, and Denise, fifteen and a half, both girls were in Lily’s typing class. She knew them only slightly, but enjoyed sharing an occasional puff of a Marlboro with them—one of a few of the list of secrets Lily did keep from Dolores. Lily caught only a portion of the conversation as they all rushed to next period and different classes in different buildings on campus, but it had to do with the words “blow” and “did you swallow or not?” A coughing fit from Lily’s last quick inhale prevented her from hearing anything else about this weird question. Reminding her to keep herself “untainted” was the only way Dolores had responded. She was not shocked by Lily’s curiosity, only patient and insistent.

“*M’ija*, these young ladies, are certainly far from ready for such behaviour. These are things not to be pursued until much later in a woman’s married life. As a couple grows more intimate . . . well . . . that’s part of a marvellous discovery they embark upon together. Bodies, my dear, and the wonders they provide, when a couple is deeply in love and share a bed, bring a unique geography of joy and ecstasy .” Lily

was about to ask Dolores if she and her father had attempted such “geography,” but thought better of it.

“So just concern yourself with waiting for that right gentleman, who will instruct you properly,” said Dolores as she turned out the light and closed the bedroom door.

It was not until her freshman year in college that Lily would discover such geography. His name was Scott.

...

Lily was finishing up her dry cheese melt sandwich and weak iced tea from the cafeteria on the centre lawn of campus. She attended a small community college as her grades hadn’t enabled her to go straight to a four-year. She didn’t really mind as she really didn’t know what it was she wanted from life, not yet at least. It was a Thursday afternoon, one of those stunning spring Los Angeles days: high seventies, smashing blue sky, a caressing light wind, the air scintillating with promise. A protest was gathering in the quad—SDS (Students for a Democratic Society)—sponsored. Probably more draft card-burning about to start. Some of her friends, especially the ones who were still furious about the abolishment of student deferments, had already left to join. Lily wasn’t going to go. Mostly they all just liked smoking grass out in the open and shouting Make Love, Not War! Someone in the crowd had a loud speaker and he was about to stand up on a stoop to begin the anti-Vietnam rhetoric that permeated the air and the voices of many students against the war in those days. Lily was against the war, but mostly because many of her friends from high school had been drafted and she hadn’t heard from them again.

She stood up and it happened. He hit her so hard that her hair fell from its knot. He didn’t mean to, of course. But he had been sprinting away from the protest so fast

that he had not expected this skinny brunette with upswept hair piled casually on her head looking like a just-got-out-of-bed-refreshed girl gathering herself and her things, to pop up so quickly and be his most interesting speed bump of the day.

“My God, are you okay?” he stammered while picking up the sheets of paper scattered about under their feet.

“No, yes, well, not really, why didn’t you—?”

“Look where I was going?” he suggested as he handed back Lily’s class notes taken earlier that day in English 101. He was reading some of her comments and was about to say how much he too had liked *Johnny Got His Gun* when Lily snatched everything out of his hands.

“Of course, look where you were going; I mean . . .” Lily said hastily stuffing them back into her twisted three-ring binder thinking this guy was a complete idiot for bending it, not to mention, squashing part of her grilled cheese.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—” He took a good look at this Twiggy-like beanpole in hip huggers, a mane of falling raven hair, and tight midriff shirt. What filled that out wasn’t a pair of twigs for sure, he thought. Nipples, perky and at attention underneath the canary yellow polished cotton, they were. And yet he stared straight into her eyes as he begged further forgiveness. “Please let me make it up to you, can I buy you a coffee and we can have a—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, really it is.”

“Are you sure you’re all right? Oh gosh I’m a—”

“I’m late, okay, I’ve got to go.” Lily saw a flash of green and amber in the eyes of a foot-taller-than-she-was guy with straw blonde hair that trailed almost down to his shoulders. As they stared at each other for a silent moment, she felt something pierce her. It felt penetratingly fervid pulling her toward him.

“Wait,” he called out to her as she pushed past him. “What’s your name?”

“Does it matter? Really, I’ve got to run.” But she couldn’t, almost as if some invisible heat coming off his tanned and muscular body refused to release her.

“It might,” he said, reaching out to hand her one last sheet of her notes that had blown up against his leg. He noticed her name in the upper right corner with the date of the class underneath. “Lily Adams, April 18, hmm. . . I think I like it.”

“Uhhh, yeah, me too . . . nice, I mean, thanks, I mean . . . bye” she rattled, trying to break free of his gaze. She felt so silly, so hyper-aware of herself and this stranger who seemed uncannily familiar. The space they were occupying had too much oxygen, suddenly. She felt giddy.

“It will,” he said.

“What will?” she asked, trying not to look back at those eyes one last time.

“You will matter, most definitely,” he said. “By the way, my name is Scott.” *Jerk*, is more likely, Lily thought, as she finally broke free. Dizziness be damned, a puff or two off a cigarette would take care of that. She stopped to light one and wound her hair back up in its convenient knot held together by a number two pencil. She was already 15 minutes late to English class.

What was it her mother had said once about bodies and geography? She couldn’t help thinking. She laughed to herself as she slipped into her seat in the back of the classroom and quietly arranged college-lined notepaper on the desk while flicking the ash off of her cigarette. What will Granny Flynn say, is what Lily really wondered, or Angelita, or Lola, for that matter, as she took her last drag of the day.

## Chapter Two: Discovery of Other Voices

“*Pues, mi cielo*, how much do you like him, really?” asked Lola.

“I don’t . . . not at all,” insisted Lily, but she was lying, and she knew it. She couldn’t shake that feeling of being possessed by . . . by . . . she didn’t know what to call it. The ladies on the wall were curious about the rosy flush worn on the face of their offspring that evening as she rushed by them.

“*Ay m’ija*, it looks like you do.” Lola kept after her.

“Well. He is awfully handsome, but so are a lot of the guys on campus, *abuela*.”

“Honey darlin’, he is almost as handsome as your grandpa Paul was that day we finally kissed and—” interjected Granny Flynn quite abruptly.

“*Pero* this one is not just another, *cómo se dice*, ‘guy’, is he Lily?” Lola had no problem interrupting Granny Flynn when Lola felt a point needed to be driven home. Lily could hear a “Well, I *never*!” being drowned out over by Lola’s “Is he Lily, *querida*”?

No he wasn’t, Lily couldn’t lie about that. And later after much coaxing from Scott and many evenings spent talking and smoking his precisely rolled joints in his lava-lamp lit studio apartment, Lily fell completely.

Kissing Scott was like drowning in a pool of exquisitely amorous perfume. He didn’t use cologne, his body made its own brand of essence of Scott: lemon, lime and cucumbers—fresh, clean and with a zest all his own. Scott fell too as he had that first day of bodies colliding on that grassy patch of campus casual life. Later, another

collision would have a more deleterious effect while walking point, one foggy morning, in the jungles of Vietnam, he stumbled. Unfortunately, the Saint Christopher medal that Lily had sent him to ward against evil was powerless that day, unlike the country itself. Stumbling seemed so harmless and yet when a stumble activates a trip wire, a pin is usually pulled. Subsequently, a grenade wired to a nearby tree stump tends to explode.

Scott felt the precision of the fragments tear him to shreds before he heard the explosion. The last thing he thought he heard was a baby crying. Lance Corporal Scott Madison had never held his daughter, but he'd been awed by the snapshot he carried. In it was a little droplet of a four month old baby girl embraced by her mother, whose smouldering exotic looks, even in a picture, still knocked him unsteady, just as the blast had knocked the medal from his body. Lily wore it still even to bed.

As time passed, whenever she was anxious about baby Alexis running too far in front of her on a street, or Alexis not paying attention when Lily warned the toddler not to touch a hot stove, or when Alexis ignored Lily as she explained the consequences to a rebellious teenager who liked staying out past midnight, or when Lily warned the young nubile of a girl that a particular young man might break her heart, that silver medallion's warmth created a rosy flush over Lily's neck and chest. The same flush Scott evoked in her during those early days of their courtship whenever he held her close.

Lily was always amazed how it was that Lola knew that Scott would be the one, before Lily did. Yet Lola never hinted that there would be any termination to the union of Scott and Lily. After all, little Alexis—named after Scott's mother—held such promise for their future. And Lily never expected the ladies in the hall to be fortune tellers, for it soon became real to her that they were actually guardians of the family's collective consciousness of a misremembered past so that Lily, and later, even Alexis

could know the future in all its sunlit brilliance. But, sadly, war makes heroes and Scott would always be a hero for Lily and Alexis, or at least that is how Lily remembered the day the Casualty Notification Officer arrived and the words that streamed out of his mouth, “killed in action . . . help to coordinate the arrival of your husband’s remains.” Just then, Lily didn’t want to think about that moment. Lily wanted to think about a series of earlier moments.

Sometimes, she ran them in her head in fast forward, often, coming across a particular moment of memory that was so infused with the sound of Scott’s voice, mellow, soothing—like the sound amber honey makes when its poured over fresh strawberries—that she would pause the visual stream and let the scene play in slow motion. Savouring each minute detail enabled even the re-creation of his touch: hot fingers, long and slender, sliding up and down her naked thigh:

“Your skin has its own electricity—I love the way it gives me so many little shocks,” Scott cooed. Lily marvelled at the beauty of his hands, they manipulated her flesh like an artist sculpting clay. Each set of veins on each of his hands marked their place in her recall. She had carefully memorized the maps imprinted by those blue thoroughfares that had marked their territory under the strength of his caresses in the dark.

“I love the way you shock me back into craving every crevice of your body,” Lily would respond. Then lips pressed against lips, against neck, against breast, against cunt, against cock, and back up to a cheek, a finger and there Lily would freeze frame. It was then that she wanted to cry out as she had in the act of coitus, but now this particular cry came from a cavernous depth of loss: more like a coyote howling for that one and only lifelong companion. Lily would then fast forward beyond that moment because no matter how much joy this act of remembering might give, such moments

often drowned her for days in the sorrowful depths of Scott's absence. In the early days, emptiness pervaded her being like the negative space that lived in the hundreds of pictures that stared back at her along the wainscoted oak hallway of the Adams home.

Over time (and after some nameless encounters), Lily had learned to edit scenes of those younger, innocent, headstrong, idyllic, passionate, and then painful years. At other times just reliving the moment that Scott's hands wandered on her tummy, swollen with the union of their bliss, helped her to get out of bed in the middle of the night when their daughter's cries insisted on placing lips to her mother's breast.

But Lily couldn't always dwell on such things for too long. She only wanted to remember how that baby girl had made such a good match. Scott would have been so proud of his daughter. . . if he'd only known that, eventually, Alexis would have an adorable toddler of a girl of her own to chase after. . . .but even that thought hurt too much to dwell on just now. Tomorrow, she'd think about that tomorrow as memories of the oak panelled hallway beckoned.

...

As long as Lily could recall her great-great grandmother Lola's 2 x 3 inch photograph had been peeling. Dolores noticed it when Lily was a teenager, but it wasn't anyone's fault. Lily always thought it was about the process of degeneration brought on by age (Lola was in her 60s when it was taken, but Lily assumed her to be more like 80) and possible lack of fixing when the original print was made. But later Lily learned it was just the way *bisabuela* Lola wanted it—that way she could hide her white hair, wrinkled face, plain skirt, and simple blouse that she wore. This breakdown was a fabrication of Lola's will, Lily was certain, rather than any specific chemical process. Funny, Lily thought, how the glass from this small seemingly insignificant photograph had also broken just like the one of Lola's daughter, Amadita. Dolores said



best to leave it that way so as to slow down the peeling process. Lily thought it would have been better to put the glass back on it to protect the photograph from further degeneration but she couldn't be sure and she never asked.

"Things are just the way they are," Lola said often. "Don't ask too many questions *niña*, the answers are not always what we would wish them to be."

In an earlier photograph (it too had been tiny but someone—probably Leonard as a favour to Dolores—had blown it up to an 8 x 10), Lola, at seventeen, had dramatic hair that had hung down past her waist, Dolores had said, but Lola preferred having it artfully arranged by her maid in layers of braids that looked sculpted directly into her head. Two combs carved out of silver and bone placed at right angles from each other into the swept up braids at the back of her neck topped off the effect of an upper class young woman affirming her place in society as one from a family of wealthy *hacendados* who ended up in Puebla City, Mexico. The photograph must have been a long exposure as many were in the earlier days of photography because it looked as if Lola had started to smile but thought better of holding it for well over two to three minutes and so it took on more of a Mona Lisa aura.

"I was told, *niñita*, that my likeness was similar to one of Goya's paintings of the *majas*. *La maja vestida*, of course, not *la maja desnuda*, *Ay Dios mío, no!*" Lola always made sure to clarify as the latter painting of the *maja* or very pretty naked woman at that time had practically ruined Goya's career depicting as it did a nude body showing actual pubic hair. He then painted a duplicate of the *maja* with clothes on.

Dolores had always insisted the colour of Lola's hair was more of a carrotty ginger for that is how the photograph appeared as if it had been hand tinted, and what Dolores believed, but Lola had immediately muttered a correction: "*no es verdad, chica, ella no sabe nada*"—it's not true, little one, she knows nothing. "It was closer

to the mealy chestnut *de mi caballo*, similar to the colour of a palomino,” Lola clarified to a younger Lily when Dolores was out of hearing range.

Lola appeared more alive in this pose. There was something reckless about it and considering it had been taken almost a hundred years ago give or take a decade here and there, that bracelet and the way she held one hand over it was striking. Later, Dolores had insisted she was going to replace the broken glass after the tiny picture had fallen off the wall. Lily was sure that Angelita had something to do with it, even though Dolores claimed she had bumped into it and knocked it down. Yet Lily remembered that the hallway had a thick wall-to-wall carpet, so how did the glass break? Lily tried to ask Angelita about it late one night, but both Amadita and Lola responded with an immediate admonishment of “*¡Cállate, hija!*” before Lily could complete her “*¿Qué pasó?*” What happened? Lily thought better of insisting on an answer. She had learned that if any of the inhabitants in the portrait gallery did not wish to answer Lily’s questions, even when she pressed them, the ladies would just stop talking for a period of days, weeks even. And they refused to be rushed about it.

For some reason the photographers of the ancestors in Lily’s family home had found the many images worth contemplating. She remembered reading somewhere that just to show something, anything, in the photographic view is to show that it is hidden. She remembered, too, how back in one of her college lit. courses, her professor had quoted Emile Zola: “You cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it.” So, Lily thought, wasn’t it through the photographs that she could actually see and reconcile her family’s past, and that of herself? Lily knew that the pictures had a reality for her in such a way that the people in her life didn’t. Lily also knew that the portraits of these women were pointing her toward evidence of a past that bore further scrutiny. Coupled with Dolores’s final words, Lily felt obsessed by what

she still had not uncovered. But one thing was sure, Lily found a world of beauty and security in the images and movements of this dynasty of women she had grown to hold dear—dearer to her than to those who had known them during their own lifetime—Lily was sure.

In that 8 x 10 portrait, Lily recalled how she had often thought of Lola as her very own sacred Madonna because she looked like an angel wearing long jet earrings and that bracelet made from gold with that distinctive Greek Key engraving. “It means devotion, continuation of life and symbolizes the bonds of love between the wearer and the giver. I should know *m’ija*, it was given to me by *mi mamá* and when Amadita was about to become a mother, I gave it to her and then when Angelita was—” Lola was about to tell Lily more about it one night, but then Dolores came home from work so Lily had to dash back quickly into her room to avoid a scolding for not completing her homework before bed time.

In fact, the entire bracelet had engraving all over it. That design was so distinctive, like the meandering of the river it supposedly represented. Again Lily couldn’t be sure and knew she must find it and why its connection to all these women mattered so much to Dolores in the end.

Lola had died not too long after Dolores was born, and Dolores’s stories about Lola always differed slightly from those that Lola told Lily. The same way the photo of the older Lola had differed from the photo of the precious and alluring Lola in her teens. The two women in the photographs couldn’t have appeared more unlike. “Lola was rather chubby and short, I think, but her marriage was arranged by contract. *Mi abuelo* was taller, of course, but he was hoping for someone a bit more petite, shall we say. Lola had a privileged education. She was tutored by a private governess. *Mi abuela* spoke fluent French and Latin and played the piano and sang like a nightingale.

Her father worked as the private secretary to the president of Mexico. All proper ladies had dowries and my great grandfather knew that she and her dowry were right for him,” Dolores always said.

“*¡Éso sí que no!*” Not on any account, she is wrong, Lily! I am telling you I was neither fat nor fluent in Latin. *Mamá* was always forcing the cook to make me extra snacks as I was quite skinny, and I spoke some French, *sí sí*, but Italian not Latin. *Mi padre* worked in the government, but not for the President directly, but he was in his confidence as a loyal advisor as they had known each other as children. The only thing she has right is that I was short. But my husband was only an inch taller.”

Lily was just beginning to understand this notion. Difference—how stories about the past and the past itself were often at variance with one another because every scene in each photograph on the wall told its own version. Curiously, Dolores always said, “It is very dangerous to draw from memory. We remember inaccurately and rarely retain the details.” So her tales about the past were like generic outlines, or lists of some general occurrences. However, when Lily listened to Dolores compared to the chronicles of family history as told by the photographs on the wall, a connection to an atavistic chain central to Lily’s individual identity was set in motion. What truth was it that had been represented to her by Dolores for so many years that now held such uncertainty? Many inconsistencies continued: Dolores told Lily that Granny Flynn lived in Oklahoma and that her father was a doctor and not a very good one if poor Granny Flynn was saddled with six babies. “I mean, what in the world was that man thinking not telling his little girl the facts of life, *qué hombre tan tonto* (what a stupid man).” Only from Granny Flynn did Lily learn the details about the swing and helping her father deliver babies. Only from Granny Flynn did Lily learn about where babies came from. This was after Granny Flynn had passed away, mind you. She wouldn’t

have thought of telling Lily any such details until she turned eleven at least! And when that day came Granny did.

“I will not let you be surprised and tricked like I was darlin’!” Granny had assured Lily one afternoon. “Your grandpa Paul and I had grown up together, his father was a merchant. He owned a general store in our hometown of Loco, Oklahoma where we’d moved. Mother and Dad opened a small apothecary after Dad had a fall. His horse stumbled and he got thrown off, broke his leg. He set the bone himself. He recovered, but Mother refused to let him ride too far out in his buggy anymore. Many of his patients came to him. And they had to pay real money not in hogs or pounds of potatoes. Besides there was a younger doctor in town by then and he took care of birthing the babies and making most of the house calls. Paul Adams and I played hide and seek together sometimes, with my friends Betsey and Rhoda. He was handsome even then. He must have been fourteen when I was twelve.”

“Did you love him right away, Granny?”

“Not really, honey, he was just fun and made me laugh so.”

“How?”

“Well . . . he told me that if he hid well enough that if I found him, he would buy me a soda, but if he found me, I would have to give him a kiss.”

“What kind of a kiss?”

“One that I wasn’t ready to give, I’m sure.” Lola smiled at this and the others who usually kept silent, giggled.

“Why was that funny?”

“Because he ended up having to buy me four sodas before he could win a kiss from me. Granny Flynn is smart, baby doll and so are you, aren’t you?” Lily stood back to look at the other photographs hanging higher up on the wall. There it was the

one of the Grandpa Paul and Granny Flynn when they were still courting, as she called it. Yes, Grandpa Paul was quite handsome in his single breasted suit with a fat tie. He had movie star good looks, a bit like Clark Gable actually, Lily thought. Paul's distinctively dark eyebrows grew unwaveringly across his brow accenting the depth of his eyes, "hazel and haunted" Granny said. In the photograph, Flynn's amber hair—"flamed, like clover honey, Paul always said the first time he saw me digging potatoes in our garden on a hot day after returning from a trip to Oklahoma City with his father to purchase more goods for their store,"—was piled high on her head underneath a straw hat.

"I never liked that hat, but Mother insisted I hide my hair as it was still wet, that particular picnic day." Granny Flynn's waist looked to be all of eighteen inches, "yes, darling, that was before all those babies!" This was a year before World War One. "Things seemed so simple then," she said.

Granny Flynn, at nineteen, looks so serious, staring straight at the camera as if she was ready to take the world head on with both hands. "I thought I loved him and had no idea what was going to happen." There is no sign of affection between them at all. They don't even look like they are in love. Grandpa Paul stares away from Granny Flynn off in the distance as if he wishes he could be somewhere else, "I didn't know what I wanted then, but my father insisted I marry, insisted, I have children, insisted I do what he—"

"Grandpa Paul, is that you, I can't believe it, you never say anything" said Lily in shock, and that was the last time he ever did.

"Typical," smirked Granny Flynn, "and he never said much to any of us, *hmpf*. He certainly did not want those children. Nor would he do anything about trying to stop making them. Heavens, I didn't even know what was causing my tummy to swell for

nine months until the second time it happened. It never occurred to me when I was awakened in the middle of night by penetration of his . . . his . . . member, that my babies were the end result. Well I told him no more after number—”

“Granny, what’s a member?”

“Why, his penis, dear.”

Lily, still feeling quite stunned over Granny’s revelation that a penis

“Ewww.” Lily remembered seeing one once when her favourite cousin Christopher came over to spend the night when they were both four and shared a bath together. Lily found his “cute little pecker,” as Dolores referred to it, interesting and sad looking all shrivelled up. In the morning when they both ran to use the potty his pyjama bottom had fallen a bit and his penis stood out straight like a pencil. Pencils always reminded her of that protuberance as a result, however she assumed a penis was strictly for peeing. Then she recalled how one of her friends on the play yard once had told her to “fuck” herself when she tried to take a ball back from him that he had swiped right out from under her nose. As a consequence she came home to ask Dolores what fuck meant and without blinking an eye Dolores said, as if she were reciting a recipe from memory, “Lily that’s just a bad word for *intercourse* between human beings, one might say sexual discourse is even a better phrase. That young man at your school is just ignorant of the word’s meaning, dear. You may look it up in the dictionary, if you wish for more detail, however.” Lily meant to, but forgot about it besides the dictionary was awfully heavy and Lily was too embarrassed to ask Dolores for help.

had such multiple uses, looked up at her serene face as she explained further: “Now, darling, you might as well understand that a penis placed inside a vagina makes a baby.” Suddenly, Lily recalled that sometime later she had read in the dictionary that

intercourse implied “sexual relations.” But there were no details as to sexual positions required, and Lily didn’t want to think about that, not yet.

“Ewww ewww ewww, no, Granny,” Lily said, “ my girlfriend in school last year, Ana Maria, told me that when you kiss on the lips and use your tongue that sharing your saliva causes your germs to mix and then that germ lodges in your tummy and the baby grows from that little germ, at least that is what her mother told her.” All Lily could hear was raucous laughter from most of the people in the photographs on the wall. Some of them guffawed, some of them just snickered. Thankfully, Dolores snored. It was only when the snoring stopped that Lily dashed back to bed.

“Lily, I understand the confusion dear, but please understand, that little friend of yours was purposely misguided, just as my parents misguided me. And I won’t have it, my dear, not at all. Blast you Paul!”

“Granny, why are you so mad at him?”

“He didn’t do his job, darlin’, he could not keep a job, and when he’d drink, he would get so ill that he’d throw up for days and then he was useless—useless as a father and as a husband. God forgive him.”

Lily noticed that Grandpa Paul’s eyes actually moved momentarily looking over at Granny Flynn in the picture when she said “God forgive him.” That was the picture where she was sitting next to him, but then Lily looked away for a moment and looked back and Paul did not appear to have moved, so perhaps Lily thought she’d imagined it. But that picture wasn’t the one Granny Flynn talked in anyhow. The one of Granny Flynn that usually talked to Lily was the one where Granny was sitting on Dolores’s antique French sofa, the one she said was in the style of a king named Louis the XVI (Lily usually confused King Louis XIV with XVI, but no matter). Lily only knew that this settee, as Dolores called it, was stuffed with horsehair and itchy. Lily wasn’t



allowed to sit on it, or the side chairs unless guests came to visit. That was also the time that Dolores would turn on the elaborately decorated crystal lamps that sat on the inlay side tables on each side of the settee. Dolores usually bragged how these antiques came with her to Los Angeles when her parents left Mexico to escape the revolution. Lily usually forgot which one, there were so many.

In this portrait, those lamps are lit and Granny looks like a Southern belle in the early eve of an accomplished life, “Your grandpa had married some silly, much younger, and naive waitress by this time—thanks my lucky stars—of course, he died shortly after that . . . *hmpf*.” Granny Flynn always expelled extra air from pursed lips when she was upset or frustrated. Lily loved the sound it made when Granny Flynn was still alive and that sound became even more distinctive after she died. If Lily was standing right in front of her photograph when she made that *hmpf* sound, Lily could feel her breath right on her chin. Later as Lily grew she felt it on her neck and then her chest. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

...

Granny’s face tilts up slightly looking camera left. Her eyes gaze beyond a light source that washes her skin with a youthful glow. Her salt and pepper short hair frames her face with curls that are swept away high off her forehead and tucked behind her ears. She wears a gold necklace with a clasp that resembles fingers grasping the other end of it and matching earrings. Her ample bosom is draped by a soft knit blouse with a draped neckline. She wears a gold bangle on her left arm and a gold watch on the right. Her hands rest on a lace handkerchief decorated with roses. “It took me many weeks to sew that hanky and embroider the roses. Your daddy insisted I pose with it. He wanted me to look like a lady who never worked a day in her life. I think he was trying to provide me with a fantasy portrait—what my life might have been . . .,” said

Granny Flynn letting her voice trail off.

Dolores had always claimed that Granny Flynn never knew what hit her when she got married and all those children came, but that she'd really really wanted all six of those beautiful babies she'd had. And that she was a very modest woman. Granny clarified that she'd actually lost a baby in between one and two and then she attempted to rid herself of number six.

"When I found out that your great uncle Jerry was on the way, I begged one of the pharmacists working for my father to please give me something, anything, an elixir of some sort to help me miscarry. He did and then promised to keep my confidence. He felt so sorry for me and knew Paul couldn't ever keep a job for very long."

"But Granny, great uncle Jerry lives in New Mexico, doesn't he?"

"Yes, honey, all that disgusting drink did was give me diarrhoea. In fact, I was sick for several days after ingesting that nasty brown stuff, and then, of course, I felt so guilty that I might have harmed my baby. I prayed on my knees every night so that God would forgive me." Funny that this last baby, Uncle Jerry, grew up to be the highway commissioner of New Mexico.

Leonard was boy number one after his sister Virginia May. Her middle name for the month she was born, her first name for the state her grandmother had grown up in. "Well, your daddy, Leonard, was a little dickens," Granny would say. Lily figured out that "little dickens" or sometimes Granny said "Your daddy scared the dickens out of me" was her nice way of calling him a little devil, as Lily recalled his habit of telling her those scary stories at bedtime.

"That little baby boy disappeared out of his bed at 1 o'clock in the morning when he was barely two years-old. We were visiting my brother in the town of Duncan. We'd gone there by train and your daddy was fascinated by the ride and the sound of

the engine. He would imitate the sound, *choo choo*, one of his first words. Anyway, I was frantic! When I found out he was missing I ran thirteen blocks toward the train station because I knew he liked watching them so much. Turned out that a coloured boy saw Leonard wandering alone on the main road in his night gown and scooped him up to comfort the baby from his crying. The boy left Leonard with some neighbours asking them to ‘Puhlease Missuhs, take care this little one for me’. So they bathed him and put him to sleep certain he was from a good family because of all the hand embroidery on his cotton nightshirt. Then they told the station master if anyone came looking for the little one, they had him safe and sound. What I didn’t realize was that I only had on a very thin nightgown myself and that caused quite a sensation in Duncan that next day, I can tell you darlin, a practically almost naked mother breaking into a dead run down the main street, late at night, imagine!

“Apparently, little Leonard had actually stepped onto a train when it began to pull out of the station and he had fallen out just as abruptly. He was quite a dirty mess and that’s why this couple had to bathe him even though he cried his eyes out. His love of trains never ceased.” Lily had faint memories of Daddy driving her over to the Glendale train station where they would watch the 4.25 arrive and the 5.05 depart. What excited them both was the deafening noise and the clanging of the bell as the announcement of the train’s arrival and departure destinations.

There were memories of visits to Griffith Park and Travel Town where all the antique trains were kept. There Leonard allowed Lily to climb over each train car to her heart’s content. Dolores preferred that Lily didn’t dirty the meticulously detailed organza dresses Granny Flynn sewed and embroidered with tiny flowers for her, but Leonard didn’t care. He wanted Lily to run freely around the park and if she wanted to climb and get dirty, it was just fine with him. It wasn’t about the dress, it was about not

curtailing Lily's passion to roam, but encouraging it just as he had done as teenager in the 1930's when he'd hopped a freight train from Oklahoma City to Hollywood to find a better life. And he did—sneaking on to movie sets as a runner for the different photographers who needed someone to carry their equipment, get them coffee, help them when printing their contact sheets. Of course his good looks didn't hurt. He did double work a few times for a famous movie actor named Tyrone Power, but Leonard much preferred being behind the camera than in front of it.

Following Leonard's departure, Dolores pretended like he'd never existed, but Lily knew that he had. There were very few photographs of him left hanging or on table tops, and there was an outline of one that used to be visible on the wall near Granny Flynn. Lily recalled that it was what Leonard called a double exposure and it had been her favourite. It captured Dolores and Leonard standing on either side of a fence with hills in the background. Each looks in opposite directions. He grasps a chain linked fence that sits on top of a concrete barrier with his right hand as he puffs on his signature pipe. His shirt with flap pockets on either side is unbuttoned exposing a bit of his t-shirt. Dolores is wearing a light soft linen dress with Juliette sleeves bolstered by small shoulder pads making her shoulders seem broader than they are. The folds of fresh-pressed linen soften the outlines of her breasts. Around her neck is a large gold choker of squared chain links intertwined with coral. Lily remembered that coral necklace as salmon in colour, because once when she played with it as a child and the strand broke, Lily had to scurry to gather all the pieces up from the floor before her cat Pancho thought they were play toys. Then she put the necklace parts back in Dolores's drawer and pretended ignorance when Dolores asked about it.

Dolores is resting her right arm against the concrete barrier portion of the fence. Leonard's face appears hauntingly inside of Dolores's face. Or perhaps he lives within

hers, but what is unusual is that Dolores face is twice the size of Leonard's. Did he plan it that way? He must have as he was far too professional for this photograph to be a mistake, unlike their marriage. Taking this photograph must have been Leonard's way of accepting the world as his camera recorded it. And yet their marriage proved that they, or perhaps just he, could not accept it as it looks in this romantic moment: each inhabiting the other's thoughts as if one could not live without the other. So where in this snap of the shutter moment does the truth lie? Then again what is the truth? Lily considered all the voices in her mother's home that provided a map for her to manoeuvre through her younger years—weren't they then part of this elusive truth?

Weeks after Dolores's death, Lily found the photo again crumpled in an old yellowing envelope. But the bracelet still eluded her.

### Chapter Three: Otherness and Speaking

“Angelita?” sixteen-year-old Lily called out one night.

They hadn’t spoken in a while, as Lola and Amadita usually did most of the talking. Sometimes, Granny Flynn bit back at them, telling them to “Hush!” But they paid her no mind as the ladies loved to talk over each other and Angelita—and since Angelita spoke only when she had something really important to say. When Angelita did speak, the others listened.

On these nights when young Lily couldn’t sleep, or her legs itched, a red rash would appear all over her shins, calves, and thighs—a skin condition, a type of allergy, said the doctor. Lily would scratch and scratch herself, often sitting down in the bathtub to let the needle shower do some of the relief scratching for her. Dolores had told her that heat would only make it worse, but Lily did not listen. Her doctor prescribed creams and ointments, merely palliatives, never remedies. Stress, the doctor said, could bring it on.

Dolores often wondered what her teenage daughter had to be stressed about. “What does she have to worry about, for goodness sakes, she just has a lot of homework and she has work after school in a small bakery,” she’d say. But it was not the job and not school, it was boys. And keeping herself unstained created nervousness because Lily didn’t want to disappoint her mother. And most of the boys always tried

in one way or another to get into her pants. This all preyed on her mind because after all, in high school, if you weren't a virgin, those same gossipy girls who followed her from middle school would grab the usual illegal smokes in the bathroom and quickly spread the word as to whose hymen was intact and whose wasn't. Although Lily's still was, unlike some of the other girls whose were not and who were often called whores behind their backs—they very much liked to perpetuate rumors that Lily was one also. Teenage girls enjoyed being mean to each other and who knows why, they just do, Lily thought. Perhaps it was Lily's sultry appearance and the way boys were drawn to her, but Lily never figured it out. Her mother suggested jealousy as the reason.

“But mom, they all treat me so nicely, to my face.”

“Yes, dear, to your face, but behind it? *Ay m'ija*, beauty is a curse and blessing, we should know,” Dolores said with hands thrown up in the air. Many of the pretty ladies inhabiting the picture frames in the hall all nodded their assent at Dolores's comment. She couldn't see them as she had her back to them, but Lily could. She tried not to laugh. But Lily did chuckle to herself thinking about how some of the boys she occasionally dated discovered rather quickly how chaste she was. When wandering hands tried to travel up her blouse, or down the waistband of her skirt or bellbottoms, Lily had no problem slugging the offender. Word quickly spread around the boys' bathrooms to watch her right hook. Boys knew to keep their hands still unless invited to be otherwise. This was another secret Lily kept from Dolores. And remembering such scenes upset Lily, creating more obsessive scratching on itchy nights.

And yet the word *sinvergüenza* spoken by Amadita was usually heard in conjunction with Arturo's name, but even that wasn't spoken often. As a child Lily didn't understand what scoundrel meant. And no one on the walls would explain other

than to say he was a bad boy, and she didn't care enough to bother looking it up in the dictionary. But now, she asked Angelita, why she didn't call him that, but simply "*hermano*," brother, and not much more. Lily could tell the mere mention of his name brought Angelita sadness and long pauses. Arturo's portrait was high up in the corner, with spider webs covering it. It looked as if it had a fog over it. It bothered Lily that her mother never cleaned around that corner of the hallway so one day Lily reached up with a broom and batted all the tiny particles hanging in the air away. Several of the nearby portraits looked as if they all took a cleansing breath when that happened. It was a subtle in-and-out motion, and Lily could almost feel the gratification in it, but when she looked up again, all was still.

"Why do you never speak about Arturo, *tía* Angie?" Lily pressed on. There was only that one photograph of him. As a little girl it was hard for Lily to see, but now that she was five-six, and the dust bunnies were gone, she could take a better look. She wasn't sure why but she decided to stare at Arturo during the wee hours of this particular night of itchiness. Lily then noticed that the wire rim glasses and handlebar moustache enhanced his boyish features rather than present the sombre and mature appearance of a typical full-face photograph taken in the previous century. Perhaps these "props," Lily thought, were at the suggestion of the photographer.

"He died too young, *niña*, too young," Angelita said.

"What happened, *tía*?" Lily asked calmly, for she knew if she pushed too hard Angelita would not respond.

"After the kidnapping he was never the same again, and then the drinking—"

"Kidnapping, what kidnapping? Who, I mean, why would—"

"Too many questions." Angelita always said this when she didn't want to



answer. Lily knew that she had to tread lightly or else this moment would be lost. If Angelita's portrait returned to its two-dimensional nature, then Lily knew a long hiatus of quiet would follow. And Lily hated that because she especially appreciated Angelita's stories. As she spoke, Lily could watch them unfold before her as if the portrait were a projector and Angelita the projectionist. The images presented lived and breathed before her.

"Who kidnapped him?" Lily asked again.

"Bad men. They were called *Los Dorados* because they only stole gold. *Papá* called them *hijos de puta*—" Lily gasped because she knew that motherfuckers was not a word Dolores would ever tolerate, much less anyone else on this wall.

"*Hija*," Amadita shouted, "what are you saying, ladies do not say such things and remember that you are—"

"*¡Dejela!*" commanded Lola.

"They had heard about *papá* having chests of gold coins buried in our family cemetery. But they didn't know that he had many chests buried all over the hacienda, but not in the cemetery. So when they found Arturo passed out drunk on top of *papá Toño's* grave—" Amadita ignored her mother's command to stop interrupting Angelita. But then Lola interrupted her.

"He adored his *abuelo*, who spoiled him to death. Arturo was going to accomplish greatness, *papá Toño* always said when Arturo was a baby. Julián was going to pass down the running of the hacienda, the grazing land for the 600 head of cattle, the family distillery in Atlixco along with the two grocery stores, a rental home on the corner nearby, and an alley where there was our pasta factory. But Julián did not want to believe that Arturo could never— . . ." Lola's voice trailed off and both she

and Amadita and even Angelita all sucked in a deep breath.

“Arturo was never the same,” continued Angelita, “after *papá*’s men rescued him from their cave, their *cueva de ladrones*. After forcing Arturo to write a letter to *papá* in order to ransom his life—valued at 4,000 pesos worth of gold—those *ladrones* stripped him naked, buried him up to his neck, and threatened to leave him in the forest for the wolves that prowled there until *papá*’s men found them, ambushed them, and cut all of their throats in the dead of night.” Lily saw the grisly-looking *bandidos* unshaven, chewing *cigarros* sticking out of the sides of their sleazy mouths. The two of them, flashing knives, were laughing and gashing poor Arturo’s face and neck, as he cried and pleaded to be set free. They were sure that *papá* would pay as others had in the past. Arturo’s head was bleeding and his blackened and purple left eye was swollen shut from being punched repeatedly. In the dim torchlight, Lily could see *Julián*’s *rancheros* slice two necks swiftly and silently. The picture fell away.

“*No más m’ija*, I can’t . . . it is too much, they did more damage to his body and his spirit than I can bear to remember.” She stopped to take a deep breath, “. . . you know, I cannot cry.” Angelita determined to hold back tears.

Lily knew this was true, that neither Angelita nor any of the portraits could afford a drop of moisture, for fear of picture deterioration and, even worse, loss of voice.

“Please Angelita, please don’t stop.” Lily hated it when Angelita clammed up. She just wanted a little more. “Why did he die so young, and why . . . ?”

“*Drogas* and gambling debts, and when that girl died—”

“Girl, you mean my official *abuela*, what do you mean, girl?” Lily asked impatiently.

“Ask your mother, *m’ija*!” interrupted Amadita. Angelita immediately stopped

speaking.

“I *have* asked Mom and she tells me the same story every time, you’ve heard it! I am asking *tía* and I want to know more, please, Angelita?” Lily begged. No answer. “Angelita?” No answer.

“¡*Todavía NO!*” cried Amadita.

“He loved her, *mamá*” said Angelita quickly. “What is wrong with sharing that with Lily, just like I loved—”

“¡*Callate inmediatamente, hija! ¿Me entiendes?*” Amadita’s voice was louder than Lily ever recalled it being.

“No!,” said Angelita with the same force she once used with *papá Toño*. But no one died this time, since all of them had already.

Stopping everything was Dolores suddenly yelling at Lily as she walked down the hall because it was way past one o’clock in the morning.

“Lily, what the heck are you doing standing here in the middle of the night, get to bed! You know you’re not supposed to watch TV this late. Off to bed,” Dolores motioned with her hands while stifling a yawn. Lily hesitated for a moment, then she dashed back into her room. She thought she had noticed Arturo yawning out of the corner of her eye, until the order “¡*Ándale!*” from Dolores sent Lily scurrying.

Often, when Dolores claimed she’d heard Lily talking to someone late at night, Lily would say she’d been watching the *Million Dollar Movie* where the same movie would repeat nightly for a whole week and three or four times more on the weekends. This was a way, Lily insisted, that she could distract herself from “the itches” (as she sometimes called her condition) and ultimately fall asleep. Dolores didn’t like it, but was often too tired to dispute it because Lily was never late for school in the morning no matter how late she had stayed up at night. Even as a little girl, Lily would pre-

dress for school prior to falling asleep. When Lily was in grade school, Dolores would walk into her bedroom late at night to check on Lily and there'd she be, stretched out on top of the covers fast asleep in her school uniform with even her socks and tennis shoes on, laced up and ready to go. Lily was always prepared, Dolores thought, smiling proudly as she'd kiss her little girl goodnight.

...

Lily had never felt so unprepared in her life. Being anywhere near her childhood home always created conflict for her. When Dolores first had to be moved, Lily had considered selling it. But that only lasted for about a minute. Dolores wouldn't hear of it. Even when her mind wandered, lost in the canyons of its own dimming memory, she remembered owning a home that provided shelter to her life, its past, and its treasures.

"Where is my house?" she would call out. "Why aren't I in it?"

"Mom, it's fine. The house is there. Don't worry," Lily assured her.

"Leave it alone. Leave them alone!" Dolores would repeat over and over. Lily didn't have to ask who "them" was, for she knew. Yet Dolores's comment surprised her, because never during her years in the house did Lily and Dolores discuss what the portraits had shared. Lily just assumed that Dolores had no knowledge that those late-night talks in the hall ever happened. Lily also assumed that the portraits never spoke directly to Dolores. So how was it that Dolores referred to them as a recognizable collective noun? Lily simply excused the ramblings as those of a demented old woman; perhaps Dolores's "them" was just her catch all phrase for everything in the house. Although the money from a house sale would have helped, Dolores's objections and hysteria could not be ignored so Lily had no choice but to wait. She had waited for

more than a year and a half while Dolores hovered in a world of was and is. Then Dolores was gone. And there was the house and the hall and so many possible voices waiting also.

Walking back into the old house, which had been closed up for some time, and inhaling its musty smell of disuse made her cry. It was wrenching to see her mother cry so hard at being forced to leave. Dolores had retreated into her world in that house so deeply that all the various caretakers Lily had hired through the final five years of her mother's life could not withstand the old woman's evolving constantly erratic behaviour. Dolores refused to wear any clothes or wash, and caretakers had to coax her to climb down off the kitchen counter where she would sit nude, eating a tortilla dripping with butter that she had warmed on the stove. For a short time, Lily had the stove handles removed because Dolores would leave them on and gas escaped throughout the house. Caretakers had to use pliers to turn the flame on and off until the last one complained about the inconvenience. Thankfully, Dolores was not a smoker, but she always scared the caretakers away. So Lily had no choice but to move her to a nursing home.

...

6234 Fountain Avenue was not a large house, and even smaller than Lily remembered: only one storey, a bungalow-style revival with two bedrooms and two and a half baths, a formal dining room, hardwood floors except in the hallway, a spacious living room and an unadorned kitchen with the same leaky faucet, Lily remembered, that could never be fixed properly. Dolores resented it when Lily tried to make repairs on any part of the house, as if Lily was insulting Dolores for not keeping up the house the way it should have been. As Lily closed the door behind her she could

see that on every inch of wall space, in every corner, at every turn, and along the great hall between Dolores's bedroom and Lily's childhood bedroom—the portraits hung. Funny, Lily could never figure out why the builders created such a long hallway between the two bedrooms. More like a world apart than some twelve feet apart. The third bedroom that served as Granny Flynn's for too short a time had actually been a den. This became the room Dolores mostly inhabited in her later years. She endlessly watched TV (news, telenovelas, and any show about animals) and ate her meals in there, and slept on the sofa. Too much trouble to walk back to her own room, or to the bathroom as her balance became more impaired with arthritis and Alzheimer's.

First, Lily opened the windows in the kitchen. One latch was broken, but she was able to push up the old double-hung window by the breakfast table. Then she opened the sliding glass doors to the patio in the back and walked outside. The gardener kept the lawn mowed, and Lily could smell the freshly mowed grass, but most of Dolores's flower garden had died. Only a few gazanias survived. The trimmed Cyprus trees still lined the back fence affording privacy from the neighbours on the other side of the alley that ran behind the house. But the old swing set left over from the days when Lily and, temporarily, Alexis lived there temporarily had rusted over. Dolores would never let Lily have it dismantled.

"She might want to come back and use it," Dolores had said in one of her few vivid moments.

"Mom, she is twenty-five years-old and married with her own family. I doubt it."

"Leave well enough alone, *m'ija*, *ándale*," Dolores hissed. She was still trying to rush Lily off. And soon enough Alzheimer's robbed her of a voice and any memory that Lily, Alexis, or baby Lola were connected to her in any way. But never mind that,

Lily thought, as she tried to force the window open in her old bedroom. It had been painted shut a long time ago, but after some budging, banging, and shoving it gave way. As the dust on the sill flew in her face, she sneezed.

“¡*Salud!*” said a voice Lily had not heard in some time.

Lily froze. She turned toward the hall. She had purposely run through it so as not to have to see them. She had refused to hear them after Scott’s death. She had imposed silence upon them that day while in a rage and they had not spoken since.

...

Lily had arrived at the house that day so long ago shouting through blinding tears after the officers had dropped the bomb shattering Lily’s newly married, new-mother world.

“You should have warned me . . . all of you!”

“*Hija*,” said Amadita, “how could we?”

“What do you mean ‘*how could we*’? You have the power to tell me—”

“Honey darlin’, we don’t have the power to—” Granny Flynn began.

“*Yes . . . you do!*” Lily had collapsed on the floor, tears engulfing her like a waterfall of anguish. “You’re the ones who told me it . . . we . . . would be all right!” Lily was shrieking now. Scott’s absence and the hole it opened up within her was just beginning to cut itself deep into her being, coupled with the reality that he was never coming home again. She pushed it away and continued wailing. Dolores was at work and Lily had not alerted her yet. She wanted to slash at the portraits, but a gripping agony paralyzed her arms. All she could do was collapse into a pile of sobs on the carpet as the portraits looked down on her.

“You knew . . . you all knew . . . God damn you all . . .” Lily pounded the rug.

“We know the past, *ángel*, our past, your past, not necessarily the—,” Lola tried to continue.

“Noooo. . . stop talking . . . I should have never listened to you—”

“*Niña*, the pain will recede one day, we promise you. Alexis needs you,” said Angelita.

“You know what . . . I want you all to do . . . is shut up, just shut up!” Lily commanded as she stumbled over herself to get up and wipe her now red and puffy eyes.

A collective intake of breath came fast from the portraits and then . . . nothing further. Lily hurried out of the house as it was time to collect Alexis from the sitter. And to call Dolores and unload her devastating news.

...

That terrible day was a memory that had never quite faded, although the numbness that it acquired over the decades made it possible for her now to stand in the hallway and inquire.

“Who was that?” Lily thought it sounded like Lola but it had been so long.

Silence. Lily walked up and down the long hall. A walk she had made thousands of times on her lifelong journey down the corridor of time. And now it seemed an eternity had elapsed as she stood there. Silence still. The dust was quite thick on some of the frames. Perhaps if I clean them off, Lily thought. Perhaps. Or has it been too long? Might as well, she figured. In the laundry room, she found rags and spray bottles of glass cleaner and furniture polish, so many in fact that she finally realized that the different caretakers had never really cleaned the place, and certainly not the pictures in the hall.



Methodically, Lily wiped away the years of dirt and decay. First, she carefully wiped off the frame and the glass on Granny Flynn's portrait. Then came Lola's youthful portrait, then Amadita's, then Angelita's teenaged one, and then a palpable sigh escaped from Lola's older miniature portrait, the one that looked as if it still was peeling, but it wasn't. It had always been small and insignificant in size, but the sound coming from it at the moment was not.

“¿Niña, cómo estás?” Lola asked softly.

“Lola, my God, uhm....I'm fine, I guess . . . I mean—”

“Your *mamá* is with God now, *querida*.” The others chimed in, “¡gracias a Dios!” making the sign of the cross as they said it, touching their foreheads and their hearts.

“We have missed you, baby girl,” said Granny Flynn. Lily was amused by this as she was well into middle age and no one's baby girl any more, with the exception of these women: her kin, her blood.

“I have missed you, but I couldn't help it—”

“No explanations needed, nor required,” said Granny Flynn in her perennial Southern belle tone.

“No, all that matters is that we are here now *juntas*,” agreed Amadita.

“Together again,” said Lily. All of the voices concurred in assent. Curious, how none of the portraits had aged or contained even one added crinkle, not even any added yellowing. After so many years, Lily expected some sign of age or change in the pictures, but other than the dust she had removed there was none.

“No doubt you have questions, Lily, don't you, *mi amor*?” said Lola's eight-by-ten portrait, wearing the bracelet Lily could still not locate.

“Yes, I do. Mother said something about that bracelet, Lola—”

“I’m sure she did, *m’ija*.”

“I haven’t been able to find it, Lola, the one you wear there on your wrist.”

“What about it?”

“Where is it?”

“That depends, *hija*, on how much you are prepared to learn to find it,” said Lola with her enigmatic smile. Her voice sounded calmer and more sedate than in the old days when Lily was a child. Lily wondered why, but her thoughts were interrupted quite suddenly.

“It is now my turn,” pronounced Angelita.

“Are you sure, Angelita?” asked Amadita. Almost all of the voices, almost all of her relations on the wall had spoken now. Lily was about to say something, but thought better of it as she heard Angelita speak out.

“*Mamá*, the time has come” said Angelita.

“What do you mean, *tía* Angie?” Lily asked.

“That bracelet you refer to was given to me by—”

“I gave it to her mother and she passed it down to Angelita, and—” interrupted Lola.

“Yes, I remember you telling me that when I was a child, but where—”

“He took it with him. *Papá* made sure of it,” Angelita continued as if she had not heard Lily or anyone else for that matter. “There was nothing anyone could have done to keep us apart, especially after Arturo died, except God himself—”

“Angelita, *¿entiendes lo que estás diciendo?*” interjected Amadita. “Ay *m’ija*, Dolores has barely left us and it will be some time before she can speak through her portrait.”

A black and white portrait of Dolores sitting on the same antique sofa Granny

Flynn had been photographed sitting on had been shot by Leonard. In the picture, Dolores sits in the foreground in a strapless evening gown. “It was gold lame and I made it,” she had announced proudly when Lily was much younger. A green scarf—“I made that too,” Dolores would remind Lily—is draped around her midriff, having fallen, leaving her shoulders bare. It lies in the crook of each bent arm. One hand rests upon the other, as if she is about to applaud someone or something. Her wedding ring is a band set against another with a stone, a diamond, maybe. Large earrings, gold flowers, adorn the elegance of her swept-back chignon. Leonard is reflected in an elaborately carved wood and gold accented mirror (which now hangs in Lily’s apartment bedroom) behind her. His face is right next to the lens of his view camera. A scarf is draped over his neck. He squeezes the shutter button. A barrel spot light hovers above Dolores, showering light upon her chest and naked shoulders. Smooth, sleek, unequivocally soft. This image is Leonard’s self-portrait of their marriage. A photo of himself shooting a portrait of Dolores on this Louis XVI Neoclassical French furniture. It might appear in *Vanity Fair* or *Vogue*, but it doesn’t. It looks like something out of a film noir still photo, but it isn’t. Dolores had told a younger Lily that it was their Christmas card photo. They look so refined. They are still very much in love in this still-life moment. This is early in their marriage. Since the portrait hung in Dolores’s bedroom right next to her dressing table, Lily had not looked at it for a long time. She could barely bring herself to enter that room or look at the picture even now . . . especially now, so soon after her mother’s death. At this time, however, Lily was more interested in how much time must pass before Dolores might be able to speak to her, or if she ever would be able to.

“How long?” asked Lily of not just one of the portraits but of every one hanging in the hallway.

“Honey pie, sometimes it’s just best to wait and see, do you understand?” said Granny Flynn.

“Sí, she is right Lily, *sólo Dios sabe*, each departed soul takes the time God gives it to find a voice. And only after that God-given time are we allowed to speak to our existence, and then only to those worthy,” said Lola. Lily never wondered why she had been considered worthy; even now, it had not occurred to her. She had just accepted that these women, as they had presented themselves, and as they were doing now, simply were part of the world that she inhabited, a world that never offered rational reasons for the magical aspects of such a gift. Lily had been grateful, for their early presence. But as with all things supernatural, their existence in her life brought its prescient joys—and unprepared heartbreak. No matter. She must press on with her questions, because she felt sure that now they would speak without the old hesitations as in the past.

“Mom’s last words were something about Lola’s portrait and the bracelet, what did she mean?”

“Let me begin,” said Angelita, “*mi amor*, by telling you about the man whom I loved, the man who swept me away. The force of him was stronger than I could resist. Arturo also fell in love with a girl who *papá* did not approve of. This all happened at about the same time and well, that made *papá furioso . . .*”

“Angelita, “ interrupted Amadita, “your *papá* wanted the best for you and for Arturo, even though he was already lost to us . . . how could he have known that—”

“*Mamá basta*, not another word!” screamed Angelita.

“That’s tellin’ her, darlin’, ” urged Granny Flynn. She and Amadita had always been a bit testy with each other on that wall. Lily had always found it more amusing than anything else, and she loved the way Granny Flynn just spoke up in Angelita’s

defence when she felt like it. “Listen sweetie doll, I suggest you grab a seat and maybe a coffee or somethin’.” Granny Flynn was always the sensible one.

Lily wandered back into her room to find one. She then walked into the kitchen to see if there was any coffee. Instant, ugh, only instant. Dolores liked it, probably because it didn’t take any time to prepare. Dolores had always been in such a hurry to get to work at that restaurant and never had time for breakfast. She had run a food service establishment, but had hardly eaten proper meals herself. She was too busy making Lily’s breakfast before school and later making Alexis’s breakfast when she babysat. So long ago.

Lily boiled some water and stirred a couple of teaspoons of old Nescafe into it. At least there weren’t any cobwebs in it. Sugar should help stave off the bitterness. Yes, there was sugar in the cupboard still, cubes of it. Lily walked back into the hall, positioned her chair in front of Angelita, and thought, as she took a sip of the instant brew, looking up at her *tía*, this is going to take a while.

#### Chapter Four: Revelation of Past Narratives

“He came in search of buried treasure, and instead, he found me” Angelita began.

“What do you mean treas—”

“¡Cállate! . . . hush,” shushed Amadita, Lola, and even Granny Flynn, each of them with index fingers positioned at their lips signalling *silencio*.

“*Es su turno, no la interrumpas*” said Lola. Once Angelita was ready to tell her truth, the ladies on the wall knew there would be no stopping her—it was her time—no interruptions allowed. Lily sat perfectly still and listened as Angelita’s voice continued with purpose.

“His name was Tom Willis, at other times just Tommy, but to me he was *mi Tomás* . . .” Angelita paused as if to swallow back an emotion that she had long put aside and now stood to overtake her in a wave of repressed memory. Lily felt it too and both she and Angelita took in the breath of it simultaneously. Angelita was finally sharing this memory, Lily thought, or rather a re-memory, not of a parallel reality, but of an original event and together all the most vocal ladies on the wall were remembering it too. And more importantly some of them had actually lived it with Angelita.

What will this act of remembering bring? Lily wondered. Why is it so

frightening for these woman whose voices, for as long as Lily could recall, had told Angelita to keep silent, or to wait, or to *cállate*, simply, just shut up. Lily at long last felt for the first time that she was considered ready to be privy to the truth of the past not as Dolores had always recalled it or wanted it recalled, but as Angelita lived, and inhaled it. And so Lily waited to exhale just a second or two so as not to disturb the air in the room that was at stand still until Angelita continued.

“His green eyes with amber centres pierced into me like the swords he collected. He saw the beauty in things representing the past and the hands that created them. He prized old things, things that others might discard or throw away. Tomás’s family owned an interior design business back in Los Angeles that sold furniture along with antiques so he was always looking for old weapons of war, rusted or damaged, swords mostly, but sometimes old books, or musical instruments like old horns in particular, and old Spanish scales in many different sizes, even pharmaceutical bottles . . . anything he could that he could trade for something even more valuable or make into a piece of art. They even specialized in making table lamps with shades that could match wallpaper . . . so many of the finds Tomás traded for or purchased were considered for their potential as lamps. No matter if something was damaged or needed restoring, he loved finding objects that had stories attached to them, if not, Tomás created stories about them: the search for it, who he encountered in the journey, something about the former owner or owners. The stories gave more value to the objects, he said. Potential buyers who may not have wanted to purchase something usually bought these things when their backstory drew them in. Often, Tomás would take photographs of his find and after developing the prints which came out as postcards, he would mail them back to the family store where they would be framed and sold to some of their many wealthy clients as works of art. Of course, in those

days he told me, that his father thought *que es ridículo* to think that customers would look at photographs as works of art, but his mother believed in his talent and when selling some of her favourite clients the antiques Tomás provided from his travels, she would include one of his elaborately framed small photographs for free. Apparently the ladies loved them.

“When word got around the city that this *gringo* who set up a photographic studio would take a photograph for free if something of value was brought along for him to inspect, purchase, or trade for, there would often be a line of people out the door. Many of them wondered how such a small box camera could create anything worth looking at. And when Tomás would unfold it like a small book, his subjects were completely mystified. And they couldn’t wait to see how their portraits turned out. But Tomás had preferred taking portraits of people with a larger camera and *ay ay* the time it took for him to develop those from glass plates, *híjole—muy complicado*, so shortly after he traded that camera and its many accessories for the simpler black box camera.”

As Angelita spoke, Lily saw Tom appear before her in full cinematic brilliance. Over 6’ 4” with strong muscular arms, combed straight back sandy brown hair, chiselled face, and long legs, in a white starched shirt that was open at the neck, he was working in his studio, bent under a camera cloth trying to focus his lens on a very stunning young girl who had her back to the camera. There had been a group of *indios* earlier in the day that had brought an old rusted scale probably used to weigh gold bullion. They had found part of it protruding out of a crop of rocks in the hills where it appeared to have been buried for many years, they’d said. Tom took their portrait and then the men left in a hurry as if they were being chased by someone completely forgetting the scale. This made Tom very happy as it was the kind of object he loved to



restore and ship back to his family business. Tom loved nothing better than to tell tales of the origins of such things even if he added his own fiction to enhance the story. Lily could see and hear him direct the young beauty from behind his photographer's cloth to release her long black hair as he was explaining about this rather large scale which measured almost four feet in height. She refused to let her hair down preferring to keep it up and fastened with her silver encrusted Spanish combs. Isabella was sitting within view and looking quite disapproving of the whole scene and tapping her foot, which made Angelita tense up. Then Tom asked her to turn her head and hold the profile shot for what seemed an eternity. Lily realized that this Angelita looked unusually proper, almost conservative, in a dark green silk embroidered dress with handmade lace cuffs and collar. She was covered down to her ankles and she appeared to be as big as a minute. The dress exposed a tiny bit of bosom just enough to underscore a young maiden in full flower. Angelita held her pose awkwardly. It became obvious that she felt a great degree of discomfort and fidgeted so much that she ruined the exposure. Tom asked her to return at a later time and she agreed. Isabella, acting as her *dama de compañía*, looking quite elderly in a coarse cotton black dress with white hair pulled behind her neck in a severe bun wearing a bonnet more appropriate for a decade prior, insisted that they leave immediately as any proper chaperone would have done.

“Tomás had travelled through Texas down to Mexico City and then to Puebla. He had been on a very long journey buying, selling and trading his many found objects as he liked to call them. We rode on the streetcar together one afternoon without my Isabella.

“We had walked by his studio a few weeks before when he first opened it as Tommy was standing out front wiping down his front window. There was a sign saying *Se Venden Retratos*, “Portraits for Trade.” Isabella did not want me to speak to

him, but he said “*Buenas tardes, señorita,*” and his American accent made me laugh a bit, but I did not want to embarrass him so I merely responded in English. Father had sent us to a private school where we studied French and English as well so Tommy was rather surprised that my English was quite good. This led to a promise for me to return at a later date for an official portrait. Isabella refused to stand more than two feet away from us. Mother insisted she follow me everywhere.”

“And with good reason, *hija*” interjected Amadita. But any more conversation from her was silenced by Lola and Granny Flynn hushing her again.

“I could never say no to him, not after that first time . . . he was so . . . convincing. And he compelled me to forget who I was and what I should do. He compelled me to obey and no one had ever done that before.”

Lily noticed that Lola and Amadita were making the sign of the cross just as Angelita’s admission of such dominance by another spilled from her lips. Fingers touched foreheads then hearts, then left and right shoulders as Dolores used to do, especially, upon hearing some news that was upsetting like the fact that Leonard could not be found when she tried to pursue child-support from him. Her attorney had told her not to spend money and resources to find him because without his input she, Dolores, could raise Lily as she wished. And Leonard would have nothing to say about it. Of course Dolores had waited to contact the attorney after Granny Flynn succumbed to cancer. Granny Flynn’s presence had plugged the hole Leonard’s leaving created. And Granny Flynn loved Lily that much that she preferred to live with her ex-daughter in law and provide some sustenance never wanting any compensation nor exacting judgement over her son’s abandonment of these two women. Granny Flynn simply came to save the day and provide as much love and support as Dolores needed. And Lily never thought to ask her why, not even of her portrait, until today, but those

questions had to wait....Angelita was just getting started and Lily did not want to give her any reason to cease this intact memory of a past Lily so desperately wanted to relive along with the others.

“The memory of Tomás’s touch invaded my every waking moment, as I remembered the heat from his hands that barely skimmed my shoulders when he was helping me arrange my pose for him that first time. His hands shook ever so slightly, no differently than my whole being shook from his nearness. Then there were Isabella’s constant throat clearings spoiling the moment. These sobering reminders of any potential breach of impropriety certainly prevented us from moving in the direction that her presence attempted to thwart. I was so dazed by the experience after Isabella and I returned home that I had to lie down for the rest of the afternoon. ”

“Your face was completely pink, I scolded Isabella for not making you wear your hat on such a sunny day,” said Amadita.

“Sun had nothing to do with it, Amadita,” said Lola with a snort. Angelita carried on paying them no attention.

“And then Tomás sent a young Indian boy who ran his errands to throw a note through my second storey window asking me to meet him two weeks later. I could think of nothing else till that day. And then an opportunity came, I told mamá that I did not need Isabella to accompany me that day as I was meeting Carlitos’s fiancé, Teresa, for lunch and that her *dama de compañía*, Mercedes, would chaperone us. Teresa was only too willing to help me as we had been close ever since we were babies. Remember, Lily, how I told you Teresa’s childhood crush was Arturo’s playmate too. Luckily, this ruse worked as everyone was too distracted by *mi hermano’s* affair with Petra, the upstairs maid and seamstress. You remember, Lily, I told you about that once too.”

“Yes but, *tía*, you only said that Arturo loved a girl, who died, so this maid or seamstress or whatever she was, was my *abuela*?”

Lily heard another collective sigh from Lola and Amadita as if they were afraid this would come up again and they were so hoping it would not. But no amount of forced breathing or admonishment from them would stop Angelita. She was determined to continue.

“Well, yes, and no. I mean she was only fourteen, *la pobre inocente*. She was so taken with him. She used to sew Arturo’s shirts. I am not sure who started it, but I know Arturo showed me how Petra would embroider tiny little hearts or roses on the insides of the shirts she repaired for him. He rolled up one of his sleeves one hot day as he was about to mount his stallion, Pico, when he was going out to survey some of the property with papá . And he noticed a heart shape on the inside of the cuff. It was ever so delicate in the colour of *café con leche* so as not to show through the fabric. At first Arturo said he thought it was just some sort of mistake, but when it happened again on the tail of another of the shirts that Petra mended he realized that he had an admirer. Petra was terribly shy and hardly ever had spoken a word to him. She had these lovely brown saucer shaped eyes. And her skin, although dark, as though she were perpetually tanned, exuded such smoothness and sensuality. Arturo was not a bad boy; he was just like so many of the young men of that time. He felt that he only had to exude charm to possess something if he wanted it badly enough, never wanting to really work hard to obtain what he desired.”

“Your papá spoiled him too much, he—” Amadita quickly added.

“¡Sí, mamá, we know that,” hissed Angelita. Lily was not surprised at this as Amadita and Angelita had always sparked during conversations in the hallway so long ago. They seemed a meagre reflection of the power of the enmity they must have

experienced when mother and daughter were both alive.

“All the same, Lily, Arturo began to truly care about his *querida niña* as he called her. She was so simple, so incredibly lovely with those eyes that looked up at him as if he were a god. Isabella always scolded Petra for thinking that she, a simple servant in the house, would even think that the son of her employer would think anything more of her than mere sport. But Petra could not help herself and continued with her needlepoint symbols of love inside Arturo shirts.”

“But *tía* what happened to you and Tomás? Tell me more about Arturo. . . later . . . please I’ve been waiting so long and I’m getting confused between the two stories,” said Lily.

“Of course, *m’ija*, I understand, but they are linked and I cannot necessarily separate them . . . but let’s see . . . where was I?”

“You and Tomás were on a streetcar ride.”

“Ah *sí*. It was the one time Tomás and I could sit and truly speak to each other on that streetcar. We rode around downtown to the *zócalo* and back twice forgetting that we were supposed to disembark in the square. He told me about his past, where he was born, what he had been looking for when he came to Puebla, and that he felt strongly that I had a part to play in his future. His parents had escaped an unusually sweltering heat wave in Buffalo, New York to a summer cabin in Chautauqua. And it was there that Tomás was born.

“His parents were Methodists, his mother taught Bible school for a time, and his father Harold Willis ran the family business, Willis Interiors, as I said, a company that imported wallpaper from Europe and made furniture with fabric to match that was used on sofas and chairs that they created. They supplied many of the larger retail outlets in the area. They also imported antiques from Europe and Central and South America.

His mother finally was persuaded to give up teaching and help run the business and manage the seventeen full time employees there. Lillian Willis was very good at sales in their Buffalo store, which was later moved to Los Angeles, California on Western Avenue.

“Tomás took more joy in how things were made, however, and what made them work, and even more how electricity worked. As a curious student at Harvard, where he graduated with a degree in Applied Sciences with an emphasis on Electrical Engineering, he was almost expelled for building Tesla coils in his rented room and practically electrocuting his roommate and then almost burning the rooming house down. And later, Tomás’s curiosity turned him from how the mechanical or scientific aspects of life worked to documenting life itself for his personal growth and understanding of the world around him.

“And as I said before, for him, the photograph and the act of making one became as profound as creating a brilliant watercolour or painting. However, Tomás always insisted that photography stood on its own as a work of art. What a photograph captured was in effect a living thing or an extension of the heart of the photographer who depicts a moment forever frozen in time: a portrait of a child who will never age, a portrait of an exquisite engraving in silver on the handle of a *pistola* will never tarnish, a portrait of an ancient Mexican sword perfectly hewn with floral etchings and crosshatching on both sides of a blade that will never blunt or dull. He claimed he could only capture one-dimensional moments of the many multi-faceted human beings or objects that came before his lens. Tomás truly found his calling in this field and his passion drove his photographic eye.

“This used to frustrate, his father very much, Tomás said, because Harold wanted Tomás to stay in Los Angeles, and help run the business, but his mother

encouraged him to see the world and bring back any curiosities she could supply the rich clientele that kept the company going and had been for two generations. What did upset his mother was that Tomás turned away from his Methodist upbringing. He decided that believing in a god or in nature or in the forces that caused the universe to move in its harmony or even disharmony was so vast an idea that no one should be restricted to any one church, place or particular priest or minister to communicate with such divine aspects. Luckily, his father interceded for him with his disappointed mother. As long as their son was finding and passing on treasures to be sold to clients who were appreciative of the craftsmanship and the stories each purchase carried with it—that was God’s gospel or so Harold convinced Lillian. Tomás said that he found the power of nature or the universe or even God in all the places and people and things that he encountered along his journey and that God had led him to me. *Entiendes*, Lily, he felt that being spiritual was understanding that real beauty and purity moved, lived, and breathed within the many people he had met and the stories and treasures they shared with him.

“And on that streetcar ride that day, Tomás said that he and I, we, were destined to meet. Tomás and I talked and talked for hours. I have no specific memory of the sights and sounds we passed that day only the sound of Tomás melodious and mesmerizing voice telling me again and again about his passion for objects from the past and the photographic process that he documented them with. He wanted to freeze an artefact, he called it, prevent it from decay and its story from being remembered. It mattered, it was important, if not to the original owner then to whoever retrieved it from a state of apathy and neglect. These items that once belonged to someone or somewhere had voices that deserved to be heard, deserved to reflect a past that might be forgotten otherwise.

“I remember the chills, as I listened to him and looked into his eyes, that pervaded my legs travelled up through my groin, my spine and culminated at my breast as if his words had pierced me straight through the heart. I knew this man was mine somehow. And I was soon to be his. Those eyes. Those eyes when they looked at me, through me, undressing me, stripping away the clothes that covered the animal spirit I hid from everyone. I wanted to unleash it. He made me want to. And yet at first I just laughed at him. I felt he was just toying with me. I felt that he was just the kind of man *mamá* had tried to prevent me from meeting—”

“*Ahem, ahem, hem*” Amadita was clearing her throat, but Angelita ignored her again. Granny Flynn actually snickered, but said nothing.

“Tomás was a free thinker. He embraced life as I did, but was unable to in the open as my parents wanted me to marry someone they chose who they felt was right for me and who deserved part of our estate as a dowry, but Tomás wanted nothing more than for me to ride that streetcar away with him—and—I wanted to. As the one hour together turned into three, I knew that if I did not go home soon Isabella would finally notice my long absence, especially if she had spoken with Teresa’s chaperone that a deception had occurred. Luckily, Teresa took care of the details so that did not happen. She kept her busy on a shopping spree and ended up buying Mercedes a new frock so that delayed them from arriving home too early and not giving Isabella a chance to get the latest gossip that day. I would have done the same for Teresa if she’d asked.”

“She had the sense not to—” interjected Amadita.

“*Mamá*, if you say another word, *te digo que*—”

Lily felt she best intercede in this instant so that Angelita’s threat of *I’m telling you* did not unleash a full blown war of pictures flying off the wall as she knew Angelita had let loose in the distant past although in measured amounts. But now Lily



was afraid that *all* the portraits would fall as a result, if Angelita's rage went unchecked.

“*Tía?*”

“*Sí, mi amor.*”

“You said that the stories were intertwined. How?”

“Well . . . I . . . could not stay away from Tomás. And I suppose Petra could not stop stitching her love into Arturo's shirts. And he, in turn, could not stay away from her *que Dios lo bendiga.*” Again Lola and Amadita both made the sign of the cross and echoed the blessing as Angelita spoke over them and crossed herself as well.

“After that first time I could not deny him. He asked me to come in for another portrait sitting and that is . . . when . . . it . . . happened.” At this point Lily did not have to ask what “it” was because, again as if watching a film . . . Lily saw Angelita walk into Tom's portrait studio. The door slightly creaked. It was a bit warm inside. Tom shut the door behind her. He looked seriously at her. They talked for a bit, general niceties about the weather, and how long she had arranged to be away without Isabella being alerted. The arousal in the room was palpable. Angelita's eyes kept looking away from Tom as if each time she held them; they burned a part of him into her. Lily could see the way each of their movements fought tumbling into each other's arms too soon. They stumbled with formality as he suggested she take off her wrap. She wore a simple dress this time, white batiste with silk embroidery across the neck and the hem. Her black beaded four-strap heels accented her small frame and dainty feet. Tom towered over her as he directed her to sit in front of his camera.

“We were like two magnets. I suppose it was the same for Petra and Arturo. Sometimes, a power pulls people together and there is no preventing it. All convention and propriety ceases or at the very least pauses for a time—an eternity, a life altering

moment—the result of which is neither discussed, mentioned, nor cogitated.” Lily heard a deep sigh emit from Lola, Amadita, and even Granny Flynn. Lily sighed as well as her thoughts drifted back to a time she, too, had experienced such a moment with Scott, but she brushed that thought quickly away. That was then, this is now, she preferred to, listen, watch and remember.

“He asked me to turn my head and look away from him, or perhaps I just did it instinctively as I could not yet look directly at him for too long. Then he placed the gold cross around my neck. The one you once thought was silver. *¿Te acuerdas?* It had belonged to his mother and she had given it to him to keep him safe on his many travels. Sounds familiar, Lily thought as she reached up to touch the St. Christopher’s medal around her neck.

“ ‘Hold it’, Tomás would say. And I did, for what seemed to be a very long time and then I got the giggles. And he said ‘please stop, Angelita, or you will ruin the picture,’ but I couldn’t help it. He scolded me with such softness. And I wanted so to run my fingers through his perfect hair. Then he moved a light near me then farther away or opened the curtains . . . I can’t recall, exactly, I suppose to make shadows appear behind me. Then he commented how ‘Exquisite’ I looked and then he’d say, ‘just another,’ over and over. This portrait was to celebrate my seventeenth birthday which was in a couple of days. Tomás said he was going to make it memorable because it would be a gift to me and that it would be his masterpiece. Finally, after some time, his hands caressed my shoulder, at one point, as he lingered in front of me. He kneeled down to arrange my hair away from my face for I had worn it loose into the studio remembering how I had not that first day I posed for him. But this time I felt the need to let my hair fall. This time I also felt the need to let my soul breathe.”

Lily watched the scene grow more heated as Tom gently and slowly put one

hand on Angelita's shoulder and gathered her hair up in his other to move it away from her face and in this swift and supple moment, their lips met. Angelita made no movement at first, and then she put her arms around Tom as he kissed the nape of her neck, her shoulder, and pressed his face into her breasts. Lily almost gasped audibly, as she realized that this was the sitting for the very portrait of Angelita which now spoke, but Lily knew better than to ruin the moment by letting the present intrude upon Angelita's past. As Tom continued to kiss Angelita, he lifted her up and her legs wrapped around his waist as he carried her off into another room. The movie suddenly fell away.

"You realize, of course, what came next, need I say more?" Lily found no reason to answer because she understood the power of such passion. It was readily comprehensible given what Lily had just seen, but she hesitated for a moment, thinking about the other part of this story.

"*Tía*, what happened to Petra and Arturo?" Lily couldn't help asking.

"Well the same thing that happened to us. After a few months, Petra conceived Arturo's child and I conceived Tomás's child, or perhaps I should say children" .

"What do you mean children? Mother said the child died?" There was a long pause. No one on the wall said a word. The quiet turned long and uncomfortable. Lily found this almost unnatural as these women had more trouble keeping quiet than staying quiet.

"Tomás was very excited and we made plans for me to leave Puebla with him before the baby was to be born. He wanted his child to be born in America. Arturo was just the opposite. He loved Petra, yes, he did, for as long as he could not have her and once he had her . . . well . . . I'm afraid . . .the problem was papá ."

"He blamed me, of course, for everything" said Amadita. "He said I should

have had a better watch on my flock. Ha! And then I reminded him how he had encouraged you to be independent and stand up for what you wanted . . . the same way you rode your horse— untethered and unbridled. That was his fault as was his privileging of Arturo. Arturo could never do wrong even when he drank and drank and became addicted to that nasty drug after Petra and the baby died and then—” Lola, immediately inhaled sucking in all the air in the room. And all was quiet again. No one said a word. That prickly silence. Lily wondered who would be the first to break it?

“*M’ija*” Lola began, “¿*Comprendes lo que estás diciendo?*” and at that moment Lily knew that Amadita knew exactly what she was saying.

“She does indeed, *abuela*,” assured Angelita.

“Wait,” said Lily, “wait . . . the baby died? But then I thought . . . wasn’t that . . .?”

“*Sí, amor*,” Angelita continued, “she died as did her mother. The baby was *¿cómo se dice?*, still born, and Petra had gained so much weight during her pregnancy everyone thought she was having twins, but in those days high blood pressure was rare for a girl her age. She still worked for us through her pregnancy, as papá insisted that if he was responsible for her medical care, she might as well stay hidden upstairs, doing her chores so that our friends would not know. He might as well still get some work out of her in return. She had a stroke. The labour was too much for her, I suppose. Arturo was away when it happened, papá, made sure of it, but when Arturo returned he . . . well . . . he started drinking and everything else and . . . papá was furious with Arturo for besmirching the family name, not because of poor Petra’s death but because of the way Arturo responded to it. He fell apart and then that kidnapping, but I told you about that.”

“But wait . . . who then was my *abuela*, I mean . . . if Petra and her baby died? What have you been keeping from me all these years? My God . . .”

“*Querida*, you know how much I adore you and tried to watch over you all these years.”

“You mean, wait a minute—”

“You are my granddaughter *hija*, and Dolores was my daughter.”

Lily just sat there saying nothing for a full five minutes. And no one else said anything either. It was as if the portraits had never spoken. They looked perfectly normal. No sense of movement from any of them. Not even a momentary whiff of life or breath. Lily’s childhood began to flash before her. All those times Dolores kept saying her mother had died in childbirth. She even referred to Angelita’s portrait on the wall as Aunt Angie and had taught Lily to call her *tía*. What else had Dolores lied about? In an instant the past, as Lily knew it, was tumbling into a faint memory of reality. Were all these people inside the frames in the hallway of Lily’s life a lie then? Her imagination? And their stories—false memories, perhaps? Had these portraits all mislead her on purpose. Her mind kept racing to snapshots of her mother comforting her when Lily had first cried about Angelita’s portrait trying to speaking to her. Lily remembered, too, how as an adolescent every time a story from one of the ladies on the wall began to engross her, Dolores would suddenly pop up out of nowhere to rush her off to bed. As the recollections of these scenes began to engulf her, Lily wondered: what else? What else was there? Because there was always something else.

When Alexis first snuck out at night at sixteen to be with her friends after curfew, and meet other school friends at a party, the what else was a car accident. Luckily, Alexis wasn’t hurt, but the driver, Bobby was in a coma for a month. The

other girls in the car walked away, but not this boy. Alexis and those same girls went every day to the hospital to see him after school. She would read to him from the collection of poems and share her drawings that she kept in her journal. She didn't care that Bobby was in a coma, she was certain he could hear her. Bobby was Alexis's best buddy. Bobby was gay and most of the kids knew it in this catholic school, yet the good what else was that nobody cared because he was funny, likeable, and popular. Nevertheless when all the others in their clique tired of visiting him, Alexis continued her vigil sharing with him all the gossip about what went on in high school that day or that week. And when Bobby finally woke up, the what else was that he had to spend another six months learning to walk again. Every mother's nightmare (but this turned out to be a good what else because Bobby made it through and not quite a decade later was a groomsman at Alexis's wedding).

Or during senior year, when Alexis would come home after a date and her heart was broken by the cutest kid on the football team who saw her as just one of the many girls in his collection of followers, that what else was that Alexis's best friend, Molly, got pregnant from said football player. And quietly, and without much fuss Molly's parents insisted she have an abortion and the what else that happened just prior was that her father practically beat the hell out of her. And another what else here was that she contracted an infection after the abortion or perhaps after her father's beating, the what else being Molly was hospitalized for another week. And then her father sent her to a boarding school on the east coast. And the football player's family left that catholic high school and moved to the another state before the girl recovered because this young kid was being scouted by the majors and no one was going to interfere.

Lily hated the what elses of life because, usually, she had found them not to be happy ones. Because when Scott had first shipped out before Alexis was born, she

remembered thinking “what else?” and then she lived to regret that stupid thought. And she still did. But she couldn’t stand it anymore. She had waited this long. She wasn’t going to wait any longer, although she was almost afraid to ask it.

“Well . . . what else?” Again no one stirred. The hallway grew cold and Lily wasn’t sure if it was that cold cup of coffee she had just taken a sip of, or if it was time to close that window she had struggled so hard to open earlier. She got up and noticed the air temperature was definitely dropping. And instead of another cup of coffee she just made a cup of tea. Fortunately, there were still some old Lipton tea bags gathering dust in the cupboard. She hated Lipton, preferring chamomile with its relaxing benefits, but just at this moment she needed something hot to swallow to cut the chill she was feeling, not just in the hallway with its peeling paint obscured behind some of the photographs, but inside her very bones. As she swallowed that first sip she burned her tongue, and cried out, “God damn it!” She walked back to her room and slammed the window shut making a loud racket.

She walked back to the chair in front of Angelita and sat back down and waited. She cupped her hands around the mug and let the warmth fill her. She took a deep breath and continued to wait and sip the tea more carefully.

“Tell me about, *tí—abuela*—tell me more?”

Silence.

“¡Angelita, I need to know and you know I do!”

“Your mother was a *gemela*,” whispered Angelita.

“A what?” Lily had forgotten the meaning, or she simply did not want to recognize its implications.

“A twin,” answered Lola.

. . .

## Chapter Six: They Still Talk To Her

Holding the letters in her hands, Lily wailed. Not like the anguished lament so many years ago after losing Scott, but a wail of shock nevertheless.

“*M’ija?*” Lola called out to her tenderly. Lily had slid out of the chair and was kneeling on the carpet having dropped the packet after reading its contents. Trapped by this past that had seized her in such a way, she was unable to answer. She felt as if what went before wasn’t hers to own. Still, its overwhelming memories were squeezing the air out of her lungs, determined to kill her future, or so she thought. How could she deny that this current revelation and where it would lead her was all part of who she was—so exposed in the light of new truth?

After Angelita’s startling disclosure, Lily single-mindedly searched for that bracelet and anything more that she could locate to shed more light on this discovery. She had hurried back to Dolores’s bedroom pulling out every drawer in the dresser and night stands. Then studying the contents of the closet, sweat trickling down her forehead and her back in the frenzied hunt, Lily yanked clothes off of hangers, emptied out each lovingly cotton cloth wrapped leather and suede purse, raining shoe boxes of old suede covered high heels from the fifties Dolores had hoarded, in green, purple, brown and navy whacked and bumped Lily on the head. Sneezing from the dust kicked up from the flurry of foraging for clues, Lily wiped her teary eyes and then hollered at



the room and its possessions, “Where are you? God damn it, Mom? Where, where is it?”

Ultimately, looking under the bed, she found a flat plastic storage box. Something Lily realized she should have located ages ago, but because of the obvious hiding place, she had never thought to look there in the first place. That’s when she remembered Dolores’s long ago phone call of joy pronouncing how she’d found the bracelet and the photograph of Lola. Lily also remembered she never had called her mother back that day. She had forgotten about it, or she just didn’t want to see the photograph or any of the photographs anymore. And now here was Lola’s picture in her braided splendour wearing the very gold Greek key bracelet Lily now held in her hands. Lily had already found that photograph in Dolores’s bed side table drawer not long ago and left it there, thinking she would have it framed and hung in her own place at some point, but now, here, were the family letters Dolores had mentioned so casually in the past as if par for the course.

Of course, during that phone call, Lily could have cared less about any of these items. She was supporting Alexis and her wedding plans back then. Wasn’t that more important? Plans that she had been unable to share and enjoy with her own mother’s participation because Dolores’s mental state had declined so rapidly by then that she was unable to attend her own granddaughter’s wedding. Dolores would not have recognized Alexis, or her husband-to-be, Joshua, even though Alexis had introduced them months before. Even though Dolores had pronounced him handsome and a good man for Alexis, her grandmother would not have known him, her, or the whys or wherefores of such a ceremony. That was the way of that damned illness. Remembering the chasm of such a loss and the agony of watching Dolores’s decline barely in her sixties cut deep into Lily’s psyche—so little was understood about this

demon of a disease. It was only with the help of a CAT scan and a memory test that proved Dolores did not have a brain tumour, or was not going insane, or was merely suffering from the stress of her hard working life or just dealing with an old person's disease. Dolores wasn't that old! So, why at such a young age? The doctors could never answer that question.

Lily recalled the day when Dolores forgot her birthday and never remembered it again. That was the beginning of the Dolores she knew disappearing over time. Lily remembered, too, that one night when she had stopped by to have coffee with Dolores and share the joy of Alexis's one year-old daughter's first birthday that Dolores had looked her in the eye and asked, "Who are you?" And not long after Dolores became fascinated by a woman in the mirror she stopped recognizing. "Why does she keep following me around all day?" Dolores wondered. Even her conversations with this stranger in the mirror brought no clarification to her repeated question. Soon after, Lily had had to move her mother into skilled nursing.

The only way to know Dolores now is through these photographs, Lily realized. The woman who inhabited her body those last several years did not know her own daughter, granddaughter or great granddaughter which is why Alexis refused to visit anymore. Dolores had just stared into space when Alexis laid baby Lola in her lap, in fact, Alexis had to quickly scoop the baby up because Dolores did not stop her from rolling right off her lap. Dolores only took consolation in her caretakers in the nursing home she ultimately died in. Lily recollected sitting outside one afternoon with Dolores in the sunlight on the patio outside her room. Her caretaker had wheeled her outside and Lily was talking to Dolores about Lola's first birthday party. Dolores looked over at the caretaker, his name was Juan. She reached for Juan's hand and held

it up to her cheek so tenderly. It should have been a sweet moment. But Lily felt betrayed, stunned, and defeated. It was as if she was not even there as far as Dolores was concerned. Comfort could only be appreciated from this stranger, not from Lily, her one and only daughter.

The real Dolores would only be understood on these walls through the voices of these beloved ancestors. The force of such a blow that only the feeling of such historical betrayal can dredge up was all too much.

“God damn it all” bellowed Lily, “God damn everything and everyone to hell.” And that is when the women on the wall could keep silent no longer.

“*Hija ¡mirame, por favor!*” Lily would not look at her . . . her grandmother . . . her . . . *abuela*. How odd it sounded when associating the word grandmother with Angelita whom she had always called *tía*. But Lily wouldn’t look at her or Lola either, no matter how much each asked her to. So both Lola and Angelita just waited. They were used to that and they were skilled at the practice. They had waited this long to enlighten Lily about who she really was and the arduous journey that led to her presence in this life. Never mind that she felt distraught by it, in time, with patience, she would see the good in owning her real identity. And in time Lola, Amadita, Angelita, and even Granny Flynn would continue their patient guidance of Lily and those she loved, but that could not be rushed. That they knew. They also knew if they waited long enough, all would be well. That was Lola, Angelita, and even Amadita’s adage, “*todo estará bien.*” Granny Flynn preferred to say, “This too shall pass,” but that was because of her Methodist upbringing. The others had been raised Catholic, so actually they all believed in a similar God, however it was the way in which they went about it which was dissimilar, but the ladies didn’t like to admit it as that would have been impolite.

“Lily, *por favor, mi ángel*, do not take his name in vain.” Angelita pleaded, “please just stop and talk to me, *querida nieta*?” Angelita wished she could extend her arms around her granddaughter as Lily’s sobs grew more muffled. She ached to hold her granddaughter in her arms, stroke her forehead affectionately. But this was not something any of the portraits on the wall could do. They could speak, they could move within the print they inhabited, they could emit sounds from the setting they occupied in their portraits. And sometimes they could even emit a slight scent, only when the occasion or the need called for it, but they could not breach the in-between: that dimension between second and third. This was not allowed and they knew better than to attempt it. In earlier years, Angelita, when enraged to such a degree at something her mother, or grandmother had said, or not said to Lily, had only succeeded by agitating the air around her with such force that it blew their photographs, at different times, off the wall and onto the carpet. Occasionally her power would crack or shatter the glass that caged them in. Subsequently, Angelita would be relegated back to hanging as a purely two dimensional likeness. She could not speak, not move, nor make Lily hear her for days, weeks. The laws of the hall were the laws of the hall. The portraits did not ask who, or what made them. They only lived within the confines of the length of the passageway’s capacity, content when they were successful in guiding Lily toward the right direction, unlike Dolores.

Dolores had made up her mind long ago to block them out, not consciously, but with her mental state in such flux even if they had revealed themselves to her, she would have thought it was the tricks her brain had already begun playing on her many years before her illness was actually diagnosed. No, Dolores had fulfilled her part as the creator of this gallery compelled to frame each picture, and place each one artfully and devotedly, unaware of the visual truth she was orchestrating.

...

Lily picked herself up off the floor and sat back in the chair. Her face still red and swollen, her eyes puffy—she wiped them with the sleeve of her mother’s old black beaded cashmere cardigan that she had loved as a girl. She’d only had to have a couple of moth holes repaired on the back and on one sleeve. When she first wore it to the home to show her mother what wonderful shape it was in, Dolores erupted in accusations calling Lily a thief who was taking pride in stealing everything from her poor mother, including her home. Lily had rushed back to her car and discarded it. Then upon returning Dolores greeted her as if they had not seen each other in years. Lily had not worn it since, how funny, she mused, that today of all days, she had chosen to wear it again. Probably, she assumed, because no one would admonish her for doing so. What she never assumed were the memories and the scabs they’d inflicted being unearthed. The photographs had documented each and every wound. The photographs had made records of what was previously invisible.

“Yes, all right,” she said, smoothing back her light brown hair, made lighter by a small gathering of grey streaks on one side. Pulling her hair up and twisting it into a knot, she took a breath in and said, “I’m listening,” to Angelita and Lola still talking over each other beseeching Lily to hear them.

“¡*Silencio!*, I will speak now and only I!” Angelita paused a moment and waited to make sure that her mother and grandmother would say no more until asked. Amadita knew better than to make a peep at this point as she had already kept quiet through much of Lily’s moments of despair. Granny Flynn had wisely chosen not to intervene at all as her time would come.

As Lily stared at Angelita's picture, Lily knew from times past that the holographic breadth of Angelita's powerful voice and persona would command all of, not only Lily's attention, but all of the portraits in the corridor. Especially now.

"*Papá* had locked me in my quarters in the house, you see. He wouldn't abide his daughter looking like a *puta* in public. And bringing shame to the house of Soler would not be tolerated. But what *papá* did not comprehend was the power of Tom's love for me and mine for him." At the mention of this insult, whore, Amadita's mouth opened attempting a futile rebuttal to a past of pitiful secrecy, and yet she shut it just as quickly.

"Then I cut my hair. After screaming each day for the last few months to be freed, I lost my voice, I took those scissors thinking I was going to kill myself, but I was afraid of hurting the baby, and instead sliced off my hair."

"You took 10 inches off of that exquisite mane—" Amadita finally interrupted, but Angelita gave her a look that could have just sliced her portrait in pieces so no more was heard from Amadita at that moment.

"I did it on purpose because I wanted *papá* to see me as a shackled prisoner. I wanted him to see that he was cutting me off from the life that was rightfully mine—a life with a man who honoured my intelligence and my passion, a man who was unafraid of *papá* and unimpressed with his wealth. Tom and I were going to build a marriage of equality and creativity together. He would teach me the art of photography as he saw it. We would work together and open a photographic studio similar to the one in Puebla, but in Los Angeles.

"I had arranged for some of Mercedes's younger brothers to hunt and collect unusual items that Tom loved to collect and trade. And then they would be shipped up north. These would add to the curious finds that compelled Tom so and inspired him to

make art from them with his photography. We would build a new venture out of this and have an art gallery inside the photography studio. We spent months planning this move. But Tom insisted on seeking *papá's* permission by asking for my hand as any gentleman would have done.”

At this mention, Lily heard both Lola and Amadita emit audible sighs tinged with tones of longing and regret. Such plaintive sighs they were that Lily thought for a moment Angelita would admonish them again to keep quiet. However, Angelita did not acknowledge the ladies, or stop her story, she merely carried on.

“What we didn’t plan on was that life . . . two lives were growing inside of me. The seed of our commitment to each other would not be stopped. And these small souls were proof of its durability . . .” Angelita paused for a moment.

The hallway light began to sputter. Yet there was no breeze, not even from that open window in the bedroom, Lily realized. The sun had just set and the air outside had grown, cool, but all felt calm. Lily thought at first that the force of Amadita and Lola’s sighing sounds caused the light to flicker, but then she realized that only candles flicker from a breeze not light bulbs. That’s when Angelita’s story revealed itself as if on film right in front of Lily’s eyes. But there was no film, only the power of Lily’s grandmother to render the vividness of the past as it really was. Lily was not watching a movie on a screen, she was seeing the events and the people in them move, speak, interacting with each other as Angelita’s narration continued. This atavistic vision enraptured Lily completely. She forgot where she was and what time she was living in because for the moment the power projecting from her grandmother’s portrait encompassed Lily’s entire being.

Lily saw Angelita heavy with child lying in an intricately carved mahogany four poster bed with Mercedes, and Isabella standing around her. Mercedes was wiping the

sweat pouring from Angelita's face with an embroidered lace handkerchief. Lily wondered if that might have been one that Petra had made. Another indigenous woman, *la partera*, who was the midwife usually called upon to deliver the babies of the less fortunate was sitting at the end of the bed. Julián did not allow the family doctor near Angelita to prevent the possibility of any word getting out of his daughter's indecent behaviour. It was bad enough that Dr. Morales had delivered Arturo's illegitimate child just a week ago and then seen to the burial of both the baby girl and her young mother with the discretion that a bag of gold could buy. A son's misbehaviour was anticipated, even expected, although Arturo's reaction to his boyish blunder was not. As the son and heir of *Don Julián Soler*, Arturo should have shown indifference to the death of a simple servant girl—the mother of their bastard, but we already know that his subsequent behaviour following this loss exhibited quite the opposite.

Angelita looked tiny, almost childlike, with the exception of her heaving belly. And even though she looked the same age as she did in the portrait it was clear that she was in physical distress. Childbirth was well on its way and the midwife was ordering Isabella to get more towels and more hot water to assist in heating and massaging Angelita's perineum. Lily watched as Angelita sucked in her breath and then Mercedes helped pull her legs back as Angelita pushed and pushed to facilitate the crowning of her baby's head. Again and again she inhaled and then pushed for her life. Her face turned scarlet, her eyes bulged as Lily watched feeling herself have the same urge to push. Angelita released her breath with a loud moan and finally after what seemed an eternity and countless pushes out popped a perfect little cone shaped head, indicative of the challenging trip down the birth canal. *La partera* coaxed Angelita to keep pushing, *puja, puja* as she caught the little boy's body and gently placed it on top of Angelita's



bare chest. Lily could hear the little one cry softly as Angelita struggled to latch him correctly onto her breast. He looked to weigh barely five pounds—like a tiny white new-born puppy rooting for its mother.

Lily wiped more tears coursing down her cheeks with the sleeve of her sweater again. Lily recalled a student photography exhibit at her old college. One photograph stuck in her mind—simply titled “Madonna and Child” it showed a poor girl barely sixteen lying in squalor in an alley in some nameless ghetto having just delivered her dead baby on the sidewalk while apathetic pedestrians walk by. One man is looking over at her as he is about to flick his cigarette. She is holding her lifeless child, and the mother’s mouth is open as if in a silent scream. The photograph was black and white—so stark in its surreality. Impossible to imagine it was not staged. But that was the point. What Lily was seeing in front of her was neither black and white nor staged. It was its own absolute of a flagrant reality in its depiction of the very birth of her own parent . . . parents. She just stared transfixed, at the images immobilized.

“We did not realize that I was carrying twins. I had grown large, yes, but not unusually so. It only became evident after Daniel pushed out of me with such force that, as you see, I screamed so the saints and anyone in *la casa* could hear me—save me. Tom had tried, but *papá’s pistoleros* had chased him off the property, which forced him to be far cleverer than they or *papá*.

“No one knew that I was even pregnant except for Tomas, Arturo, your *bisabuelos*, Isabella, and Mercedes,” Angelita continued. Watching the scene, Lily could see that her grandmother called for Mercedes to pick up the baby boy and then Angelita began pushing again. Isabella’s “*puja puja*” filled the room. Suddenly everyone heard it in disbelief.

“*Viene otro,*” said the midwife simply that, another one is coming.

Another tiny head crowned and then Angelita gave one final grand effort as *la partera* caught a baby girl who entered the world a full six minutes after her brother. Angelita reached for her as the little female gurgled while also nuzzling at her mother's breast, but Angelita felt so weakened that she could hardly hold this sudden surprise from *Jesucristo*. Isabella and Mercedes tried to whisk the babies away to clean off the vernix and swaddle them tightly. Isabella was supposed to quietly inform Amadita that all was successful. But Angelita wanted to keep her new-borns protected in her arms and on her chest just for a minute or two longer. As she smelled them, caressed them, kissed them, she began to lose consciousness.

Lola and Amadita had been locked in Lola's bedroom as Julián had forbidden them to be anywhere near Angelita's room. Julián ignored his mother-in-law's pleading and his wife's wailing to be set free to attend to their *pobre* Angelita. Their cries fell on the deaf ears of Julián who sat in the parlour holding his double barrel 12 gage shotgun loaded and ready across his lap in case Tom showed up unannounced again. Julián had promised to shoot Tom dead on site and he made no secret that he hoped Angelita would deliver a still born.

However, Julián was unaware that Tom had been climbing up the wall via the gigantic vermillion bougainvillea clinging outside of Angelita's second storey bedroom window. Fortunately, he wore heavy leather gloves so as not to be a bloody mess from the thorns. He had bribed one of the *pistoleros* who had happened to moonlight for him by going on some of those scavenger hunts for those unique and hard to find artefacts that Tom treasured. Pedro was very fond of *Señor* Tom, who had helped him pay a doctor to nurse his febrile baby boy back to health in months past, whereas his current employer had refused. And when chasing *Señor* Tom away the week before, Pedro had falsely exemplified his hatred of *el patrón's* enemy by taking aim with his *pistola* and

purposely missing *Señor* Tom so as not to arouse suspicion to the other thugs of his disloyalty to *Don Julián*.

Tom had also bribed Mercedes to keep him aware of the goings on in the hacienda all throughout Angelita's confinement. Mercedes found *Señor* Tom quite attractive herself and even though she was elderly she couldn't help flirting with him when he approached with coin in his hand. He would crook his finger gently and tease her with a little touch on the cheek and a wink of those dramatic eyes, which sent chills down to a place she hadn't felt anything in a long time. Tom knew Angelita had been in labour. Tom also knew he would soon free Angelita from this jail she had been raised in. Through notes passed via Mercedes, they had planned an escape with their new born, but soon he would discover a slight alteration in the plan. Fortunately, the German shepherds that patrolled the hacienda had taken to Tom on his earlier secret visits as he had always brought bits of tasty meats. So the bitches were busy dining and saw no reason to bark at their chef. They merely responded to his pats on the head and scratching of ears with slobbery anticipation as the chunks of pork landed in front of them.

"*Las placentas no salieron y se desangró,*" Lily heard *la partera* sadly proclaim, but didn't fully anticipate its meaning. Angelita had fallen asleep, at first, Lily thought. But then as Isabella and Mercedes burst into tears, each holding a swaddled tiny creature close, the travesty of Angelita's lifeless body washed over Lily. She watched spellbound as *la partera* put her head down to Angelita's nostrils, no breath. She began to wash off the large amounts of blood on Angelita's body, and then she wiped stains from the bedclothes and the floor as if not knowing what else to do. The placentas did not come out and this petite and spirited mother had simply bled to death. Mercedes handed *la partera* a purse filled with money telling her to leave

immediately. The lady opened her mouth as if to protest and Mercedes put her finger to her lips commanding the midwife's loyal silence and then hissed, "*¡Fuera!*" Out.

"Tom had to act rapidly, and he did," Angelita interrupted Lily's deep concentration and then encouraged her to keep watching. Isabella and Mercedes were then whispering. Lily could not quite make out the mutterings, yet they possessed the tenor of a conspiracy between them. Mercedes instructed Isabella to take the baby girl to Amadita's suite of rooms where Lola waited with her. After all, they needed to meet their one and only *nieta* and *bisnieta*. Isabella also had the key to the suite of rooms. *La niña* would soon need a wet nurse. Amadita and Lola would soon learn the heartbreaking truth—what was lost in order for this baby to survive. And they only needed to know about this one baby.

Mercedes laid the baby boy down on his mother's chest for one last sensory moment with a woman he would never know. Then Mercedes rushed to the window, unlatched it and Tom climbed in. Shaken, stunned, desperate, he bent down and put his lips on Angelita's lips. They were still warm. The baby grew fussy and then quieted as Tom grasped him tenderly in his arms wiping away the tears streaming from his own eyes so they wouldn't drown his son. Tom knew if he didn't act instantaneously, he just might be shot dead before the night was over and maybe even his progeny. He had already missed his moment with his baby daughter, and the pain of not being able to know her pierced his heart as if he were being stabbed with one of his antique sabres. He was not going to miss a life with his little boy. He prayed that by some miracle the loss of Arturo's daughter might somehow compel his daughter's existence. Yes, that might be. His daughter, a possible changeling, a precious surrogate for Arturo's. Could this be? It had to, it had to. He convinced himself of the certainty of this truth of his own making.

*“¡Vete, ahorita, Señor Tom, vete, por favor!”* Mercedes insisted. Go now, go, please. Tom didn’t move. *“¿Señor?”* He knelt down holding the woman he adored and the son he would grow to adore. Put his lips on her lips once more. Lily was transfixed watching her own grandfather act so heroically and yet she couldn’t help thinking that he was a coward for abandoning his daughter. She pushed that thought away and listened.

“My angel, keep a watch on them both. My beloved . . . my life, he will grow knowing of you. She will grow not knowing of you . . . unless you . . . we . . . force that knowledge, somehow, someway, so help me God.” Tom struggled through his sobbing as he murmured this into Angelita’s ear. Meanwhile Mercedes eyed the bangle bracelet with the Greek key design. Acting on impulse, she retrieved it from Angelita’s dresser, she slipped it into Tom’s pocket. She knew how much the gold piece meant to its owner and former owners. She knew that it had been passed down through the maternal line. She also knew that Angelita’s daughter might never see it. Perhaps it was Angelita’s spirit gripping her to act, but Mercedes knew it was the right thing to do. And then father and infant, hidden safely inside his jacket, slipped out the window and disappeared into the night.

Just as abruptly, Lily’s dissociated experience of this painful reality left its imprint—she had been unprepared to confront this new real thing. It almost felt cruel, upsetting, even scandalous. Suddenly, by this process framing her life, and that of her family, Lily was provided a new way of seeing herself and the history that made her. The images before her had enlarged the neglect of the truth she had always been fed. She looked up and down the hallway. All was still. None of the portraits stirred. The quiet was stifling. Lily turned on the overhead light which cast shadows oddly bent upon the carpet and on Granny Flynn’s portrait. Lily rushed over to it because she

thought a stain she had never seen before was on the chin. She reached up to rub it out. It was an illusion, only the way the fusion of light and shadow struck the face. Lily found herself caressing the photograph just as Granny Flynn had done to her while putting a young six year-old Lily down for the night. Granny Flynn would rub her belly tenderly and tell her to pretend she had Jell-O in there. Her jellowy stomach felt so relaxed that sleep usually came quickly.

“Sugar plum, are you okay?” Granny Flynn asked in her syrupy voice.

“I’m not sure, Granny, I . . . I don’t . . .”

“No matter sweetie, your father has been watching you all these years,” Granny Flynn gestured toward that one smaller photo Lily barely remembered seeing and hearing once. “You see dear he has always been here, loving you and waiting.” Lily remembered the portrait of Dick, so young, with those eyes. That was the photograph mentioned in those letters. Dolores had hung this portrait and never really explained it. And Granny Flynn had kept its origins a vague mystery, because—

“I gave Angelita my word. I had to protect her, your dear mother and of course Dick, well, his name is Daniel, as you now know, Dick (his middle name), also wanted it that way. Besides I had a school girl crush on a Daniel once.”

“But what about Leonard? Didn’t you have to protect him?”

“He should have protected you and he didn’t. I thought I had raised him better than that. He walked out! Perhaps he couldn’t help it, but honey pie you were and are special. I had to stay for you, and then later, for . . . for them,” said Granny Flynn gesturing at all of the portraits hanging in the gallery. All of a sudden Lily’s memory of a long ago particular argument between Leonard, the only father she had known, but a name she had not used for him in decades, and Dolores came rushing back with a new level of lucidity—Leonard storming out as if he had received the worst possible news

from Dolores. This revelation had nothing to do with her falling out of love with him. There had never been a real explanation given when Lily queried her mother in the subsequent years, other than Dolores' usual pronouncement filled with contempt of "Men!" But Lily now could picture the whole scene in her mind, certain that the truth of her own biology had caused Leonard to leave. Surely he had known that he wasn't the man who fathered her, he could live with that. What he couldn't live with was that Lily's conception was the result of incest. He just couldn't bear it. Yet what right did he have to blame an unknowing participant? Dolores was innocent of her own past. Why couldn't he understand that?

"Lily, you must . . . please . . . forgive him, he really wasn't up to that kind of truth. Perhaps I protected him too much as boy. I let him believe that sheer will if well intentioned could make anything right. I raised him to look away from the ugly truths in life considering his own father was one. Oh, I don't know . . . there was so much that we didn't talk about back then . . ." said Granny Flynn in her usual disarming southern drawl, her voice trailing off. However, Lily was far more interested right then in speaking to her true father. How odd that seemed. Her true father. What was true? That stupid and elusive word. And how was he her real father, because of an accident of birth or was it something else? She couldn't be sure; she only knew she wanted to hear him speak in the worst way.

"Will he speak to me now? He never has before . . ."

"Go to him *m'ija*" urged Angelita. Lily looked at her *abuela* with new found love and admiration and walked the few strides down the hall and stopped. Teenaged Daniel's portrait still hung where it always had high up in one of the top rows where a younger Lily always felt he was watching her, but the older Lily had just ignored. Lily stood and looked deeply into his eyes—eyes that reflected the colours of her own gaze.

She waited. She wondered if he would indeed speak. His eyes looked down at her for a moment. He took a rather large inhale as his shoulders seemed to rise and fall.

“At last,” he exhaled. His voice sounded like that of a young boy.

“So you are my real father?”

“What is real?” he asked sounding more like a man than a boy.

“Apparently you and I are” Lily said and looked back down the hall at Angelita as she nodded. “Daniel, or should I say Dick or should I say Dad, or . . . none of them sound right” said Lily hesitantly, untying her hair, letting it fall around her shoulders, then running her hands through it and then twisting it back it into a knot again.

“No matter. It is unimportant what you call me . . . what matters is that you know now the journey those who are your flesh and blood travelled so that you could be standing here and now having this conversation. What matters is that you believe how much you were loved, are loved, and will always be loved” said Daniel sounding far more mature than in previous moments. Lily began to cry. She couldn’t speak. Her tears overwhelmed her in rivers down her face making spots appear on Dolores’s sweater. Lily needed a tissue badly as snot ran from her nose. She then caught sight of the portrait of Dolores from a reflection in her mother’s bedroom mirror. She looked at it so intently. It was still in its two dimensional life. It did not move. Dolores did not look over at her, although Lily hoped she would. Then Lily looked back at Daniel, her . . . her father. His portrait went back to its two dimensional existence as he no longer was looking at her straight in the eyes. Lily kept looking back and forth for, probably, only a few minutes, yet it seemed like all the minutes in her life leading up to this one called her to engage in a broader comprehension—enter a vast space of new awareness. It was as if she finally understood how to decipher a complexly articulated series of photographic codes that each portrait had given of itself for her to capture, to analyse



over all these years. These portraits on the wall of her life, through the range of subject matter in each, through the many elements within each and every pose, had magnified her visual vernacular of a world she thought she knew in such a way that it all began to implode. It was too much, this new consciousness too weighted, this gift of sight beyond measure, beyond understanding, beyond . . . she fainted.

...

The house was a bustle of newness. Alexis had been helping her mother with the move. It seemed as if they had been packing and unpacking for months. Lily unexpectedly decided, it seemed to Alexis, to not sell Dolores's house but preferred moving back into it. Lily wanted a larger place, she said, so that Alexis and Joshua and the baby could enjoy it. Besides her apartment, she finally admitted, was just too small. Lily had remodelled the kitchen, just before the move. A new pine swing set graced the back yard freshly stained and lacquered. Soon she was going to replant Dolores's still bare overgrown flower garden, with a lot of help from the gardener. Even little Lola wanted to help. It would be their very own project.

Lola loved the chaos in the house this afternoon because she could run and run among the stacks of boxes pretending they were mountains to be scaled.

"Lolita, stop, you're going to fall, sweetie" warned Alexis right before rushing off to meet Joshua for dinner and a movie. Lolita, as Lily and Alexis now called the little one, would giggle, and run faster with her long black braids trailing behind her as she played hide and seek behind one of the stacks of boxes yet to be unpacked. Then she'd manoeuvre as if she was on roller skates through the maze of boxes piled up throughout her *abuelita's* home. Lolita could never quite pronounce the name *abuelita*

correctly so she called Lily, *Wita*, for short. Alexis gave up trying to get Lolita to say her grandmother's name in Spanish correctly because Lolita refused to call Lily anything else. Lily was quite touched by the nickname, even revelling in its uniqueness.

Lolita was turning five in two weeks and Lily wanted to get the house ready for her granddaughter's birthday party. Lily wanted a bounce party. Lily had the backyard to fit one because Alexis and Joshua owned a condominium with no yard. Lolita loved nothing more than to bounce up and down on those large oversized blown up air mattresses. At a circus charity event at the Little Schoolhouse Day school, a few weeks earlier, Alexis could not get Lolita off the darn thing. She loved the feeling that flying up in the air brought. She knew she could touch the clouds if she jumped high enough. One of her favourite pastimes, after sliding down the slide, was lying on the grass with Wita in the backyard and looking up in the sky and describing all the clouds they saw. Wita would point out clouds that resembled horses, or camels, or trees, or angels. Those were Alexis's ideal clouds. Wita always said that Lolita had many guardian angels, not just in the clouds, but right there in the house, in the hallway. They had walked it together often whenever Lolita had slept over. Alexis and Joshua regularly went out on date nights and Lily was more than happy to accommodate them.

Wita pointed out the faces in the portraits on the wall. They looked quite dusty from the many workers who had clustered in the house shifting boxes, furnishings, or making dust clouds from the remodelling even earlier.

Lolita thought she would have to do some very high jumping in order to truly see the faces of these ancient people cluttered on the walls. They didn't look like angels to her. Where were their wings? Why were they all in only black and white? She wondered why they weren't in colour? Maybe that was why they looked so serious. They must have all been sad to live in a world where everything was just black and

white. Lolita figured that if she bounced high enough she might be able to draw some colour and maybe smiles on some of those sad faces with her special Magic Markers.

“*Mijita*, these are your family,” Lily gestured at the pictures, as she lifted Lolita up on her hip. Then shifting Lolita to her other hip, Wita walked by each of the portraits of Lolita’s ancestors. Wita pointed out how beautiful each of the ladies was. She had already explained the portrait of her great grandmother Dolores that hung in the bedroom. Lolita had heard, like a thousand times, that she was named after her because Alexis and Wita kept telling her over and over and over. Why do grownups repeat themselves so much, Lolita wondered. She knew more than they thought, but she didn’t want them to think she did. And in this moment Lolita just laughed and squirmed wanting to get down and run back and forth in the space to take in all the portraits, or these so-called guardian angels, from her mere three feet in height perspective.

All of a sudden the phone rang, enabling Lolita to run off as Wita walked into the kitchen to answer it. Lolita could hear Wita laughing and talking so she decided to go into her bedroom. Lolita loved lying on the stuffed pillows and chenille bedspread. She noticed also that Wita’s gold bracelet with that funny black design on it sitting on the night stand. Lolita reached to pick it up and slip it onto her tiny wrist, but first she felt bound to stand before the portrait of Dolores. Lolita thought she saw something odd, a fast sort of flutter. She wasn’t sure but she thought that her great grandmother or as Wita told her, “That’s your *bisabuela*, Lolita!” was winking at her. Lolita turned her back on the portrait playfully and counted to three. Then she planned on turning around fast just to check. Maybe she’d even count to five out loud in Spanish because she knew just enough.

“*Cuatro, cinco—*”

“*Seis, siete—*” Lolita heard as she turned back and stared. Dolores just stared right back.

“Nine . . .” said Lolita as she held up her fingers to help with her counting.

“Ten!” said Dolores with a grin and a twinkle in her eyes as Lolita watched her great grandmother’s lips move.

“Are you my . . . are you my *bis ab. . . abue—*”

“Just call me Dolores, *mi cielo.*” Lolita felt sure that rather than just her great grandmother, this lady was truly an angel looking down at her, maybe even a princess with her pretty face, large eyes, and dark chocolaty lips. Her long dress shimmered. Her skin looked almost like French vanilla ice cream, Lolita’s favourite. The jewellery Dolores wore on her ears and around her neck sparkled like magic. Lolita was about to ask her who that man behind her in the picture really was because she couldn’t remember what her mommy had told her about him.

“Lolita?” said Wita. Lolita froze, so did the portrait. Lolita saw Wita walking very slowly up the hall toward her. “*Mijita,*” asked Wita, “who are you talking to?”