

The Old Photographer

I live in a world of stills. More specifically, developed memories. Or, if you like to be simple, photographs. They collect dust underneath my bed, surrounded by my son's tennis rackets and balls. They adhere to pages of white scrapbooks that rest on the two lowest shelves of my bookcases. Under books, in books, and on them—in every crook and cranny of my small brick country home, I see a memory. I've lived more than three-quarters of a century, and I'd like to think I've captured enough memories to remember my entire life. Charlotte, my wife, was my favorite memory.

The familiar sound of my spoon clinking against my purple teacup awakes me from my drifting which keeps me company on mornings like today where the sun slowly rises and the air is crisp. I'm torn between staying here on my porch to sip my tea or going inside to find my camera to capture yet another sunrise. You see, I live in the world dichotomously. More specifically, I teeter between the act of living a moment and that of capturing one. I'm divided between my camera lens and my glasses. What I see in this world fades, but what I capture, that I can't lose. So, I set my teacup down, press my hands to the white rocking chair arms, and push myself up. Instantly, my knee and hips crack and discomfort forms on my lips. I'm getting too old for this. I wobble back inside. It seems my left knee is struggling more than normal today, and I'm unsteady as I cross the creaking wooden floors of my lounge. I think I've decided on the polaroid for this morning's sunrise. It'll darken the image a bit, but the concept of light and dark, morning and night, will work well. It's a good way to capture a sunrise.

All my cameras are kept in one room. It's the treasure room, or at least that's what Danny, my son, called it as he was playing pirates one day. The colors of his red cape and striped eye patch remain vivid in my mind. His squeaky voice shouted from the upstairs, "Mi Amor, Mama. I will

retrieve for you prizes and jewels of great fortune.” He said in his unique combination of Italian and British accents.

“Oh, but I have all I want,” Charlotte whispered. My body turns reflexive to where she spoke these words on that winter day thirty-something years ago. She sat in the lounge with her own tea and book, with her green sweater on. Her smile turned up slightly, but her eyes showed true joy. That picture rests on my bedside table.

The treasure room keeps my cameras, but also Charlotte’s favorite books. She collected classics upon classics and some copies she had double of. Everything inside the treasure room meant something to her and me. I grab the polaroid from its place on my ancient Victorian desk and instinctively run my hand over my initials etched into the leather casing. My name is Hector Jovano, “Hector” meaning “to restrain” and “Jovano” meaning “to desire freedom.” To others, “H.J.” means established photographer with photos polished beyond perfection. But to me, it means I am pulled in two directions. The Polaroid 6000 fit well in my hands, and on my way to the lounge I take a quick photo to judge the lightning. In an instant, a polaroid slides out of the mouth of the camera. Like second nature, I grab the image and begin the shaking process.

“Hello?” My head shifts slightly to the left and I see my door half open with a small silhouette standing in the doorway. I blink.

“Why are you shaking?” The voice says again. I look from it to my hand with the developing polaroid.

“I, I’m developing the image.” I squint again at the voice, and I see now it’s a young girl with black hair pulled between two braids. “Who are you, and what are you doing there?”

The little girl’s eyes were huge and practically the same shade of black as her hair. My fingers itched to shoot a picture of her, but I held them back.

“I’m Zoey.” She removed her hand from the door and came fully in. She looks about ten or so and she’s wearing a pink dress with a blue cotton cardigan. “I’m your neighbor! We live by those big willow trees and green hedge. Well, so my mum remembered you take pictures all the time and are like, mega famous, and so—” She speaks while her eyes scan the room.

“I know of the trees,” but the girl just kept talking.

“Mum said to come over here and convince Hector Jovano to take pictures at the village over’s summer celebration. She said they’re highlighting everything, the food, the people—”

“No.” I slowly rise, but my knee cracks again, and I wince.

She furrows her brows but says nothing. Instead, she starts walking further into the house and I’m left with no choice but to follow her. She looks at the walls covered in posters of pictures from Africa, America, and even one from Papua New Guinea. Her fingers dance on the china cabinet in the small dining room I haven’t used in four years. She pays little attention to the kitchen, mostly because of its simplicity, but she pauses before the door of the treasure room.

“May I go in here?” I laugh slightly at her question, because of her abrupt entrance into my home just minutes prior. I want to say no, and it starts to come out of my lips, but a memory of Danny seeing the treasure room for the first time, his amazement and wonder, comes to mind, and I crave to see it again.

“If you’d like.” She smiles and I spot a missing tooth on the side of her right cheek. Slowly, with her small white hands, she reaches and opens the door. She gasps, and I follow. Seeing one’s treasure through another’s eyes is the very air I breathe and the blood that pumps through my veins. I crave to take a picture, so much so I practically ache with dread by not doing so.

Anyways, I think I failed to mention it, but the treasure room holds much more than cameras and

books. There's a blanket from Mexico on the floor as the carpet—there's a monkey statue at the end of my desk and a large sailboat from Zakynthos on a mantel across from the bookshelves.

“What's this?” Her hand points to the light source in the room, hanging from the ceiling. The colors illuminate the room in a constant shade of orange, purple, and pink lighting.

“It's a chandelier from India.” Her eyes widen even more and as I look at the treasure room with her, and I see years of exploration, adventure, and love.

“Since you love to take pictures of the world, you should really take pictures at the festival.” She turns to me, her eyes hopeful. “There's going to be food and all sorts of people. Oh, and the decorations! They've already started to set them up!”

“I no longer photograph for work, Mi dispiace. You will have to find someone else.” I turn and motion for her to leave the room, and she follows, but I can tell she doesn't want to leave.

“So, you've seen practically everything, but you refuse to photograph the celebration?” She turns on her heel and accuses me right outside of the treasure room. To this I have no reply, but like always, I have a picture. I walk with purpose to the mantel above the fireplace and open a small wooden box with a C carved in the wooden lid and pull out a picture.

“She's the last person I took a picture of. And I'd like it to stay that way.” I slowly lower my hand and show the girl. Zoey, I think. I don't look because I know the image as clear as I know my reflection. It's Charlotte in our garden, just simply reading. I was with her, mostly but not quite. I was thinking of a day like today when I would be asked to photograph for work after she passed. I couldn't stand to see anything but her. And so, that picture was my last portrait.

“When you love someone, Zoey. You never want to let them go.” I slowly lower the hand with the photo. “This is how I hold on.” Zoey, the small stranger, sighed and by some marvelous thing, looked as if she knew exactly what I was feeling.

“My dad died before I was born. He was a soldier, with a uniform and everything.” I blink. The wind from the door she left open tickles my cheek, and it blows a stray strand of hair along Zoey’s face. “Mum always told me we love by doing and hugging and giving.” She pursed her lips together. “We don’t love by holding still.” She gave me a small smile and without warning took Charlotte’s photo out of my hands and...put it into my trouser pocket.

“There.” Zoey took a step back and beamed back up at me. Her cheeks were so round, I think I can see all her teeth. She placed a hand into her own pocket and retrieved a small polaroid with tan edges and a crease down the middle of it. “Now you can be just like me. I take my dad’s picture with me everywhere I go. And it’s like he’s always going to be there with me. And I show him all the places I love. The swing sets behind my house and that abandoned church by the lake with the –”

“With the pink rose bushes.” I finish and she lights up even more and claps her hands. I smile too and look around my home and all its memories stored inside. I look, really look, and I conclude that something is missing. It’s people: Souls, breath, and vibrancy. I turn around and see Zoey looking down at her own picture in hand, and I think I can see her eyes imagining being there at that church with her father. I smile softly, and I realize how good it feels to find joy in another’s story. I’ve spent so many years hoarding my stories and my memories, I almost forgot to tell them, but even more, I forgot to live them. With hesitant resolve, I walk towards the treasure room and Zoey curiously follows behind me.

“Where are you going?” Her feet move quickly to catch up.

“To get my favorite camera. We’ve got a festival to capture.” We love by doing not by holding still. I’ve held still for long enough. After all, living dichotomously requires movement in both directions. I’m simply moving forward.