ELLEN'S CAMERA

Kathleen Hughes

"Few people keenly realize how imperfectly memory can recall the many details which a collection of pictures could have recorded with complete accuracy." **p. 162**

How To Make Good Pictures, Eastman Kodak Co., Rochester, NY 1948

It was a hot August Wednesday when I watched Hazel leave her perch in that front window and go to backgammon club. I was drinking a glass of iced coffee and watching a big rolling flap of paint wave back and forth on my garage in the puff of a breeze. Maybe only a month had passed since the Wilson family moved out, and soon the graduate students would move in. It's a white clapboard house thirty yards to the west of me, obscured by some terribly overgrown Douglas Fir trees. The house is in decent shape, with a nice porch. No trim. There's nothing special or undiscovered about the house that I could see anyway—no one is about to come in and restore it, plant Zinnias in the side flower beds, and paint it lavender. Maybe there are three bedrooms—two upstairs, one off the living room, a big kitchen, nice wood floors, big windows, and a great yard. But the icicles that hang off that roof in the winter! The place needs reinsulating badly, the porch could use righting, and, probably, the kitchen wants new appliances.

The house was built in the 30s like all the rest of ours in the neighborhood, except for Hazel's Bedford Limestone ranch affair. There used to be an old pine ice house on Hazel's lot, from 1820 or thereabouts, but it collapsed in '53 or '54, right when Hazel and her husband, now long gone, were looking to build. And that low, long thing is what they built.

Come afternoon, I set my glass in the sink and headed to the garage. There I picked up the screws, my portable drill, and the birdhouse inside of which I had arranged the camera so that the lens was almost flush with the hole where the birds slip in and out. There was a wedge of sorts beneath the camera so that the lens could look down and this tilt kept the lens from being exactly flush with the hole.

I walked across my yard and through the stifling evergreens to the kitchen window on the side of the white house. The window had two panes; one approximately three feet wide by five feet tall, and the second, above it, maybe three feet wide by a foot and a half tall. The bottom right corner (as you face it from the outside) of the second window was my target. I leaned the ladder against the house carefully and climbed up. I had already mounted corner brackets on the bottom of the birdhouse and I secured it to the house by driving four screws into the trim which divided and framed the window.

Marty told me that Gene Roberts, the owner, had rented the house to a group of graduate students. Marty was whining about it because he was sure they would have parties and that cups and beer cans would blow into his yard, which touched Roberts' at one corner.

Marty is lazy and ornery and he cares mostly about the New York Jets, even though he's lived in Ohio since before the franchise started. Marty hates trash in his yard.

"Oh Marty," I said to him one day at the fence dividing our yards. "Maybe they'll invite you to some parties."

"I don't want to be invited to parties!" he boomed. "I want a clean, quiet family neighorhood!"

"Well," I said.

Hazel, on the other hand, was likely to be waiting on their doorstep with a fresh loaf of banana bread when the students' overpacked cars pulled into the driveway. It could seem like she just had an intuition for such things as the moment of arrival; but I know that she's just a really good spy. Her bay window is like the neighborhood bifocal.

Marty and Hazel don't work, so it's no wonder they spend their time and energies like old people. I've been semi-retired myself for five years, but I'm still on the payroll for 20 hours a week with the admissions office at the university. Gives me a little money, a reason to get out of bed in the morning. I go in, get a stack of applications, read them at home, give a few notes, and return them for someone else to read. I look at charts and figures about our enrollment and demographics and all that. Try to keep up.

"Don't wait for something spectacular to happen, or you will certainly waste good opportunities. More often than not, the snapshots of everyday become the most precious of all." **p. 82**

The camera belonged to Ellen. It was her favorite camera. The most expensive one, too, if I recall our homeowner's insurance detail. A *Hasselblad*. It makes me feel like I should be working in a science lab just to say it, it sounds so serious. I remember Ellen saying that they took Hasselblads to the moon but had to leave them there so that they could fit moonrocks on the capsule returning. I like to imagine two Hasselblads swimming in the empty Sea of Tranquillity up there. She also said Hasselblads were the cameras used to take pictures in the Bikinis and at Trinity during nuclear testing, which I like to imagine less than the moon.

Ellen's last project was getting that camera planted out of sight in the county lock-up, the Ground Round, and Mead Elementary for a few days. It had attachments for time lapse pictures, like they use for TV ads to show you how stains disappear and how plants grow. She wanted to take pictures of mundane, or *quotidian* things, she used to say—customers at a restaurant, school children, dental patients, prisoners. People thought she was crazy. But a few years ago they still shrugged their shoulders and accepted what they didn't understand. "Sure, Mrs. Cisel," they'd say, "where would you like to put it?" Ellen was famous around town because she had shows at the university museum every now and then, and this probably helped convince people to let her take their pictures.

Marty says the city violence today is all about people misunderstanding each other and everyone losing trust. "Don't go to Dayton, Joe," he said one morning when I was on my way to my car and he was in his backyard doing his daily stretch—arms overhead with the rolled-up newspaper in one hand, cheeks puckered. Wore an old plaid robe and terrible furry slippers. I can never believe he actually goes outside like that. "Don't go to Dayton," he said again. "See? Drive-in shooting." He waved the paper at me.

"Drive-*by*," I said.

"Huh?" Marty said.

I just waved. "OK, Marty, thanks."

"There's no trust in this country anymore! No trust!" I could still hear him when I got into the garage. I've always thought Marty should have been a politician or a preacher. Maybe a football coach. Talks slow enough, gets real excited, and likes the sound of his own voice. But I suppose he has a point—it certainly used to be that people trusted each other more, otherwise Ellen would never have gotten her camera into their places.

Marty asked Ellen if she would put a camera in his living room one summer to take pictures as he watched TV and shooed away the squirrels on his bird feeder by spraying them with a pink water gun. "I'm the average American guy, Ellen," he said to her at the Fourth of July block party. "You should have pictures of me." He had a Schlitz in one hand and a hot dog in the other.

"I have plenty of pictures of you, Mart," Ellen said, tapping her temple with her index finger. "The old silver acetate in the brain trick."

Marty laughed his deep booming laugh. Ellen could have said anything to Marty; he thought the world of her. He was always the first one to show up at her local openings and at her lectures. "Got new pictures to show me?" he'd ask her right off.

"Sure," Ellen said.

He clenched his fists and pumped one in the air like it was a victory. "That's my girl!" he said. It made Ellen laugh.

Hazel still goes to those block parties. On the Fourth of July, She wears a white hat like you see on barbershop quartets with a wide red, white and blue ribbon around it, and she hands out flags. "Grannie Hazel, Grannie Hazel," the kids say, crowding around her. "Do you have candies?"

"Did your mommy and daddy say okay?" she asks them, looking around to

find some parents' eyes.

The kids nod as if their lives depend on it, and Hazel gives them red, white, and blue suckers and flags. She loves it. Tells me about it every July 5th or 6th when she brings me some beans from her garden. I always tell her she should call Willard Scott and invite him some year, *before* she's the Smucker's birthday girl.

"Oh Joe," she says. "You're so funny."

"I am Hazel," I say back to her. "That I am."

"You should come to the Labor Day party. You would love it, Joe. It would do you some good."

"I don't think so, Hazel."

"Well then you should come for dinner or Pinochle sometime soon. With me and Marty. Maybe my cousin Frieda from Columbus."

"Thanks for the beans, Hazel," I say.

"Think about it, Joe."

Hazel's not that old, maybe seventy-one. She's young enough to still eat steak—I've seen the meat wrappers from her trash blowing around. She gets them one at a time from the butcher. $3.99 a pop for an 8 oz. New York Strip. I buy two or four and freeze them, then grill them one by one.

"Remember in the first place, that it is a good rule, though not an invariable one, not to have people looking directly at the camera... Sometimes this will require a little thought and planning on your part, and perhaps some cooperation from your subjects." **p. 83**

With the contact sheets from the time lapse series, Ellen was just as thrilled, or more, if one frame was exactly the same as the next, as she was if the figures were all scrambled up and moving between frames. She fell in love with a little girl who was eating a hot dog at the Ground Round and looking straight at the camera. "I can't imagine how she found the camera," Ellen said. "No one ever does. Look at this."

We were sitting in the kitchen finishing our Sunday morning poached eggs on white toast. I wiped my hands with a napkin, and took the contact sheet and the magnifying eye from her. The child had mud pie eyes, deep and wide, and was biting into a hot dog. She had, sure enough, found the camera which was mounted high over her head.

"Kids have that talent, you know," I said. "Seeing things adults miss."

"Look at the next frame," Ellen said. "One to the right."

I did. "She's gone. Her hot dog is there on the table but she's gone." I looked through the rest of the sheet and the child was nowhere. Her parents and a little brother were still there, carrying on, but her chair was empty. "Wow," I said. "How about that." I handed the sheet back to Ellen.

"Yeah, how about that," Ellen said. She was quiet about those shots for a few days. But looked at them all the time. I always suspected that she saw or discovered something in that disappearing child that she was afraid to ever say out loud to me or anyone else. "It's just so sad to me," she said.

"Sad how?" I asked. "It's not like the kid is gone gone. She's just gone from the pictures."

"That's 'gone'," she said. But that's all she would say.

I didn't know how to use Ellen's cameras when she was alive so I never took pictures of her. And she never did any self-portraits. But I came across her equipment last spring when I was looking for binoculars to loan Hazel for her church birding trip. God knows how long it had been since I went in to her darkroom. Right after she died I had planned to convert the dark room into a greenhouse or office or something. But I never got around to it. So when I opened the door one day in April, her smell was still there. The smells of those chemicals, acrid and warm and wet. And hand lotion, not perfumey, but soap clean.

I fumbled for the light switch, flipped it on. The room was a virtual twin of the laundry room. Rectangular with one window to the side yard, and a door onto the back hallway. We had split a larger room in half when Ellen decided she couldn't work in the bathroom anymore. With the big white porcelain sink and white metal counter and cabinets which we moved from the old kitchen, the dark room didn't have much standing space. "Just enough for me is all I need," Ellen said when I tried to convince her to move the wall back even more into the laundry room. "It's cozy."

I was surprised to find the room so tidy; I guess I expected to find prints hanging from clips and basins lined up with tongs hanging off the side. But that day, the clothesline ran from wall to wall with the clips empty, and basins were stacked in one corner. The old blue button-down of mine she would put on over her clothes was still on the hook behind the door. Under the sink there were gallons of unopened fixer and developer and stopbath. A heavy canvas drape covered the window, and it occurred to me that the room had literally not seen the light of day in probably two years.

Ellen would never let me clean the place out because she never believed that she was done in there. "This afternoon," she'd say in the mornings. "This afternoon I need to check on a wash I'd like to try." Or, at night she'd say, "Tomorrow morning. First thing. To the darkroom with me, okay?"

"Okay," I'd say.

But finally Hazel went in there when I was getting dressed for the funeral. She and Marty had come over to drive me. Marty sat at the kitchen table, reading the paper. I was tying my tie and then just sitting on the bed, not wanting to join Marty. Or Hazel in the dark room taking down the long-dried prints and contact sheets and putting them in a box; dumping the basins and rinsing them out; grouping and collecting and capping and ordering everything else. It was March and it snowed that day. I noticed later, at the luncheon, that Hazel's shirt was discolored right near the left cuff, and also at the waist in one spot. I recognized it immediately as chemical stain from one of the basins. She hadn't known to wear a smock or coverall.

It's hard to believe that I had neglected the dark room. But I suppose I never went in there in the first place, so it was easy not to miss. Sure, when I walked past the door on my way out the back or to the laundry room, I some-

times caught myself thinking *Ellen might just be in there, wouldn't that be a nice surprise.* But I guess I never stopped to ask myself just how long it had been since I went in.

That day in April, after a minute of just looking, I pulled the drape off the window, opened it. The Hasselblad, with the timing mechanism still plugged in, sat on the counter next to the window and I went to it, picked it up carefully. It looked much different than I remembered. Heavier, too—probably three or four pounds. The sides are a sort of rippled leather, nothing like the smooth hard plastic of today's fancy superautomatics. The Hasselblad looks more like a surveyor's device than anything you'll see around some guy's neck at the Eiffel Tower or on the sidelines of a basketball game. There isn't even a way to attach a strap. It is rectangular with right-angled edges, and the body is slightly longer than it is tall or wide. The lens itself is maybe two inches in diameter. And there's no viewfinder in back. Instead you press down a lever on the side and two doors on top of the camera pop open. You hold the camera at your waist and look into it. You put your thumb on the shutter release.

I ran one hand all the way around it, expecting to find grooves from where she held the camera. And I kept expecting to remember something about her that I'd forgotten until just that moment. But that was just me being a sentimental old man, I suppose. Besides, after a while, she hardly ever held the Hasselblad. It was usually mounted someplace.

"Misfortunes though they are, fires are a part of community life definitely worth recording...If you are a 'fire chaser,' always take along your camera." **p. 98**

If it had been a little Kodak or something, I might have played with the camera until I got it right. But faced with the Hasselblad, I decided to consult the camera store next to the old pharmacy downtown. Walked in one Wednesday afternoon with the Hasselblad and the timer. Young blonde guy with an earring whistled softly through his teeth when I set the camera on the counter. "500 ELM," he said. "What a camera."

"Um-hmm," I said. "Well I'm not exactly sure how to use it. And I'm wondering if you could help me out."

"Okay," he said, waiting for a specific question.

"Okay," I said, "what, um, is this dial for?" I pointed to the dial on the top left of the body which was calibrated as 1, 4, 8, 15, 60, 125, 250, 500, 1000.

"That's your shutter speed. '1' means the shutter is open for one second; '1000' means it's open for one-thousandth of a second. The faster something is moving, the higher your shutter speed needs to be. Otherwise you get blurry pictures."

"And this?" I pointed to the dial on the top right.

"Film speed. 100 speed film, 100 on the dial. Up to a 1000 speed. You know this camera takes 70 millimeter film?"

I nodded, feeling more idiotic all the time. I, of course, had not known this. "And the numbers on the lens dial?" I said.

"Aperture. How wide the shutter opens. f32, all the way to the right," and

he turned the dial gently to show me, "means the smallest hole. We call it 'depth of field.' f32 has the deepest depth of field. That's good for landscapes. On the other end," he said turning the dial all the way to the left, "is 1.8, which is the biggest opening, and the shallowest depth of field. The most focused on a single object." He watched me carefully and I felt like I did when I decided to change the oil in the car all by myself and asked Kurt at the garage for a quick tutorial.

I wished I'd noted where Ellen had left the dials. I thanked the man, and started to leave. I would figure out the timer on my own, I decided.

"Hey, I'm happy to answer other questions if you have them," he said. He reached a card out to me as I pushed against the door and the tinny bells there jingled.

I stepped back and took it. "Thanks again."

When I got home, I happily discovered that the timing mechanism was simple. Set the needle where you want it, like an oven timer. *5 S, 10 S, 30 S, 1 M, 5 M, 15 M, 30 M, 45 M, 60 M, 75 M, 90 M, 105 M, 120 M.* The timer itself was probably two inches wide by three inches long, and didn't weigh more than a couple of ounces. And there was an outlet of sorts on the bottom of the camera where you plugged it in.

Leftover film still filled an entire drawer in the dark room, so I loaded the camera the way I remembered Ellen doing it and hoped I was right. The film itself was twice as big as the Kodak rolls you see in the drug store. And sure enough, when I looked on the canister, it said '70 MM.'

I left the shutter speed dial at 250, and the aperture dial on the lens right in the middle, at 8. I set the timer for 30 S. I placed the camera on the kitchen table and aimed it at the bird feeder outside the window. I had squirrel problems just like Marty, but I never wasted my time shooting them with water pistols. I started by buying a metal "squirrel shield" for $12 at Miller's, which I didn't need the camera to tell me didn't work at all. So then I got a hanging feeder and I hung it far away from any branches from which they could light. The pictures were terrible, very faint, but you could barely make out the squirrels' frustrations with this new tricky swinging feeder. Squirrels are crazy, persistent little creatures. They never stop trying to get to that food. The pictures came nearly totally white, with barely darker almost holographic images of them just above the feeder, claws stretched out like landing gear, waiting to find the edge of the thing; or just below the feeder, still with their claws extended even though they already missed.

When I picked up the pictures at the store, the blonde haired guy, I knew his name was Andy from the card, said, "hey, by the way, how old is the film you're using? It looks pretty worn out from the pictures."

"Oh sure," I said. "How stupid of me. Here I thought it was my fault all along. The film is at least two years old."

"Well then, have some more," he said, and reached into a drawer, fumbled around for a minute, and rolled three black canisters towards me.

I reached for my wallet.

"No, hey, don't worry about it."

I shrugged and left the store. "Thanks a lot," I said. It had never occurred to me that someone else always sees your pictures when you pay to have them developed. It seemed embarassing, somehow, like undressing at night with the shades up.

After emptying the dark room drawer of the old canisters, I decided to set the camera in my front porch so that it could watch Hazel at her bifocal bay window, to see how often she really was there. I took a chance and set the aperture lower, on '4' since I really only wanted to see Hazel. An old Kodak book, which I finally found in the coupon drawer, said that lower aperture settings were good for taking pictures of people.

I found out I was right. Except for Wednesdays between one and three, when she goes to backgammon club, Hazel spends almost every waking hour sitting in that window. It seems like she knits, reads, talks on the phone, files her nails, writes, most everything, while sitting in there. Of course the camera was too far away to see what she was really doing—so then I knew I had to set the camera right up against Roberts' window if I wanted to see what the students were up to. But it looked like Hazel could be knitting, sewing, reading, filing, etc.. And it didn't seem like anything missed her attention. There's a two-way street and two sidewalks in between our houses. Any time someone or something passed—a car on the road, a kid on a bike, or a woman walking her dog on the sidewalk, Hazel looked up.

In the afternoon anyway, I could tell for sure if her head was up because sunbeams falling in her front window would catch her glasses—it would turn her lenses completely white, strangely enough. They were whiter than white—whiter than the trim on her window. I guessed it had something to do with light absorption or a simple reflection. I asked Andy at the camera store about it. "Lens flare," he said. "It's when something reflects back into the camera lens." I smiled at the irony—it was like we were cancelling each other out, me and Hazel.

Ellen used to say that we lived in a neighborhood of crazy watchers. I was one of them, even, she said. It came from living in a small town for too long.

"You're a photographer—what else do you do besides watch?" I said to her once.

"I look, and I see," she said. "I don't watch. The camera watches."

"I don't see the difference."

"I know," she said. "In Paris—" she started to say.

"You think because you lived in Paris that you're better than all of us small town folk." I laughed.

"No," she said. "I've just seen more. People here are compulsive watchers. Like if they look away, just for a minute, something will disappear."

"Won't it?" I said.

"The eye must not suspect it is being led. But it should like being led." **p. 65**

The jail cell series interested Ellen the least. Probably because the prisoners assumed there was always some sort of surveillance camera trained on them,

she said. She said there was nothing natural about what they were doing.

"But they're not normal," I said to her. "They're criminals. Criminals aren't normal."

"I don't think you really believe that, Joe," she said. "Think about it. There are people in there for very human crimes. Bookmaking. Petty thievery. Even prostitution. Crimes old and natural as the caves," she said. "It's not Charles Manson in there."

She was holding up the contact sheets that had pictures of these guys on it. Moon faced, half of them, like they were more innocent than Adam before Eve; the other half looked like they could speak volumes, but wouldn't. They were shaven and unshaven, tight skinned and lean like a mongoose, or loose and fat like sea lions. They leaned to each other to light a cigarette for a smoke, or to whisper something conspiratorial. Some hugged to the corners of the cell as if that ninety degree angle was the crux of their lives.

"Wait," I said. "What about the murderers and swindlers and rapists." I pointed to one guy who sat on the toilet all day long, clothes on. "You can't expect them to be natural because they aren't normal people."

"It's not that their movements aren't natural," she said. "It's that they hardly move at all, like that guy on the toilet. That's unnatural. He's completely closed up. I'm surprised, frankly," she said. "Anyway, why can't abnormal people have natural movements. Normal and natural aren't the same thing."

I shrugged. The men in jail didn't seem normal or natural to me; but it was Ellen, after all, who was taking the pictures. She was the photographer.

She was going to try again and put the camera in a different place in the jail cell. Someplace crazily hidden like in a ventilation pipe or something. She said she thought a different angle might add new life, new movement to the picture. But she was too sick when they called to talk about it.

"Your eyes and your film see differently." **p. 119**

I have wondered if she ever thought about putting the camera on herself for a few days. It is almost too horrible a thought to admit having. But I wonder if she wasn't thinking it. I'll never know, I suppose, but I *am* glad not to have those pictures lying around.

What does it look like to die? I saw Ellen die. But I still couldn't say. She had always been my eye, telling me what to look for. And the last two weeks, she kept saying, "Close your eyes Joe. Don't look at me." I didn't close my eyes, even though she closed hers, ,and I said mine were closed, like in church when everyone is told to bow his head and one child keeps looking up, cheating. I kept watching her. Yet now, I have no idea what she looked like when she died. I just see her short hair in a headband and green eyes and left dimple as they always were, which is not quite smiling, but amused or pleased, and her hands, holding a camera or extended to me with a contact sheet or print or a flash to hold.

"*While disturbing, bad distortion is to be avoided in the truly artistic photo-*

graph, but it is possible to obtain interesting pictures from unusual points of view even though the perspective is a bit violent." **p. 88**

I had taken pictures of the squirrels, of Hazel, and of crocuses and daffodils opening up in the morning. I was getting better at it. I had used apertures 4, 5.6, and 8, and shutter speeds 125, 250, 500, 1000. Of course I couldn't much tell the difference in the pictures that resulted. One day Andy handed an envelope of pictures back to me. "You should try developing your own film," he said. "That's where the real satisfaction starts. I know of some great dark room space if you're interested."

"I've got my own dark room," I said. "Used to be my wife's actually."

"Uh-huh," he said.

I borrowed a book about developing from him and said I'd be back with questions.

All the leases on Mr. Roberts' house begin August 1. The Wilsons moved out in early July, but I guessed correctly that the new kids wouldn't show up until sometime mid-August. I put the camera up without film on the 10th with the bird house around it for weather and camouflage. I mounted it on the kitchen window, not in any bedroom or bathroom or anything. I'm no pervert; I didn't hope to see them naked or anything like that—I didn't even know if it would be women or men living there when I put the camera up. Ellen wanted to see what people did in a small city jail; I guess I wanted to see what new graduate students did in their kitchen. Anyway, the house was right there. I could put the camera up without asking or telling anyone and I could keep track of it very easily.

Around the fourteenth, two cars packed to the gills showed up and started unloading. Two days later, I started going over around five am to load some film into the camera and set the timer. I had rigged the birdhouse so that the back side was hinged and swung open so that I could get to the camera quickly. The first day I set the timer for every hour; the third day I set it for every half hour; and the fourth day I set it for every fifteen minutes.

I had been reading the book Andy gave me pretty carefully. I had, of course, everything I would need in Ellen's dark room. So I tried developing that first roll by myself, but couldn't get anything to work. I went back to Andy and asked him what might be wrong. He looked at the contact sheet, which was completely black. We went through the list. I had done things in the correct order: Developer, Stopbath, Fixer. Yes, the room was completely dark. "Where'd you buy your chemicals?" he asked finally.

"Oh, I have them. Ellen had a lot."

Andy smiled and seemed embarrassed. "Of chemicals."

"Yeah, at least two years."

"That's your problem." He went over to the store's chemical stash and returned with a bottle of fixer. "Can I ask if your wife is Ellen Cisel?"

"Yes."

Andy said, "I love her work. What an eye. No wonder you have such great

equipment." He looked at me for a moment, too serious for someone in his early twenties. "Wow," he said and pushed the bottle towards me. "Fixer's on me," he said.

"You running a tab for me?" I laughed.

Andy shook his head and smiled.

* * *

With new fixer, I tried again, but of course made another mistake—this time of dipping backwards—in the fixer first instead of the developer. The sheet turned completely white, like Hazel's glasses and like the edges of prints before they're cropped.

I finally got it right with the second sheet. There were a few pictures of the kids on it, but mostly it was an empty kitchen at different times of day, or nothing at all—easily 20% of the frames didn't work. The girls were busy with registration and getting settled. Plus it was hot out and I didn't see any air conditioners in the windows. It's no wonder they were never home! Every now and then I wondered if the girls had spotted the camera, but I reassured myself that I had done a good job hiding it.

I saw the girls coming in and out from time to time. They were all around twenty-three, I would guess. The same age Ellen was when I married her, I realized with a start one day. They were all medical or nursing students in scrubwear with thick text books under their arms. One girl had lovely blond curly hair but bad skin, poor girl; the second one wore glasses and a baseball hat with a long ponytail falling out the back; and the third one, I hardly ever saw—in fact I thought there might only be two for awhile. But I finally caught sight of the third one—she looked exotic. She had thick black curly hair and pale skin and she carried a woven bag and wore big jangly earrings.

The couple times I saw her were early in the morning or late at night, mostly when I couldn't sleep and was pacing my pace at the foot of the bed before the window that looked over both mine and Roberts' yards. I read once that in New England fishing towns, grooves were worn into the floorboards in front of seaside windows from wives pacing in wait for their husbands' return on the boats. I've wondered if my own nocturnal walks won't do the same by the time I'm gone.

Anyway, the shots from late September were clear as a bell—they captured all three of them. The blond-haired girl with bad skin, whom I decided to call Kate, studied at night at the kitchen table with juice. Dark juice like grape or cranberry. The one with glasses became Lisa, and she studied in the kitchen in the morning and took lots of notes, which accumulated from frame to frame for three hours. The third girl, the exotic one, I couldn't name. She never studied in the kitchen from what I could tell. But she cooked. She cooked everything in a big black skillet—the kind Ellen used to make meatballs and hash in. While the skillet was on the stove, this girl danced around with her arms held high and her head rolling around like the music was just irresistible, although I guessed that there wasn't any music playing except in her head since it was three am and her roommates were presumably asleep. Every now and then she stirred what was in the skillet which looked like a big bunch of mush. And when she ate, she

was standing up. She never sat.

The girls were hardly ever all there at once. Two were there sometimes together, drinking coffee. I don't think they knew each other before moving in together. Or at least the dancing girl didn't know the other two. Lisa and Kate laughed and talked sometimes. After a few weeks, I even got a picture of Kate rubbing Lisa's neck while she rested her head on an open book. If the three were together, Kate and Lisa usually sat or worked or did something near each other, while dancing girl was doing something alone, just off from them.

Pacing in the middle of the night, I sometimes found myself wondering if the dancing girl was in the kitchen, dancing. Or was she someplace else? I wondered if she had friends that just weren't her roommates. I worried that she was alone so much. Maybe she was never around because she had found my camera. I thought, if any of the three were to find it, it would be her. Sometimes I wonder if I didn't want her to find it.

"When you are photographing the full figure, watch the position of all parts: the feet, for example. And remember that curves, not angles, make for beauty and harmony." **p. 158**

Ellen would have told me I was a silly old man. She used to say that we really did the same thing. I made and looked at pictures of people in words on the applications; she made and looked at pictures of people in film. Sometimes when I looked at her subjects I gave them SAT scores, class ranks, and extracurricular activities.

"This one looks like a definite debate club champion."

"No way," Ellen would say. "Potter."

"How can you say that?" I countered. "Look how straight she's standing."

"Artists don't have to slouch, Joe," she said, punching me in the stomach.

"Okay then, her father is a lawyer and she is a debate club champion and a potter."

"You always see the parents in these kids," Ellen said, taking the pictures out of my hands and getting up from the kitchen table. "I love how much family history you see in them, in their faces. You're my perfect audience."

"Of course I'm your perfect audience. I'm your husband."

"No, but you see what I care about."

"You taught me. Anyway, what else is someone at age 18 if he's not his parents? No 18-year old has been out in the world enough to know himself so well, to be separate from the people who raised him."

"I'm sure some eighteen year olds would disagree with you."

"I don't really know any eighteen year olds," I said, but Ellen had gone down the hall to her darkroom.

"Watch the hands carefully. They look better if they are partly closed than if they are held tightly clenched or with fingers fully extended. Furthermore, do not let them protrude too far forward from the body, or they will photograph out of proportion to the face." **p. 158**

The doctors gave her twelve to sixteen months at first. Said there was an outside chance of beating it. But because there were tumors in two different parts of her body—first in her breast and then in her abdomen—they said it proved the cancer had already metastasized. We got through the mastectomy and the stomach surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, the whole nine yards. She was brave. Sick as a dog most of the time. And she had two big thick scars that hurt and itched and reminded her just how bad off she was.

Hazel brought over big pots of beef bouillon and she sat next to Ellen in the living room with a full, warm mug for her, rubbing Ellen's feet and hands while I went out. Hazel had a daughter die of breast cancer really young. She was so good to Ellen, and to me, during those months. And she and Ellen were never particular friends. Sometimes when Hazel came over I just took walks. Up past the old market near Mead Elementary, over through the elm-lined sidewalks of the University, down past the practice fields. I liked to watch the women's field hockey team practice. Not a sport you see very often, but it takes some skill. I would look at my watch and see I'd been gone an hour, and I would rush home with a bouquet of daisies from the grocery store and a plain Hershey bar that I would break into squares, then into half-squares. We'd eat them slowly for dessert.

No matter how many times I told her not to, Hazel always cleaned up the kitchen. She'd disappear when I returned, then peek back in the living room before she left, and usually Ellen was asleep with her arm still on the arm rest and her feet still crossed. "Call if you need me, Joe," she said in a whisper.

"Thanks, Haze," I said. "Thanks."

When we were packing for her last round of chemo, Ellen said, "I feel like the hero in a Greek tragedy." She was sitting in the armchair next to the window in our bedroom where she used to toss her clothes when she took them off at night. "Except I don't have any children to kill or follow to Hades. And Athena isn't my guardian angel."

I was folding two pairs of her underwear, which I knew they wouldn't let her wear at the hospice anyway but which I simply couldn't not pack. I went to her in the chair then and kneeled down, kissed her forehead and eye and nose. "You want kids now, is that it?"

She shook her head and laughed, and it was so good to hear her laugh. "Who's going to look after you, Joe?" she said after a moment. "We never thought of this. We never thought about one of us dying so much before the other. How could we have skipped that?"

What could I say? I kissed her again and picked up her hand. "I've got friends, Ellen. We live in a good neighborhood. They'll look after me. Think of how good Hazel's been to us."

It was the only time Ellen cried, believe it or not, except for when the doctor first told us. Tears running down her face then, she was quiet, and she said, "you didn't want kids, did you? You weren't just agreeing with me, were you?"

"God no," I said, "No." Although I suppose I knew then that if she'd wanted

them, I would've gladly had them. But I never said this to her.

In the end Ellen only got thirteen months, and she died before she could assemble the time lapse series and send them to anyone in New York or Chicago or San Francisco.

"Do you want me to send them out for you?" I asked one day in December when she didn't get out of bed.

"You do what you want," Joe, she said. "If you want to keep them, keep them. If you want to try and get them shown, do that too.""

"Between exposure and the process of development, the picture is a latent image; it is in the sensitive coating of the film, but invisible and unusable."
p. 209

It was November when I caught a glimpse of the contact sheets of the girls stacked up in the dark room. I said to myself, Joe, you're crazy. Someone's gonna arrest you if they get in here and find this stuff. You're gonna have to quit it. Invite them over for dinner, but quit spying on them. So I decided to take one more roll, and then wait until Thanksgiving break and hope the girls were all leaving for at least one day so I could get up there with a hammer and get the thing off.

Thursday before Thanksgiving, then, I slipped up the ladder for the last time. It had been dark at 6:30am for a long time now. Cold snap had hit, it was the first morning in the 30s. My hands were stiff as boards as I got the camera out and closed the birdhouse back up. Made a pot of tea first thing when I got back home, and started to work on the film.

When I saw the contact sheet, I swore for a minute that the camera had broken and taken the same frame all at once, 36 shots. But then I looked carefully at the time code on the negatives and saw that something had gone amiss with the timer—probably I had made a mistake—so that it was set on five minute intervals. All 36 shots, or three and some hours' worth, were all the same shot. They each had the dancing girl sprawled on the floor with her eyes open, looking straight up at the camera like the girl eating a hot dog in the Ground Round. I was so startled by it—she looked so dead—that I spilled my tea into one of the basins, ruining a blow up I was doing of her dancing back in September. She lay in the same position every time. Left arm sprawled over her head, right arm straight down at her side. She was only wearing a t-shirt and it was gathered up around her stomach so that I could see her very skimpy underwear and skinny thighs. But it was her eyes that got me. I was sure she was dead. That's what it looks like, I said to myself. She's dead.

I couldn't remember if I had looked in the kitchen window when I was taking the film out. But I didn't recall seeing her there. So I left the darkroom and paced around my own kitchen for about twenty minutes. Finally, I couldn't wait any longer. I decided to go back and see if the girl was dead on the floor. So I put my jacket back on and grabbed some gloves. Walked out the front door and started crossing the yard.

"Hey," someone called out as I approached the house

I turned to my left and there she was. The dancing girl was coming down her front steps with her coat on.

"Does the camera belong to you?" she said. She was smirking, like she thought it was funny.

"Yes." I looked around for the other house mates. "You're OK?" I said, trying to catch the breath I'd lost in my surprise.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" she said and she extended her arms, turned a circle. "How long have you been taking my picture?" she asked. "Are there cameras any place else in the house? Now I'm afraid to shower." She laughed.

"Oh no, no," I said. "Just the kitchen. It's a time lapse camera —it was my wife's," I said. I kept thinking, oh no, oh god, Joe. She's gonna call the police. You've done it now. But she just kept turning circles slowly. I thought she might be drunk for a minute, except that she seemed perfectly steady.

"Well," I said, walking back to my front door. "I'll let you go. Sorry to have disturbed you."

She stopped turning for a second. "I'm not going anywhere. Where were you going?"

"I thought I'd go make some tea," I lied.

"No. When you came outside. Where were you going when you came outside?" she said.

I reached the front steps, stopped. "To check on you. I thought you were dead."

"Really? I was that convincing?" She laughed.

"To me anyway," I said. "Yes. You were convincing."

"I'd like to see those pictures," she said. "I bet I'm not convincing at all. I work with cadavers every day. I know what death looks like and I bet I was nothing close."

I started up the steps again. "I'll make a print for you," I said. "Right now there's only a contact sheet."

"Great. Better take the camera down before my roommates see it. They'll call the police on you," she said.

"Well," I said, looking down at a nail sticking up on my porch. "Well," I said again. "I know I should've asked. And I'm sorry—I guess—" I said, fumbling. "I guess I didn't think there was much trust around anymore. I thought you'd say no." I couldn't believe I was quoting Marty, but it was all I could think to say. I looked up.

She was looking straight at me. "Hey," she said. "By the way. I can sleep with my eyes open. I taught myself when I was a kid. I saw the camera last night and I couldn't resist. I'm sorry if I scared you. But you're right—you should've asked to take our picture. It would've been okay. We would've trusted you."

I nodded, looked for the nail again, tried to think of something else to say. "How did you find the camera?" I asked. But she didn't respond, and when I looked back up, she was gone. The front screen door to her house was slapping shut loudly.

I went back to the darkroom, collected all the contact sheets and prints of

the girls I could find, and burned them. Took it all to the old composting incinerator in the corner of the yard that Ellen used for a couple months one summer in the sixties. Poured a bit of lighter fluid on the papers, threw a match in. The flames were funny colors — blue and green and almost purple from the chemicals and metals on the paper. It took a long time for the stuff to really burn; the sheets seemed to melt first.

I breathed in, out, for what seemed like the first time since the dancing girl appeared dead on the contact sheets. I went inside and sat down, looking out the window every now and then to be sure it was all staying in the incinerator.

Ellen would say it served me right for not asking them if it was OK. And if Hazel or Marty ever found out about the camera, they would fry me for lunch. They would probably call the senior citizen center and have a bus come fetch me every Tuesday for bingo. I could've lost my job at the University and, well, I just could've gotten in a lot of trouble.

The birdhouse came down as soon as all the roommates went to class that day—eleven in the morning. I didn't care if Hazel or Marty or the whole neighborhood saw me up there. Figured I would just say I was fixing the birdhouse for the girls. But then I thought, why not just get a real birdhouse and put it up there. So I took the whole thing down, drove down to Miller's, bought a real birdhouse, and had it up there before four p.m. when Kate pulled in the driveway.

The dancing girl never gave me away, not that I know of anyway. But I never saw her again either. And at the beginning of the second semester, when I saw a young man going in and out with armloads of stuff, I guessed the dancing girl had moved, or worse, dropped out. Maybe there really was something wrong with her. Maybe she didn't get along with the other girls. Or maybe I drove her away. There was one day when I got so desperate to know where she'd gone that I thought about searching the med school enrollment files. But then I remembered—I didn't even know her name.

"Slight underexposure or overprinting will produce moonlight effects."
p. 126

"How are you, Joe," Marty said one Wednesday in December when we met on the sidewalk coming back from the grocery store. "Don't see you out much these days. Are you getting out?"

"Yeah Marty," I told him. "I am."

"Good," he said. "Because I never see you. Nice gloves, those," he said, looking at my furlined deerskin work gloves. "You can come watch football with me any time, Joe," he said. "I know you don't love the Jets, but it's good to get out, you know?"

"Thanks Marty," I said. "I'll let you know when I'm free.

He shook his head at me and walked up his driveway. "We can watch a Bengals game if you like, Joe," he called when he got to his front door.

"Sure, I'll call you." I waved and turned the corner. "Thanks," I mouthed because I knew he couldn't hear me anyway. I watched him shuffle inside.

Marty used to be fat and Ellen used to say how much she hated to watch him walk from behind, because his gut sort of spilled out over the sides of his shirt, not just in front. She said it was grotesque; I told her not to be so mean.

Anyway, now his yard jackets and cardigans are loose and he doesn't look like a big pear. He shuffles when he walks instead of waddling.

* * *

I decided to invite Marty and Hazel over for dinner the other night. Marty kept inviting me over for TV, which I had no interest in doing, and Hazel sent me a invitation to her Holiday Open House a month in advance that just happened to be at the same time as the Admissions Office Holiday Tea. So I called them both up and asked them over for Saturday dinner. I made a big pot of beef stew. The carrots and potatoes were cut too big but the meat was nice and tender and it tasted good. Marty brought some pink table wine and Hazel baked some brownies.

"So you never invite us over, Joe," Marty said. "Haven't been here since the luncheon after Ellen's funeral. What's that, almost two years now? It's about time we all got together again!" Marty talked loudly, just like always.

I shrugged. "Why not," I said. "We're neighbors. Seemed like a good idea. Got me to clean the house."

"I think it's a grand idea," Hazel said, raising her glass of wine. "Cheers." Marty and I clinked glasses with her, and she winked at Marty. "You don't have any of Ellen's pictures up, Joe," Hazel said. "I must say I thought you would have put a lot of them up."

"Well," I said. "Actually I'm just cleaning out the dark room now and I think maybe I'll put some up when everything's been sorted through." The two of them looked at each other and I could tell they were thinking that I must have been in a bad way to have let it go for so long.

"I suppose children usually get us to clean out our houses when our spouses die or leave us," Hazel said and reached for the salt. Now, if Marty should have been a politician or football coach, Hazel should have been an advice columnist or home economics teacher.

"You're right about that Hazel," Marty said. "You're sure right about that."

I laughed because Hazel was the only of us who had ever had kids, and her daughter, like I said, died before Ellen. There just seemed to be no sense in her saying that, although I knew she was only trying to be nice.

"Well anyway," Marty said. "Thank god those girls in the Roberts house are nice. Hardly ever hear a peep out of them."

"They work so hard!" Hazel said. "There's always a light on somewhere in that house, someone up studying."

"Med students," I said, and got up to get second helpings of stew.

"I'm going to take them some Christmas cookies or zucchini bread," Hazel said. "Would you boys like me to make some for you?"

"Sure, Haze," Marty said. "Just watch your hand with the butter, so you don't give me a heart attack." He smiled across the table at her, then at me, and pounded his chest with one fist. "Ticker," he said. "Gotta take care of it."

"Any small part of a picture can be glorified in an enlargement." **p 225**

The pictures Ellen got in the second grade classroom at Mead Elementary were the best of all. Looking at them side by side with the jail cell ones showed me what she was talking about with natural and unnatural movements. Light haired, dark haired, tall, small, smiling kids running or carefully not-running every place they went. No hurry, just so much energy. Every movement was frozen only by the film, not at rest or frozen with tension like in the jail cell. Wide unguarded faces, open, active hands. The kids in those pictures are teenagers now. Driving even. Amazing how fast they grow, how time passes.

Ellen would probably have loved to track some of the kids down in a high school classroom and do another series of shots. I thought about doing it myself for a bit, because a town this size would certainly have a high school class with many of the same kids that were in the second grade together. But I asked myself, what would you do with the pictures? Sit around and look at them and imagine what their college applications will look like? Burn them in the incinerator? Send them off to galleries with Ellen's Mead Elementary series? I'm not the photographer Ellen was, after all; my pictures are smeary blurs of empty space compared with hers.

And besides, I wasn't sure I wanted to use the camera again after the incident with the dancing girl.

In the end I just chuckled at myself and went into the dark room and dumped the basins. Got some ammonia and water in a bucket and a rag and scrubbed the windows, then the countertops down real good. Pulled the drape off the window and put them in the washing machine for a minute, but then took them out and threw them away. They were filthy and old, and besides, the linen closet was full of stuff that was never used. I stacked the basins into one another and stored them under the sink. And all the bottles of solution went into one cabinet. Tongs and instruments I never figured out went into one drawer. All Ellen's old prints went into a seal-tight box. And then it was all clean. Floor needed work, but I decided to leave it for another day.

The only thing left sitting out was the Hasselblad. Heavy, square, simple, even antique looking. I looked at the camera for a minute, trying to decide whether to store it, sell it, display it somewhere, or maybe give it to Andy. But then I got an idea. I picked the camera up, grabbed the last roll out of the drawer I had just closed, and loaded the film into the regular well.

I walked to the kitchen and set the camera on top of the microwave facing me. Set the timer for three minute intervals. Started it. Made some Cream of Wheat and Coffee and drank a glass of apple cider while everything was brewing. I sat down, ate, watched the squirrels out the window still trying to get on my finch feeder. I read the paper. I heard the camera click, *click*, louder than I'd thought it would be. Once, I looked right at it as it clicked. I could actually see the shutter go. But after twenty minutes or so, I stopped hearing it, and began to wonder if it had stopped or if I'd just forgotten that I'd heard it. Finally I got up, put the dishes in the sink, got my jacket, and left.