

## Looking at Photographs

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“Look at this,” prompts the woman in the blue dress, “and tell me what you see.”

I stare at the small deckle-edged black and white snapshot lying on the table in front of me. “It’s a picture of a baby in a baby carriage.”

“What else is it?” persists the woman whose eyes are bluer than her blue dress. Her eyes bother me, just a little, as they seem to belong more to a malamute dog, than a human. They are very large and bulge slightly, like Volkswagen headlights.

“It’s a photograph of a baby in a baby carriage in front of a house on a street with a Raggedy Ann doll beside the baby in the carriage.” I pronounce rather loudly, a tad of annoyance creeping into my voice.

“That is correct. But what else is it?”

I look at her face and notice that her left blue eye is slightly bluer than the right one which is speckled with dark flecks. Is her left iris smaller than the right iris or is it my imagination? She is wearing china red lipstick by Revlon, just like my mother’s. Her blue-black hair hangs like an English setter’s ears on either side of her long white neck. The precision cut bangs accentuate her inhuman eyes, which rarely blink. I lower my gaze to her mouth, as it seems less dangerous, less intrusive than her blue eyes, just a small round mouth that might belong to a constant whistler.

“Please concentrate and tell me what you see.”

“I have already told you. I see a baby in a baby carriage. What more do you want me to say?” my annoyance is deepening. I’m not sure what I should do or say.

“No need to get upset,” states the blue-eyed interrogator and reaches out as if to touch me. I recoil at the sight of her blood red nails. She retracts her hand and smiles at my reaction, then softens her voice and attempts a friendlier approach. “Relax and look at the photograph and tell me what you see.”

The blue-eyed lady’s instructions are simultaneously crystal clear and impossible to understand. She wants some thing from me but I do not know what it is. Without warning I start to cry. Sobs burst from my mouth. Tears drown my eyes. My throat is holding down a great frustrated roar. We are both surprised by my outburst.

“Now, now, this won’t do. No need for tantrum this morning. You have used up your quota of tolerance. So pull it together and get back to the purpose of this meeting.”

Quota? Purpose? Meeting? What is she talking about? Why am I here anyway?

“Who are you? Why are you grilling me about some old photograph? Why am I here?” I shout at the blue-eyed, blue-dressed woman. I straighten my back and sit tall in the chair, asserting my rights, but I keep my eyes on her Betty Boop mouth just to be on the safe side.

“This is not about me, but about you. Now, let’s begin again. What do you see in the photograph?”

“ I see a baby that is about nine months old lying in a pram, the hood is up in order to provide shade. A floppy-rag doll lies on the left side of the baby who is looking into the face of the picture-taker. The baby is not crying or laughing. It is just looking back at me or anyone outside the photograph who is looking into the photograph at the baby. That is all.”

“No it is not *all*. Please go on.”

I stare hard at the photograph. The image is in black and white. When did color take over? Long ago I think somewhere in the fifties or sixties this baby is now an adult. Is the baby a boy or a girl? It’s hard to tell as the blankets are just a shade of white in the picture. Gradually, I realize the baby could be about my age.

“ Is this is a photography of me?”

“ Are you a baby?” asks the red mouth.

“No, of course not. But I was a baby once. It could be a picture of me as a baby.”

“Could be? It seems you do not know yourself very well. Do you?”

It’s a snap shot of a baby! All babies look like babies more than they look like their adult selves. How can I be expected to know what I looked like as a baby? I shout at blue eyes.

“ Where is the baby now? Blue eyes inquire with a hint of mischief in her voice.”

“ If the baby is me then the baby is here in me; in my past, in my once- upon- a time self. “

“ If the baby is you then you should know it is you. You should not have to guess. It is incongruous that you do not know who the baby is if the baby is you? Surly we are a continuum. We start, we exist and we die. Where does the original self go?”

Where indeed? I have wrestled with this mystery all of my life. Why are we constantly losing ourselves to the invisible process called time? But I decide to give her the accepted conventional response.

“ It doesn’t go anywhere. It transforms. It grows up, it becomes an adult, it procreates and then, in time, it dies.”

“That’s all? A body, an organism that continuously, silently, mutates until it dies? Then what? The end? Kaput? Doesn’t seem like it’s worth the bother, if that is all,” queries the blue-eyed interrogator.

“ No it doesn’t. But surely you can’t lay that problem at my door. I didn’t make the rules.” I say curtly and uncross my legs. I’m tired of sitting in this white room and looking at all this yellowed hospital white. I am suddenly aware that the only real colors in the room are blue and red and glossy black. The blue of the woman’s dress and eyes and, of course, the bright red of her lips and nails. I have no distinguishing color at all. I am dressed in institutional white. My skin is white. My voice is white. My hair does not matter. I blend in. I seem to be missing except for my eyes and ears, which are alert like a doe in a forest, ready to dash.

“So, you think that there is little purpose to life besides procreation?” Asks red mouth. Her lips look like a perfect cherry life -saver sucked glossy and wet and sour-sweet. I want her to say ‘so’ again. I want to watch her mouth turn into a little round hole. I wonder what would happen if I stuck my finger in her mouth. Would it fit? Would she bite it? Would her bite hurt?

“Please bring your attention back to the photograph and tell me what you see.” She is relentless. The photograph is boring. I am no longer interested in the baby in the picture but I am interested in Doctor red lips/ blue eyes. I am now certain that the woman in the blue dress is a doctor, my doctor but I don’t know why we are here and why she is interrogating me about a stupid snapshot.

“ It is a picture of a baby in a baby carriage on a street in front of a house. There are white clouds in the sky in the upper left corner of the black and white photograph.” I say in a lack luster voice. Then I turn the picture over and read September 7, 1952, Spring Street, Athens, Ohio. The hand- writing is easy to read. For some reason this surprises me.

“ What do you know about Athens, Ohio?”

“ Not a thing. I have never been there. But I think Ohio is in the United States of America. Am I correct?”

“ Yes, Athens Ohio is in the United States.”

“ Boy, am I glad because I was afraid you were going to say it was in Greece. That it was the capital of Greece and the cradle of Western Civilization and the home of the Parthenon, where all those gods and goddesses that no one believes in any more use to live.” She scowls, keeps silent and stares hard at me. I know she is on to my game.

“ The sooner you cooperate the sooner you will get out of here “ she announces matter of factly.

‘Really? “ I can’t help but get excited. She has my attention now. “Let me look at that photograph again,” I say. She slides it across the white table toward me. She blinks twice in a row and I am distracted from the task at hand.

“Concentrate.” I inwardly scold myself. “Tell her what she wants to hear and let’s get out of here.” I am colluding with myself, trying to harness all my inner resources against my formidable opponent.

“This is a photograph of me as a baby, the baby that was kidnapped from the carriage on Spring Street in 1952 at 4:35 pm.” I declare resolutely. “The police never found the kidnappers and the baby’s mother died of grief, the father moved to Los Angeles and remarried years later. But it wasn’t a happy marriage and he more or less drank himself to death. He never got over the way the newspapers wrote about their tragedy; implying he had something to do with the baby’s disappearance. It was a small tragedy but a tragedy never- the -less.” I don’t know why I say this but it feels right. It feels like something the blue-eyed doctor will like.

Her slightly bulgy eyes widen into pools of blue water. I realize she is crying.

“Oh, thank god.” She whispers, then wipes her leaky eyes. “This is the breakthrough we have worked so hard for.”

“We have?”

“But, of course this is what you had to remember, to see for yourself. That your original parents were not the people you called mama and papa. That you were stolen from that perambulator and raised by a childless couple that did something very bad.”

“Now just a minute, Doctor...? What is your name anyway?”

“Dr. Right. You know my name. There is no need to pretend otherwise. It does not aid your cause.”

“Listen, Dr. Right my parents are wonderful people. I love them more than anything in the world. I could not have asked for better, more understanding and loving people to raise me. I had a happy and secure childhood. I don’t like the way you are trying to disparage them. Hay, where are they? Why am I here anyway? I demand to see my mother and father!”

“Your parents passed away two years ago and you have been here at Meadow Brook Psychiatric hospital for two years.”

“Why?”

“This is something I want you to answer for yourself. I can not tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you must arrive at the answer for yourself. It is part of the treatment.” Old blue eyes smiles in what she thinks is her most encouraging manner. I am not taken in. She wants to pin something on me. Blame me for something or get me to confess to something. I can feel it.”

“Treatment? What kind of treatment? I don’t need any treatments. I feel just fine. Take my temperature if you wish.”

“ You know that this is a psychiatric hospital not a normal hospital.” Says Blue eyes and then catches her verbal error. Her red lips tighten in an effort to seal another Freudian slip from escaping her red lips.

“ So this is not a normal hospital. It is a hospital for crazy people? Then why am I here?” I am a normal person. I had the most normal childhood of anyone in all of North America. Honest to God! I cross my heart and hope to die!” I add for emphasis. I realize I have to get back into her good graces. If I don’t, things could drag on for a lot longer than I want. I may or may not be crazy but I don’t want to live out my remaining years in a loony bin.

“Dr. Right, I am very tired, my brain feels like soggy straw. I don’t think I can go on like this much longer. I want to lie down and close my eyes for a little while. Is this okay with you? ”

“ It will have to be. Won’t it, now?” she says curtly. “ We will look at another photograph tomorrow.”

Another photograph! Where is she getting all these snapshots and why do I have to look at them? Blue Eyes stands up, collects her papers into a white folder and departs, leaving me alone in the dingy white room with the photograph of a baby in a baby carriage on a street in Athens, Ohio or is it a street in Baltimore, Maryland or maybe Montclair, New Jersey? I could write any of those cites on the back and suddenly it would be true. I consider altering the text and seeing if she notices. What is truer words or pictures?

Now that I think of it, it could be any of those places. The baby doesn’t have to be me? The picture of the baby in the baby carriage may have absolutely nothing to do with me except that I was once a baby. Is it a crime to not remember your self as a baby? I concede that it seems a shame to not know your self, to lose so much of yourself to the forces of time, to possess your own life in distorted snippets of memory no one but you know about. It bothers me that only I have access, even if inaccurate, to moments in my life no one else shared.

When I was eight years old, I often played in back woods glen near my house. One afternoon I sat on a stone and studied a procession of ants laboring to move a wounded comrade to another location, The red ant twitched his broken back leg in what looked like pain, while the determined row of black ants hauled the hero or was it the victim, to some undisclosed place; to either heal or devour him. Had I witnessed nature’s heedless cruelty or god’s grace? The wooded glade is now a subdivision; the ants have died or moved on. Only, I remember their magnificent effort, their seemingly silent dedication. I was in awe of them and cheered them on even as suspicious doubt about their intent arose in my heart. There is no record, no photograph, no proof any of this happened. So, did it? Or is it something I made upon the spot because it is a story I think you would like?

Snap shots are physical traces, visual debris, and remains of experience. We consider them evidence that something happened; proof of existence against thieving time. They are very convincing when pitted against mere words. They don't argue. They persuade; they iron out doubt.

Dr. Right would not hesitate to remind me just how prone to error human memory is. So, I may be making up the ant story as well as the kidnapping story. Reality is up for grabs in this place and truth is the purview of these tired doctors who read reports and paint their lips and eat dinner just like everyone else.

Tonight, I will sleep and I will dream just like everyone else and tomorrow the blue eyed doctor will say, "just look at this photograph and tell me what you see."

And it will all begin again, this relentless quest to understand what happened and why, as if life wasn't a conundrum, as if there is only one truth. Doesn't she know that *truth* only matters to people and we people are only a small fraction of the big picture and that the big picture will go on even if people do not.