
C**Los Angeles Herald Examiner**Thursday, June 1, 1989

**Connecting**
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The sad truth is that pictures do sometimes lie

LAST WEEK, when I was visiting my mother and stepfather, they asked me to examine the contents of several cartons that were parked in the attic. What I didn't want would be sent to the dump.

The next morning, I went upstairs in my pajamas, with a cup of coffee and a big plastic trash bag. I knew I'd be there a long time. In a dusty storage place, I experience the same thrill I get at a flea market. I like to examine relics of another time of life, especially when the life is mine.

The first box held artifacts from college. On top, its striped pages flapping, was a blue three-ring binder that I had used as a diary during my freshman year. I couldn't believe that I had left it open and exposed in this attic long ago; at that time I thought it held the most unimaginable secrets.

MY 19-YEAR-OLD SISTER climbed the stairs in her pink bathrobe. When she saw what I was reading, she blushed. From the color of her cheeks, I supposed that she was familiar with the contents of the notebook. I asked if she'd read it. She said she guessed she'd looked through it a little. I raised my eyebrows.

OK, OK, she said.

When they were in high school, she and her friends read it like a bible. They'd gather in the afternoons to read aloud. Slowly, they worked their way through my trials and tribulations. It was full of good information, she said, stuff they knew they'd need.

Anxious to change the subject, she grabbed a tattered photo album out of another box. Someone had spent hours slipping snapshots into celluloid sleeves, most of which had already cracked and spilled their faded treasures.

It took a second for me to realize that I was looking at pictures of my original family, a very temporary family composed of mother, father, two brothers and me. I was 8. One brother was 5. The other was an infant. My parents had their arms around each other's shoulders. We nestled in their laps and hung onto their legs. It is a time that I cannot remember, no matter how hard I try.

A year after the pictures were taken, that family was gone forever. My parents were divorced, and my mother was married to my stepfather. My sister — my half sister, really, although I have never thought of her that way — is the child of that union.

LET ME LOOK, my sister said. I hesitated.

If my family had not come crashing down around me, if my mother had not remarried, my sister would not have been born.

You all look so happy, she said. It was hard, my sister said, to imagine that Mom once had another life.

We were silent for a moment. We turned the pages, carefully. Me on my father's lap. All of us with the beagle. My mother and my father in a deep embrace, no doubt engineered for the camera, for they were nearing the end of their marriage.

It must have been nice and simple back then, my sister said: Two brothers, two parents and a dog. No stepbrothers or sisters, no confusion.

There was less pain, I thought, but then I knew it could not be true.

The perfect American family, my sister said.

Pictures lie, I said, thinking it for the first time. Everyone intertwines and smiles for them, no matter how they feel inside. You may think they are a window onto the soul, I told her, but they are not. ■

Cathryn Ramin's column appears on Mondays and Thursdays.