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Twenty-seven Exposures

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Twenty-Seven Exposures

In 1992, my older brother disappeared on a family trip to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where my Aunt Helen was in the hospital, dying of cancer. Steven was ten years old then, a year older than me, and—if he is alive—will be thirty-four this September. I have not seen him since about 8:15 p.m., July 27, 1992—a distance in time of over twenty years—and so, maybe predictably, have gotten very attached to photographs.

The pictures arranged here were taken from a box full of papers, photos, and undeveloped disposable cameras I found in my mother's closet last year after her funeral. Most, though not all, of the images come from one camera in particular, a cheap wind-and-click that had been marked off from the others, placed in a plastic baggie by itself. Like evidence, I thought when I saw it—though there were no documents accompanying the camera, and though it was only a regular Ziploc, the kind my mother used to freeze leftovers. Even before I saw the label, there was something different about that camera to me, something almost sinister about the way that it, unlike all the others, had no layer of dust on its yellow cardboard sides, no dents or scratches on the plastic grips. It seemed both ready for use and completely, utterly used. Full. I held it and it felt heavier than the others, weighted differently. I became very afraid that I would drop it.

I developed the film from that camera separately from the others, later, after I'd packed and organized my mother's belongings so the house could be sold. In fact, I waited almost a week after I found it, until my drive home. Several hours from my house, in a Walgreens in Columbia, Missouri, I filled up the roll with throwaway pictures (there were two unused exposures) and waited an hour in the parking lot for the film to be developed. When I looked at the prints, I wasn't surprised by what I found. I knew what I was looking at; I had expected it. The images depicted a trip to the desert, and I looked to be about nine years old. Steven was in a number of the pictures, and then he was not.

There is nothing terrifying in these photos, and nothing that would have been particularly helpful to the police, either. But I am fascinated by my mother's decision not to develop the film, to seal it off in a bag, then a box, then the bottom of a closet. Was she afraid to look? Or would looking just have been redundant?

True to the poor film quality of disposable cameras and the haphazard technique of those who process them, many of the photographs here have been over- or underexposed. They look darker and lighter than the scenes they were meant to capture. This seems appropriate; I have not doctored them.

Photo 1

My Aunt Helen was my mother's older sister. The two women disliked each other immensely. My mother found Helen domineering, bossy, and morally questionable—she had been married three times and had lived with each husband before marrying him. I'm sure Aunt Helen found my mother prissy and rude. She (Helen) gave Steven and me a puppy one year for Christmas. Our simultaneous love for—and irresponsible negligence toward—the animal infuriated my mother until Steven's disappearance, after which she became very attached to Cowboy David (that was the dog's name).

You can see her here shying away from the dog and, by extension, from Steven and me. My father must have taken the photo the morning we left. That's me in the middle, looking backward toward the house. The boy looking seriously into the camera is Steven.

For her part, Helen died just after New Year's 1993, of the colon cancer that had put her in the hospital in the first place and necessitated the trip.

Photo 2

My father rarely drove on family outings. He was a terrible driver. Blind in one eye from a boyhood fishing accident, he had zero depth perception and a severely reduced field of lateral vision. This wreaked havoc on any activity outside the safe, ordered, well-lit confines of his CPA practice, where people knew not to approach him from the left. Unlike other people, though, he never had to squint one eye shut to use a camera's viewfinder, and so he was an enthusiastic, if unskilled, user of disposable Kodaks. Every family trip, he'd go to the drugstore and buy about ten of them, labeling them in Sharpie with the date and locale of the trip.

He took this photo from the front passenger side of our van, probably wedging the camera—as he often did—into the space between the headrest and the top of the seat. It was a large vehicle, a Plymouth Caravan, and we liked it because we got our own chairs. Steven is in the captain's chair on the right, which he preferred because he liked to watch oncoming traffic and note the model of each car in a little notebook he carried around. I'm on the left, watching him do it.

Photo 3

My mother was always prettiest when she knew you were looking at her.

Photo 4

In a dream a few weeks after he disappeared, I tried to get Steven to pose like this again. He refused, and I asked why. I don't do silly faces anymore, he said.

Photo 5

We stopped in Fort Davis about an hour before sunset and checked into a motel where the doors opened directly onto balconies overlooking the interstate. Judging from the sloppy framing here, I'd say that it was Steven or I standing on the balcony outside our room trying to capture the view of the sun going down over the mountains with the disposable while our parents were inside, fighting or taking a shower, which is usually what they did after a long day in the car. That smudge at the edge of the frame, nearly blotting out several of the Davis mountains, is a finger—either mine or Steven's. Since we still had the camera and the film in it to develop afterward, it is probably mine. Which explains the series of pitch-black images (the inside of a pocket? the corner of a packed suitcase?) that follow. I have always been careless with important objects.

Photo 6

Although it's not impossible that after he snapped the sunset, Steven handed the camera back to me. Or that he didn't, and took it with him, wherever he went, and dropped it, and we or someone else (the clerk, the police) found it later. But I think I would remember that.

In any case, there are eight blank, black photographs on the roll from that disposable. When I first developed the film, I looked at them more than any of the others. I thought they must be some kind of mistake—a problem, maybe in the film development, that could be solved. That somewhere in the black, in the right light, I or somebody else would be able to see Steven or where he went, after he told me to stay on the balcony and walked down the stairs.

Photo 7

Here's what I remember:

When it was getting really dark, my parents started to argue in the motel room and my father gave Steven twenty dollars to buy dinner for all of us.

Go to the front office and tell the clerk to order you a pizza, he said. Provide for this family.

My mother was in the bathroom, curling her hair, yelling at my dad to put some pants on, if he was going to stand there with the door open. He tried to roll his eyes, but only one of them rolled. The false one, which was green and convincingly stippled with brown and umber enamel dots in the iris, was right on me.

Photo 8

My parents trusted Steven, not only because he was a year older than me, but because he seemed older than they were, too. My mother used to call him a sixty-year-old man in a ten-year-old's body. They took his silence, his calmness, as maturity, as evidence of a full inner life, the kind they would have envied, and as judgment, too. Judgment, and maybe also disapproval.

"I always wanted to be good to him," my mother said a few years ago, "not just because I wanted him to turn out OK, but because I wanted him to *approve* of me. As a mother. And not later, in retrospect—*then*."

Photo 9

And Steven was discerning, quiet, thoughtful, and calm. But to me there was also something *blank* about him, about the way he'd stand in our backyard looking up at the two live oaks on the other side of our fence, intertwining their leaves forty feet up. I'd look at him and his face would be empty, without affect, like he was looking at something that he had decided was not, in reality, in fact, *there*.

Photo 10

What I mean is that Steven could always disappear, and that as his brother, I had learned when to try to follow him and when to not.

Photo 11

That night I tried. Out on the balcony in the fading light, Steven held out his arm at my neck level and I ducked under it. He said, Stay here. I said, Pepperoni, insisting, grabbing on his arm, and he pushed me hard in the throat. When I tried to follow him again, he took me by the shoulders and shoved me against the door.

He said, Stay.

(What is that shape in the upper left corner? A headlight from the highway? Light from the vacancy sign? What strikes me now is that Steven was still present for these photos, just outside the frame. Even if it means he was pushing me away, I want that smudge to be his thumb, pressed against the lens.)

Photo 12

I watched him walk across the parking lot and into the lobby, and then through the window saw him pick up the phone and begin to speak. Then I started to look at the mountains in the distance, high and brown, covered with scrub brush, some of them with little fields of snow near the top. When it got so dark that the mountains were just shapes, I walked down to the lobby, too, but Steven wasn't there.

Photo 13

I waited twenty minutes before I told anyone.

Photo 14

The police said he had probably just wandered off into the desert to be by himself. They asked if my parents had been fighting. They asked if Steven had seemed sad.

My mother said, No one wandered into any desert. And: My husband and I, we don't fight. She said there were a lot of truckers around, that we should have stayed somewhere where the doors didn't open straight to the highway. She cried.

I said, No.

My father took the van out looking. I didn't know what to do, so I took pictures of the cop cars in the parking lot until my mother told me to stop. In the desert their lights seemed brighter, like planets in a field of indistinguishable stars, once you've been told they're there.

Photo 15

There was no call, no ransom note. There was a detective named Jonathan assigned to the case—you can see him here, standing next to my father in front of the van, squinting and running his hands through his thinning black hair—in whom my parents had absolutely no faith. Starting the day after Steven disappeared, he called every few days to tell us there had been no new developments. This was before Amber Alert, before the Internet, when all you had to go on were printouts in grocery stores and faces on the sides of milk cartons and bus benches. My parents asked Jonathan if we should put up homemade flyers while the state was making its own.

“Ain’t a lost pet,” Jonathan said.

Photo 16

We spent three weeks in all in Fort Davis. Every day, my dad went out driving, up and down the streets, into Pecos or Odessa, into the desert. He took me with him sometimes, and I sat in the back, behind him, so I could look out the left side of the van (his right eye was the good one). We never saw much. Sometimes we'd talk to somebody who'd say they'd seen a boy matching Steven's description, except taller, or missing a tooth, or Mexican. My father always heard these people out, reluctant to leave a conversation that had, however briefly, given him a kind of hope.

I must have taken this photo on one of those drives. The glare is pretty clearly from the window of the van, and the landscape seems right, blurred and dry and pink. I do not know what I was attempting to capture.

Photo 17

I remember a lot of quiet, exhausted fighting; the hum of the Econo Lodge air conditioner; the way all the cheeseburgers had green chiles smeared on the bun, which my mother had to wipe off for me. I remember the way I expected Steven to mysteriously reappear, to come out from hiding, unzipping himself from a suitcase or gleefully shifting the ceiling tiles apart before hopping through.

And the way, for the first few days, no one thought to call Aunt Helen, to let her know we wouldn't be coming. When we bought a card to mail to her—big and teal, with a cowboy wearing a stethoscope—I hesitated and, next to my name, added a hasty approximation of Steven's signature.

I must have watched the police crime photographers doing their work. This is our motel room in Fort Davis. The photo is taken from a much higher angle than would have been possible for me; I must have stood on the bed, or the air conditioner, or the dresser, compromising the very scene I was supposed to be observing.

Photo 18

Here is the bathtub my mother cleaned again and again with Clorox and later sat in for hours, not even bothering to shut the door. Here are the dirty socks of my brother, still drying on the radiator. Here is the cold fluorescent bulb over the sink.

Photo 19

This at first seemed like a disconnected shot to me, from a different time—a small, sterile-looking room with dark brown carpeting that needs to be vacuumed. The front room of an office building, the back room (because of the lenses on the table in the corner) of a movie theater.

But the more I looked at it, the more I remembered—it is a room in the McDonald Observatory, high up in the mountains. The best telescope open to the public in Texas is there. You can see nebulae through it, or the rings of Saturn, or Jupiter.

Photo 20

This is not a blank exposure. Look closely. There are tiny pinpricks of light—reproduced here, they probably just look like imperfections in the dot matrix printing—that could be stars.

One night, a couple of weeks after Steven disappeared, my mother and I got my father to take us up into the mountains, to the observatory. We wanted to look at something new. I don't remember my father in the observatory, so he must have waited in the car or taken it back down the mountain, to drive through town looking for Steven like he did every night.

But the telescope was closed for repairs. We ended up outside with an employee, staring at a star chart, trying to make the cold, diamond-sharp stars above the mountains turn into animals. What I wanted to know then was the same as what I want to know now: why Steven hadn't let me come with him. I asked my mother again and again in the windy dark, but she just hushed me and pointed to the chart, and then up. With our penlights we traced again and again the lines between Alnitak, Anilam, and Mintaka. But when we turned the lights off and looked up, nothing seemed to connect.

Photo 21

This is where, increasingly, my father spent most of his time.

Photo 22

And this, my mother. Note the absence of an ashtray.

Photo 23

For a while, after the shock wore off and we were back at home, I was able to forget that Steven was gone—or, if not forget, I was able to think about him as though he had gone away and would be coming back someday. What I mean is that I did not think of him as being dead, even when—and this was a point of conflict for my parents—my father did. In this, as in many other things, I was like my mother.

This picture is of me on the first day of school in the fall of 1992. The camera from the trip must have made it into our kitchen, and my father must have absentmindedly picked it up. I remember that morning clearly because it was the first time I'd ever started school without Steven. The day seemed supernaturally bright and cold, cold enough that I needed a sweater, and when I couldn't find one, I took one of Steven's—the red one with yellow stripes you see here. We were close to the same size, and as I pulled the sweater over my head, I found myself thinking, *He must be alive*. Because his sweater, though I had gotten significantly bigger, still fit me. It was as though he had, over the month and a half he'd been gone, kept growing too, and stretched it. I looked in the mirror that morning, and I saw him, for a split second, staring back at me with an accusatory look on his face that seemed to ask, *And what am I going to wear now?*

Photo 24

They never divorced because they didn't believe in that. My mother, though she still thought Steven was alive, was the hopeless one. I think my father gave up on him, began to think Steven was dead, and so was able to retain something of himself. He began to garden. I like to think this picture is of his first tomato from the summer of 1993, artfully arranged on our cutting board with sprigs of rosemary.

I imagine us standing in the kitchen like two children, taking bites from the fruit and handing it off. It is almost a year since Steven disappeared. After the last bite, my father sweeps the camera into the junk drawer, where it stays long after he moves out, long after his garden goes weedy, until the day my mother finds it, somehow realizes what it is, and puts it in the Ziploc, into the closet.

Photo 25

She used to say to me—often seated, as she is here, in the ratty pink chair next to the window—“If he’s alive, he probably won’t come back. It’s been too long.” She seemed to derive a perverse sort of comfort from this; it made her loss more irreparable, final. It allowed her to be angry at him. It allowed him to be alive.

I used to think about Steven all the time, as though he were alive. As the years went on, I’d try to imagine him physically changing—growing taller, getting a deeper voice, like I was getting. But it never really stuck. He was alive to me, but I could not imagine him as a physical being. When I pictured him, his head always stayed a child’s head, with its yellow bowl cut and spaced-out teeth. His body was large and incongruous, and I always felt disappointed in myself for not being able to bring it into proportion. Sometimes I could—I would think I could see him in my mind’s eye, sitting in a room in Seattle or Chicago or Iowa City, having forgotten us, living with some other family. In my mind I would advance toward him, saying his name softly. But then he’d turn around, or the lights would turn on, and I’d realize that I was walking toward myself.

“Take me with you,” I’d say.

Photo 26

Now I don't even picture him. I just hear his voice. So the kid with Steven's haircut looking at the Redbox outside the Walgreens in Springfield? He didn't distract me at all. I didn't photograph him to use up the last two exposures on the camera, even though he had the same surprised eyes, the same bored grin.

I looked through the viewfinder at the highway behind me, all those car lights on 44 headed to St. Louis, then at the backseat, where my suit was crumpled into a charcoal pile. I thought about throwing the camera back there and forgetting about it, driving home and putting it back into a baggie. I looked at the odometer, the steering wheel, the dash. And when I found my face in the rearview mirror, I wound and clicked, wound and clicked.

Take me with you. Take me with you.

Photo 27

This is me, now. It is winter in St. Louis. Our father is blind, our mother is dead, and I carry you around like a plastic figurine, close to my chest.