

The Photograph

Anthony was very ill, in fact, he was dying. A few months earlier, he had returned from the hospital with a diagnosis of inoperable terminal pancreatic cancer. His wife was given instructions on how to administer the pain killers. As he was in bed, he drifted in and out of consciousness. He inhabited a nether world of waking dreams punctuated by moments of involvement in the painful world of his present reality.

Jeanette and his daughter were by his side. They were all terribly distressed, but tried to keep up a brave facade. When Jeanette's presence came into focus, he beckoned to her with his right arm that he could barely lift off the bed. She came over to his side and bent over to catch his every word.

"Jeanette, go to the closet and bring me the metal box on the shelf."

She knew what he was talking about and quickly returned with the box.

"Open it," he said.

Inside were hundreds of loosely organized photographs.

"Put them here," he beckoned. He motioned to Sandra, his daughter, to come join him.

He picked up one photograph at a time, and looked at each with a kind of dreamy far away expression. After finishing with each one, he passed it on to his family. Every picture triggered a flood of images and memories from his past. They were photographs of his youth and family. There were pictures of his parents when they were first married; the love that the young couple felt for each other was obvious enough. Then, there were

the pictures of his grandparents, his brother, himself and the entire family together on special occasions.

Both his parents were dead. The last to die, his Dad, had passed away thirty years ago. Anthony was there by his hospital bedside when he expired. He was no longer conscious suffering from the final stage of terminal cancer, and had been breathing through a respirator. He was still alive mostly because life is so greedy in its determination to persist in spite of the odds. Thankfully, he was probably free of pain.

He loved his Dad more as a fact of the biological connection between them than as a true feeling of affection for him. His Dad was a solemn and very controlled and controlling person. He thrived in the patriarchal structure of an Italian family. He did not remember much about his Dad except the kind of cruelty and close-mindedness he often displayed. They did not spend much time together, and their personalities were in extreme opposition and in constant conflict. He remembered the final moment of death as his Dad expelled his last breath. He could not cry, but sat transfixed for long moments. He then arose and closed his father's frightened and stricken eyes.

The memory of the funeral was still vivid to him. His father's lifeless body was in the coffin adorned with a strikingly conservative suit; those big hands of his were neatly folded on his abdomen. The unflinching solemnity and sternness of the man seemed to linger even after death. Anthony looked at his father's corpse and realized that any chance of communicating with the man was now a foregone conclusion. He was unable to shed any tears. He could not really convince himself that he would miss his father; although, in some sense, he wished he could. He did have fond memories, but

they were so few and far between that they could not dilute the overall feeling of apprehension and dread that was the hallmark of his recollections.

He came upon a photograph that was apparently a favorite of his, for it lingered in his hand and seemed to bring a shadow of a smile across his face. It was a picture of his father with his three brothers when they were boys, taken in the nineteen twenties. Their dress was characteristic of that era evidenced by the boyish caps and woolen knickers. Captured in that simple photograph was an entire universe of personality and relationship. They were the young men of the family, in which the males were the dominant members, and the oldest son was held next to the father in reverence. They were the sons of immigrants who were viewed with suspicion and distrust by the Anglo-American culture that welcomed their labor but not necessarily their ideas, their thinking or their aspirations. They were young Italian males embarking on their lives in a society that looked upon them with jaundiced vision. They were regarded with a great deal of distrust, heightened by the smoldering anarchy that was growing in the hearts of the desperately poor.

As Anthony continued looking through the photographs, he often paused when he came across those of his mother. His feelings for his mother were very complex. His great love for her was often overshadowed by a deep feeling of both poignancy and regret. He tried not to linger too long on those thoughts, for they invoked a great sorrow within him. His mother had been the emotional center of his world from childhood up until her death, a death from which he never completely recovered. She died suddenly a

year before his father passed away. In some sense, it was a death that rescued her from the pain she had endured for over forty years, suffering from crippling Multiple Sclerosis.

Anthony was growing tired. His hands were beginning to shake, and his breathing was becoming labored. All the memories invoked by these photographs were beginning to take their toll on his composure. Finally, he came across a photograph of himself as a small boy, probably around three years old. The look on that boy's face made Anthony instantly bemused and excited; his heart began to beat rapidly. He held the photograph in his hand and continued to look at it. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Seeing his distress and exhaustion, Jeanette gently took the photograph from his hand, kissed him tenderly on the cheek, and ushered Sandra out of the room. She still held in her hand the photograph that so touched Anthony and studied it herself.

Young Anthony was seated upon a pony wearing short pants and a pair of white shoes. She, of course, had seen that picture before. She wondered what special meaning that photograph had for him. For Anthony, those shoes held a story. They seemed to capture a lifetime within them. They held a secret that Anthony sought to uncover. It was an illusive undertaking, for modern life does not give much credence to personal growth and explorations of the mind. Quite to the contrary, any true examination of self is really seen as an implicit threat to the mindless and endless pursuit of material happiness.

In his room, at the portal of his own demise, Anthony's mind was flooded with memories of the past and his own growing up. Images would form in his mind and grow in clarity; until, it felt like he was reliving them. Just as quickly, as the pain and fatigue that wrapped itself around the shadow of his being would reassert themselves, these

images would fade away. Later they would be replaced by other scenes of his past. In this way his life was reenacted.