

The latchkey kids

Why do you keep a photograph that wounds so deeply?

A leak.

There was a leak in the roof of my parent's house; this meant that everything that had been stored there for years had to come down into the spare bedroom. For my parents, notorious for not being sentimental, it was the opportunity to 'spring clean' a lifetime of accumulated objects.

Unlike the family archives of others, ours is quite modest, existing in only a few albums but also in piles of old decaying plastic carrier bags full of negatives, with little in terms of organisation.

Still, it was good to go through them all and be reminded of childhood.

It was there that I saw the page and it made me pause. Among all of the other photographs of weddings, births, holidays and parties, there was this yellowing 6x4 print of my maternal aunt and paternal grandad sharing a joke on a sofa. The photograph had been abruptly cut in two. It was easy to see that this had been done long enough after the print was placed into the album because the faded edges were still there - the spectre of the photograph. At some point in the photograph's history, it was peeled from the photo album, cut in two and placed back onto the page. Amongst those carrier bags, I found the negative belonging to this print. It was Gran who had been removed from the photograph and my mum made this cut.

My mum and Gran have not spoken for over 20 years. I never really understood why, only that she was 'not a very good person' and ties had been cut completely. Very little has been spoken about it since and every time the subject came up, it was quickly closed. I had been told it was my Gran's fault, but I only had one side to go by. What if it was ours?

The more that I viewed this photograph though, the more I speculated over the absent part. Surely, it would be better to simply remove it from the album completely, avoiding those questions. It is a half-told story, for the missing narrative; I would need to speak to my gran. For that, I wrote two letters; the first reaching out and a second to follow up.

Belief.

The cut photograph played on me for a time and I started to look at my family differently. I questioned how innocent photographs truly are when they are taken in the most fleeting of moments, moving on to the next. Looking back, I can only see the instant in the photograph instead of any nuance that might have been during the moment and over the void of time between then and now.

It was not that I viewed my family negatively, it was more that I began to notice things. They place objects and messages around the house appealing to unknown entities for better luck, good fortune, or health. They are not religious but it is definitely a system of belief. However, my family has always had a deep-rooted mistrust of power. My parents and my brother have garden waste incinerators for destroying documents, they have all never voted and are not wholly convinced by the pandemic. These are all truths, something to navigate and understand the world, much like the collection of historic photographs that are supposed to show history and a sense of identity.

A few months had passed and still no reply from Gran. Had things become so bitter that even her grandchildren were no longer welcomed?

Memories.

I received a message from a cousin, who I have not seen for a long time. Gran had died. She had lung cancer, which was not a surprise, owing to a lifetime of heavy smoking. Some memories I have are of the way that her house smelt, the rolling machine on the kitchen table and the clouds of smoke billowing into the back seat of the car as she drove us. My feelings on receiving the news that she died were surreal but there was also a strange distance - she was my grandmother, but also someone I have not seen for two decades. She never knew me as an adult and to be fair, I left it far too late to reconnect. I stumbled across a Facebook page of the former employees of the Bowyers factory in Trowbridge that made meat products. Before I was born, my mum, dad, uncle and Gran all worked in different parts of the Trowbridge institution. I even went to one of their Christmas parties, as Gran continued to work there, and remembered feeling out of place. The factory is long gone now, but still remains in the center of the town waiting to be turned into luxury apartments, or similar. They added a memorial: "Ah that's sad news, she was a lovely lady, best QA we had in prepack."

I have one more memory, which comes back to me: Picking blackberries through the wire fence opposite Gran's house separating the council row from the Great Western mainline. My mum grew up in that house too. There was a path that also followed the railway all the way to the Kennet and Avon canal that Granddad used to fish from, or at least who I thought was my grandad - we were told to call him that anyway. I sometimes heard my mum and aunt refer to him as 'Dogs Teeth' but I never knew why. Anyway, one day he wasn't there anymore and Gran moved to Westbury, a stone's throw from the White Horse. It wasn't long after that we stopped visiting.

I wonder what she made of those letters that I sent?

According to my cousin, Gran had known about the cancer since June of the previous year but gave specific instructions that no one was to know until after she died; this included my mum, who found out like the rest of us. My mum once told my aunt that she didn't want to know if Gran became unwell.

After we found out, my mum and I did speak a little about her as a family, although she remained closed. I always thought that my youngest brother took his daughter to meet Gran, but that never happened. He did see her once around 2002, but only said that walking into her house was too much, referring to that strong smell of cigarettes.

My other brother seemed to think that the reason why mum and Gran fell out was because mum set out to find her real dad in the mid-nineties, though he wasn't completely sure.

Len.

I never met Len but I did meet his sister Pat once; she used to send us £5 each for Christmas. Len was my mum's biological father; I guess that makes him my actual grandfather. My mum found him living in London where he was from originally - Tottenham as far as I can remember. A world away from Somerset and Wiltshire, where my family all live.

I was told he left Gran for another woman when my mum was four, her brother two, and her sister only a few weeks old. Gran would have been 22 at the time, as old as my mum when she had me, yet Gran had three children by then. I can only imagine what it would have been like to be a single parent of three in the mid-sixties.

Mum paid the Salvation Army a small fee to use their 'find a lost relative' service. She met him once with her sister and brother. Apparently, he didn't talk much, only to say, "You all look alike, don't you?" and that was that. There are two photographs of Len in the album, given to my mum by Pat. Mum didn't really keep in contact with him, she only kept in contact with Pat.

Winning the Bingo.

It wasn't that long after that my cousin messaged me again to say that they had some pictures for me that Gran had. I hadn't actually seen my cousin or aunt in a very long time either, so I made the trip across country, back to the west country to catch up. The last time I was there, I was a kid, there was a playhouse in the garden, which is the first thing my aunt said followed by offering a coffee. I walked into the house and there were things piled everywhere. This is more or less how I remember their house. We sat down to look over the photographs, which were a combination of childhood photographs, an album of my parents wedding, and curiously, a stash of photographs from a holiday that we all took together in 1987 that I had never seen before - we only have a few of these.

At this point my aunt got up and moved over to the other side of the room, she has MS and it helps to be mobile. This is followed by some creaking from upstairs. "I didn't know dad was here." said my cousin.

"He is working nights." my aunt followed, which is punctuated by an alert on her phone and moves off to the kitchen to make him a cup of tea.

As she came back from delivering the tea, she started to talk about this holiday and made reference to my mum and Gran: "Things started to change after Spain."

The only time I ever went abroad as a child was after Gran won the bingo and took us all to Majorca. I was four so I barely remember it. There aren't that many photographs from this holiday in my family's albums but there was another photograph from this holiday that I found cut; the difference is that it wasn't my Gran this time.

Two Nans and a Gran.

I had three nans as a kid. Is this unusual? I'm not sure. Gran, Nan Beck, and Nan Hill. They were nans because they were older, that's how we defined it - I even think that they were similar ages. Gran was mum's mum, Nan Hill was dad's mum, and Nan Beck was Gran's mum. Gran was young when she had my mum so this meant that her mum was also relatively young. We used to go to her small house in Upton Scudmore; she always had custard creams, she loved poodles and had this Margaret Thatcher dog toy that we found hilarious.

Nan apparently never always accepted my aunt, believing that she was another man's child.

Dog's Teeth.

"The man was abusive, manipulative, a bully," my aunt tells me. This information was offered casually, as if I already knew it and it was just being confirmed.

Followed up by my cousin's response of, "I am glad that I have no memory of him."

Just to get this straight in my head "domestic violence?"

"Yeah" my aunt responds, "to Gran and your mum."

I had no idea.

In the background of some of the photographs there is the shade of a presence giving the impression that he used to have a greater presence within these albums. He was an intimidating character. I remember him not talking a great deal and when we used to visit Gran; he would either stay in the kitchen or be off fishing somewhere in a dark coloured Bedford van that he used to drive. I was still so young so perhaps many of the memories I have are tied up with the photographs that I can look at now. Sat there as he did in my parents back garden in one of these pictures: smoking, or sat on a picnic blanket with the rest of us at the Longleat estate, before they started charging to spend Sunday afternoon in the grounds. In the photographs that my aunt gave me, he was there at my parents' wedding, at the head table. He even walked my aunt down the aisle, though she told me how much she regretted that now. There is another photograph of me and my brother as page boys sitting on Gran's sofa, getting ready for that day but again, I barely remember the event.

20 years is a long time to wait to talk about a subject you have no idea of its significance. I contemplated this as I drove back with more photographs.

The Latchkey Kids.

There were things about my mum that I never really understood growing up. Why the lack of trust in things? Why did we never speak to our family?

After I came back from my aunt's with the photographs and the revelations around mum's step-dad, I wondered why my mum would also cut Gran out of her life.

Before this though, when we found out Gran had died, the conversations did start to change. My brothers and I were curious so asked more questions and maybe as adults, Mum was more willing to offer more and more about the reasons for the rift. Would it have been the same if she was still alive?

As she became even more candid, I listened to the stories, starting to understand a little more about what happened but also it meant understanding Mum as a person going through a traumatic period of her life.

"How do you tell your children?"

"She once chucked her wedding ring into the bushes opposite the house and just left us there. I remember the fear, the total fear that we would be left with him and just hoping that Nan would come and get us. Take us away from that place."

Gran was gone all of the time, partly because she was working, had to, but also because she would go off for the weekend, leaving mum to look after her younger siblings. "We were known as the latchkey kids." mum recalled referring to how she was left alone all the time.

My mum started to tell me a side of Gran that I had not really heard before, "We were brought up with violence, not just my step father but your Gran too."

"She used to bully us, I was very afraid of her"

"When you are born into it, that's all you know"

Mum explains that it took until she was in her 40s to make the break from Gran, such was the power she had.

Present.

After meeting my Dad, my parents bought a house quite early, Mum was 19 and they would marry the following year. They moved to my Dad's hometown, which is where I was born a couple years later. I always thought that was quite young to start out and buy a home. It makes more sense now. They wanted to make a break from that cycle so that it would be different for me and my brothers.

“I only answer the phone to you and your brothers now.”

“When the three of you were little we made a choice to be present. We brought the three of you up with love.”

“There is more, but I am going to write it all down for you to find after I die.”

The Latchkey Kids by Phil Hill.

To accompany the photography series

Unreliable Narrator

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