

The Bereavement Photographer

By Steve Rasnic Tem

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"I've also always been fascinated by those photographs of the dead taken in the early years of this country - often retouched by painting pupils on the permanently closed eyelids. Dead children dressed up like 'little angels'. Dead children looking as if they'd been unable to stay awake for their important, formal portraits. The way parents deal with what cannot be dealt with, finally, without being changed for ever.

"When I found out that a contemporary version of these photographs exists today, the story came about not without effort, but also without my ability to halt it."

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"So, have you been doing this a while now?" "A few years."

"Sorry for asking, and tell me if I'm out of line, but you can't possibly be making a full-time living doing this can you?"

I actually almost say, "It's a hobby," which would be disastrous. But I don't. I look at the fellow: sandy-haired, a beard whose final length appears to be forever undecided. He looks terrible in the suit - either long outgrown or borrowed for the occasion. And it is an occasion - a grim occasion but an occasion none the less. He watches me as I set up, without a glance for his child. The young wife fusses with her to make ready for this picture, this family portrait.

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occasion none the less. He watches me as I set up, without a glance for his child. The young wife fusses with her to make ready for this picture, this family portrait. I'm used to this. Who could blame him?

"I'm a volunteer. They reimburse me for film and lab costs. It's a way ... of being of service."

He glances down, gazes at his wife rearranging the baby in her arms, glances away again, with no place to look.

Me, I have only one place to look. I peer through the lens, musing on composition issues, the light, the shadows, the angles of their arms. "Could you move her a little to the left?" The husband and father stares at me,

puzzled, then bends *to* move his wife's chair. She blushes.

“No, sorry. You, ma’am.” I straighten up behind the camera. “Could you move the baby a little to the left?” Notice how I said “the” baby, not “your”. I try to avoid upsetting words. These are family portraits, after all. Just like all families have. Most parents don’t want to be crying. I have folders full of photographs of mothers and fathers wailing, faces split in the middle. Believe me, they don’t want to keep those. Sometimes I have taken roll after roll until there is sufficient calm for me to make the picture that will go into some leather-bound matte, slipped into some nondescript manila folder, or, if they’re so

inclined, up on the living room mantel in a place of honor, there, oh so much *there*, for the whole world to see. I've been doing this for years. But still I find that hard to imagine. I feel bad that I haven't found the right words for this father, the words that will soothe, or at least minimize his discomfort and embarrassment. But sometimes there are just no right words. At least, I can't always find them.

"I'll be taking the shot in a few minutes," I say. "Just make yourself comfortable. This isn't going to be flash flash flash and me telling you to smile each time. The most important thing is to try to make yourselves comfortable. Try to relax and ease into this shared

moment.”

This shared moment. Whatever words I say to my subjects, I always include these. Even though I’ve never been sure they were accurate, or fair. The moment is shared in that it happens to both of them. But most of the time, I think, the experience is so personal and large it will soon split the marriage apart if they’re not careful.

I’ve seen it happen so much. I’ve seen so much.

“Okay, then,” I say in warning and again I move behind the camera, almost as if I expect it to protect me from what is to come. As I peer into the electronic viewfinder, so like a small computer screen, so distancing in that same way, I

see the mother's smile, and it is miraculous in its authenticity. I've seen it before in my portraits, this miraculous mother's smile, and it never fails to surprise me. And I see the father at last look down upon his dead baby girl and reach out two fingers, so large against the plump, pale arm, and he lets them linger, a brief time but longer than I would have expected, and I realize this touch is for the first, and last, time.

I again shift my focus to the light, to the shadows and the play of shadows, and ready myself to shoot. The father attempts a dignified smile, but of course goes too broadly with it. The mother holds the child a bit too tightly. And I trigger the camera once, then twice, the

baby looking as if she were merely sleeping. The baby looking. Then I take a shot for the photographer, a shot I will never show the parents, an image to add to the growing collection I keep hidden in a file drawer at home, the one in which the baby opens its eyes and fixes its gaze upon me.

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I should explain, I suppose, that I've never had much talent for photography. I have the interest, sometimes I've had the enthusiasm, but I've never had the eye. I got this volunteer position because my next-door neighbor is a nurse, and she used to see me in my back yard with camera and tripod shooting birds, trash, leaves, whatever happened to land in

front of me. Inconsequential subjects, but I was afraid I'd screw up a more significant one, which would have broken my heart, maybe even have prevented me from ever taking another photograph. I didn't want to risk that.

Not that I wanted to risk taking such an important photograph in a family's life, either. But Liz had talked about how temporary this was, how they just needed someone to man the camera now, and every time I tried to tell her I really wasn't that good at it, she said I didn't have to be - the families just wanted the photograph having it was the idea and they wouldn't care how good it was, technically. But I told her no anyway. Even unpaid, I would have felt like an

impostor. Not only was I not that good as a photographer, but I wasn't that good with kids. Maybe that sounds terrible under the circumstances. It seemed to me at the time that the appropriate person for this kind of sensitive task would be someone with a strong empathy and dedication to and involvement with children. And I didn't have that. Of course I used to be a child, and my sister Janice and I had pretty good parents, but I don't remember childhood as being a particularly happy time. I could hardly wait for it to be over so I could be out on my own. And I can't say that I've *ever enjoyed* children. I've never particularly liked spending time with them. My nephews are okay - I've taken

them to ball-games and movies and such and I think they're great kids now that they're older. When they were little I didn't know what to say to them and, frankly, they scared me a little. They seemed so needy and fragile and that was pretty much the extent of their personalities.

As far as other kids go, I'd have to say I've basically ignored them. Their concerns are not my concerns. Most of the time I haven't even been aware they were there.

That weekend I was in the city park taking bad pictures. I tried shooting couples, failing - everything looked fuzzy and poorly framed. Composition was eccentric at best, whatever I tried.

A number of families were barbecuing. I noticed one small group in particular: really young parents, kids themselves, with a huge, dish-shaped barbecue looking hundreds of years old.

Suddenly there was an explosion of shouts, barking, shapes racing through the crowd. Then several large dogs burst from the wall of people to my right, followed by a half-dozen teenage boys, red-faced, barking like hyenas, and all of them converging on that young family.

I shouted a warning, but too late. One of the dogs knocked the unwieldy barbecue over, and several others a few feet away. The little kids started screaming, the mother and father running toward them, but the air was full of

thick, white, choking smoke. The mother grabbed up two of their kids and folded them into her. But the little one . . . “Jose!” the young father screamed. “Jose!”

I could not breathe in the smoke, but I could not close my eyes. And almost as if to protect my eyes I raised my camera in front of my face and started taking pictures of the turmoil and the panic, the father gesturing as if mad, and I’m wondering how could this be, all this over some kids and their pets, but these poor people, their lives changing forever. And then the little boy appears out of the smoke like some apparition from the mists, some ghost back to rejoin his family because the taking of him had

been a mistake, arms reaching up for his daddy, crying and sobbing and the father sobbing as well.

It was at that moment I decided to say yes to my neighbor, and became the hospital's bereavement photographer. Even before I saw the photographs I had taken: the looks on the young couple's faces on their rapid descent into despair, and that small boy appearing out of the clouds like a tragedy retrieved from the fierce and unforgiving eddies of time.

* * * *

“Oh, Johnny, those poor people!” Janice is my older sister, my confessor, and, I'm a little embarrassed to say, my barometer as to what's normal or abnormal, what's okay and what's not

okay.

The day after I'd made that decision to volunteer my photo-graphic services she had a barbecue of her own. (Would I have changed my mind if she'd responded negatively? I still don't know.) I was invited, of course. With no family or even regular girlfriend, I usually ate at her house three, four times a week. Tom didn't seem to mind, but of course you never really know when you visit married couples. They might have been fighting for hours before you got there, but when they open the front door they're like a glossy advertisement for the connubial life.

"Sounds like pretty sad work to me," Tom said morosely.

“Tom!”

“I’m not criticizing him, Janice. It just sounds like it’d be pretty grim stuff, and he’s not even being paid to do it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be doing it every day,” I said, somewhat off the point. I just wanted them both to believe that, contrary to appearances, I lead a pretty balanced life. Despite the fact that I had no girlfriend, spent most of my spare time at their house, and obsessively took photographs even *I* didn’t think were very good. Janice snorted. “Don’t listen to him, Johnny. It’s a noble way *to* spend your time. We should *all* do at least one activity like that.”

The subject mercifully disappeared into a conversational salad of new

movies, music, old friends recently seen, what my twin nephews were doing (now fifteen, athletic, and a deadly combination with an alarmingly broad age range of females), and, of course, the pregnancy.

“You should have one of your own, sometime,” Janice said, smiling and rubbing her belly as if it were silk.

“Wrong equipment, sis.”

“I meant with a *girl*.”

“Oh, duh, I didn’t *understand*.”

“You guys.” Tom, an only child, didn’t get it.

“Actually I think I would, even have it myself, if it made me half as happy as you look every time you’re pregnant.”

“Every *time*? Two times, little

brother.”

“Could be more,” Tom said, and ducked when she tossed the ketchup squeeze-bottle at his head.

I looked around. The angle of the light had changed, deepening some colors, brightening others. There had always been an intensity and vividness about my sister’s life. It was almost unnatural the way the environment shifted its spectrum to suit her. The bright blue stucco house, the grass green as Astroturf, the red-and-white-checkered cloth over the redwood table, laden with matching yellow plates and cups and a rainbow of food. A few feet away the tanned blond boys passing the football through the jeweled spray from the sprinkler. Unexpectedly, the

sight made me hold my breath. My beautiful nephews. I could have been a better uncle. But perhaps for the first time, their connection to me seemed sharp and undeniable, and it didn't seem to matter that I didn't understand them most of the time. All of it like one of those Kodachrome photographs from the 1960s: colors so intensely unrealistic, so vividly assaultive, they dazzled the eyes.

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The job was meant to be only temporary. That actually increased my stress over the whole affair, because I felt I didn't have that much time to figure out how to do things right. I'd spend a long time with the camera, framing the shot, then suddenly I'd feel everything

was wrong, that I'd be leaving this family with nothing to remember their dead child by. So I'd compulsively start all over again adjust-ing, readjusting, my fingers shaking and sliding off the controls. Invariably I'd take too long and the family's understandable nervousness would increase tenfold. They'd suddenly be anxious to let go of this child or they would slip over some invisible line and would act as if they might hold onto him or her forever. The mothers, mostly. The fathers would usually just be irritated, but most of them started out irritated, angry. They were being asked or pressured into doing something they weren't really sure they could do.

Liz could see what was happening.

She let me struggle a little at first, scoping out the boundaries of my difficulty, and then she finally stepped in, talking to these parents, letting them know what to expect, helping me set up, letting *m e* know what to expect, by example teaching me what to say, what to look out for, how to pace things so the experience wasn't too much, wasn't too little.

Despite all my worries, I never took a bad picture for any of these people. Oh, some shots were better than others, certainly, but I don't think I ever took a really *bad* shot. As morbid as it sounds, I had found my subject. And my subject had found me.

Taking pictures of dead children -

well, as I've said, the work generated the expected tension in both the families and the photographer. I'd spend so much time trying to get a pose that looked natural. Sometimes I'd be working so hard to make everything look just right that I'd forget why these people were looking so sad and I'd catch myself hoping that the baby would wake up and look at the camera. And when one of them finally did, I went on with what I was doing and took the shot without a thought about what had just occurred.

Then minutes later - I stood up and looked over the camera at the couple and their tiny, tiny baby. Dead baby - I could not have imagined that a creature so small who looked so like a miniature

human being could have survived our comparatively brutal, everyday air.

The couple looked at me uneasily. Finally the man said, "Are we done here?"

Something wrong?"

Everything's wrong, I wanted to say. Your baby is dead. How much wronger could things possibly get}

"No," I said. "No." And I looked closely at this child, hoping to see that it was sleeping, but immediately knew it was not.

Dead children, at least the really small ones, have an unformed, stylized quality even though there may be nothing missing ana-tomically. Their tiny bodies recall some unusual piece of art, perhaps

of an animal that's never been seen before, some part-human, part-bird thing, or some new breed of feral pig or rodent. They are like remnants of the long, involved dream you just had, mysteriously conveyed to our waking world. They are like hope petrified and now you have no idea where to put the thing.

That was what sat perched against the young mother's swollen breasts, a sad reminder of her fullness craving release.

Of course I decided almost immediately that what I was sure I had seen hadn't even happened at all. One of the things that occurs when you spend a great deal of time staring into a camera lens is that stationary things appear to

move, moving things freeze, and a variety of other optical illusions may occur. Things appear, disappear, change color and shape. Of course you don't have to use a camera to see this - stare at almost anything in the real world long enough and these kinds of phenomena occur. That's true enough, isn't it? I mean, it isn't just me, right?

The great photographers are great because they see things differently from the rest of us. So from our perspective they see things that aren't there. I've long had this notion, not quite a theory, that the world changes when a great photographer looks through the lens.

As I said before, I'm not a great photographer. But when I took those first

rolls home and developed them I think I got just a glimpse of what the great photographer sees. In three of the shots the baby's eyes were open, looking at me.

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I admit that upon occasion I do fall prey to a certain suggestibility. I'm wound pretty tightly at times. I get somewhat anxious in the darkroom. I'm interested in shadows in an aesthetic sense, but I'm also uncomfortable with them. Unexpected sounds can make me jump out of my skin. I don't care for scary movies. And I'll believe almost anything that comes out of the mouth of a well-spoken man or woman.

So I wasn't about to let myself

believe what the pictures were telling me. Not without a fight.

“Liz, did you ever notice the babies’ eyes? How sometimes they’re . . . open just a little?”

I don’t know if I expected her to ask me if I’d been drinking, or suggest that I get more sleep, or maybe just stare at me with that evaluating look I’d seen her give some of the patients. But I didn’t expect the calmness, the matter-of-factness.

“Sometimes the eyes don’t close all the way. When they get to the embalmer, some-times he’ll sew the lids down, or glue them maybe. Whatever seems necessary for the viewing. Occasionally I’ll warn the parents, if I think it will

upset them. Why, has it been bothering you, or is it just something you noticed?"

Relieved, I almost told her what I'd been thinking, what I'd been imagining, but I didn't. "I just noticed," I said.

* * * *

So for a while I refocused myself on just taking the pictures, trying to relax the couples (or in some cases, single moms, and in one very complicated case, a single dad, who seemed angry about the whole thing, and frowned during the picture, but still insisted that the picture with his son was something *h e h a d* to have. Liz was obviously nervous about that one, and hung around outside the room while I hurried the session.) My composition got better; the

pictures improved. Sometimes there would be something different about a baby: a certain slant to the shoulders, a small hand frozen in a gesture, an ambiguous expressiveness in the face that tugged at my imagination, but I withheld any response. I knew that if I brought any of these details to Liz's attention she would give me some simple, calm, rational answer, and I would feel that I was only making myself suspect in her eyes. Yet I felt almost guilty not to be paying more notice to these small details, as if I were ignoring the appeals of some damaged or frightened child. And what did I know of these things? I'd never been a parent, never hoped to be a parent. I knew

nothing, really, of children. I had learned a little about grieving parents: how they held their dead babies, how they looked at the camera, how they held themselves. And I could see clearly, now, the way the eyelids sometimes loosened a bit, sliding up to expose crescent-shaped slivers of greyish eyeball. I'd seen this look in people who were napping -there was nothing unusual about it. But I still didn't like seeing this in the babies. For in the babies it didn't look like napping at all - it looked like additional evidence of their premature deaths.

I had become more relaxed in my volunteer work. I didn't expect any surprises and no surprises occurred. And yet still I would occasionally take

those special pictures out of their folders and examine them. And it did not escape my notice that the babies in the pictures, the ones who appeared to be staring at me, had eyes which remained wide open, with an aspect of deliberate and unmistakable intention.

* * * *

This vocation of bereavement photography is hardly a new one. From the earliest days of photography you will find pictures of dead people staring at the camera, sometimes with the surgeon's or embalmer's stitches all too visible around the scalp or chest. The adults are in their best clothing, sometimes slouched in a chair, sometimes propped up in bed, a Bible

underneath one hand. Sometimes the women are holding flowers.

Many, of course, appear to be sleeping, caught by the sneaky photographer as they nap the afternoon away. Others look terrified: eyes wide and impossibly white, the enlarged dots of their pupils fixing you in a mean, unforgiving gaze. These gazes are artificial, of course: the eyes painted onto the closed, dead lids. They look, I think, like stills from some badly animated cartoon. In those days portraiture was quite a bit more formal, and sittings a special occasion. Few families owned cameras of their own, and you might have only two or three photographs taken of yourself over the

course of a lifetime. Sometimes a grieving relative's only chance for a photographic record of a beloved's life was after the beloved was dead.

This was particularly true in the case of children. Infant mortality in the days of our great-grandparents was so high that without the photographic proof people might not ever know you'd ever been a parent. You dressed them up as angels and paid the man good money to take their everlasting portraits, money you doubtless could not spare. You put those portraits up on the mantel or in an honored place on the parlor wall, and you showed them to friends and neighbors, even salesmen come to call. And you alternately preened and choked

with grief when they commented

“How precious,” “How handsome,”
and “How terribly, terribly sad.”

* * * *

The issue returned with the Wilson child.

Did I mention before that most of the children I photographed were stillborns?

Of course that would make sense as there would be no opportunities for school pictures or family portraits or any of the other usual domestic photo opportunities. The need for my services was greater.

But occasionally an older child of one or two years would be signed up for the service, accompanied by parents who were always a bit ashamed for not

having engaged in that normal parental obsession of incessant snapshots and home movies. I have to say I was glad this particular age group didn't come up too often. It was awful enough to take pictures of parents devastated by the loss of a dream - a child who might have been anything, whose likes and dislikes, the sound of the voice, were completely unknown. Worse was the child who had developed a personality, however roughly formed, who liked toy trucks and hated green beans, who smelled of a dozen different things, whose eyes had focus. The Wilsons were older than the usual couples I saw. She was in her early forties; he had to be on the far side of fifty. They had a small chicken farm

twenty miles outside the city. Mrs Wilson smelled of flour and of make-up carelessly and too thickly applied. In fact I think make-up was a rare accessory for her. She had pupils like little dark peas, washed up in a cup of milk. There was something wrong with her hip; she shuffled and bobbed across the room to the metal chair I'd set up for her. The nice chair was being cleaned, and the appointment had been hastily arranged. I felt bad about that. I knew nothing about her, but I would have liked to have photographed her in the finest hotel in the city.

This reaction was all silliness on my part, of course. She wouldn't have cared - she was barely aware of her

surroundings. Her eyes were focused on another piece of furniture in the room: a gurney bearing a small swaddled bundle, an elderly nurse stationed nearby as if to prevent its theft or escape.

Mr Wilson also came to me in layers. Floating above it all was the stink of chickens, of years of too much labor with too little reward. Under that was a face like sheared-off slabs of rock, and eyes scorched from too little crying, no matter what. Unlike Mrs Wilson, there appeared to be nothing wrong with his body, but he shuffled across the floor just the same, a rising tide of anger impeding forward progress. He stopped dutifully by the rigid metal chair, gripping the back with narrow, grease-

stained fin-gers, a little too tightly because he thought no one would notice. He watched as his wife made her way painfully over to the gurney and stood there patting and stroking - not the sunken little bundle, but the sheets surrounding it. He didn't move another step. He knew his place.

The nurse asked if they'd like to "get situated", and then she'd bring them their son. I couldn't imagine what she meant - it sounded as if they were moving into a new place, or starting a new job. They appeared to understand her better, however. Mrs Wilson dropped into the chair and held on to her knees. Mr Wilson straightened up as if to verify the height listed on his driver's license. The

nurse carried the package over, whispering comforting things into its open top. She unwrapped the child and fussed with him in mock-complaint, trying to position him in his mother's lap so that the large dent in the side of his head wouldn't show. She almost managed it by laying the dent against his mother's chest and twisting his pelvis a little. She pretended not to notice the mother's profound shudder.

Then the nurse quickly backed away from the house of cards she'd just constructed, holding her breath as if even that might trigger collapse. She retreated to the back of the room, with a gesture toward the family as if presenting some magic trick or religious

tableau.

The couple stared straight ahead, slightly above me at the dark wall behind. I didn't bother telling them to look at or reposition the child. They were done with me and what I represented.

All that was left for me to do was to gaze at the child and snap the shutter. Even slumped inwards like that, he was actually a pretty sturdy kid. Broad-faced with chubby arms and legs. The head a little large, and I wondered briefly if there had been a spreading due to impact and I shook slightly, a bit disgusted with myself. This couple's beautiful little boy.

But the head wasn't quite right, and

the composition was made worse by the couple's hunched-forward, intense stares. I moved the camera and tripod a little to the left while gazing through the viewfinder, ready to stop moving when things looked right.

The little boy opened his eyes, the pupils following me.

I looked up from the viewfinder. The eyes remained closed.

Back with my eye to the lens and the boy's eyes were following me again, as I moved further left, than back right again. It was probably just the position of his head and the slump of the shoulders, but he looked angry. He looked furious. Finally I stopped. The eyes closed. But as I started to press the

button they opened again. Bore down on me. Impatient, waiting.

I took shot after shot that afternoon. Most of them were unusable. What was he so angry about? It was as if he didn't want his picture taken with these people and he was blaming me for it.

* * * *

After that day the children opened their eyes for me now and then, although certainly not during the majority of these sessions. I don't believe I'd still be doing this work today if it had happened with every child. Most of the time my volunteer work consisted of calming the parents without actually counseling them - I don't have the temperament or training for it. Positioning them, feeling

out what they would be comfortable with, and finally taking the shot. That's what it's all about, really: taking the shot.

The children who opened their eyes to me hampered that work, since obviously I couldn't send those poor couples home with that kind of photograph. Increasingly they seemed angry with me, and increasingly I was irritated with them for the obstacle they had In-come.

* * * *

“Okay . . . uh, could you move her to the left just a bit? There, that's good. That's perfect.”

And she is. This child, this Amy, my flesh, my blood, my niece. Tom grips Janice's shoulders a little too firmly. I

can see the small wince of discomfort playing with the corners of my sister's mouth. I look at Tom, he looks back at me, relaxes his hands. He looks so pale - I think if I don't take this family portrait soon he might faint. The twin boys stand to each side of him, beautiful and sullen, yet they pull in closer to his body for his support and theirs.

Janice looks up at me, her little brother, not sure what she should do. I offer her a smile; she takes it, attempts to make it her own, and almost succeeds. Then I look through the lens. I look at Amy, and she's otherworldly, beautiful as her mother. And then she opens her eyes, giving me that stare I've seen a hundred times before, but it's different

this time, because this is Amy, this is one of my own. I see the anger coming slowly into her eyes, but I smile at her anyway. I make a kiss with my mouth, and I hope she understands it is just for her. And I take the shot, this one for me, and she closes her eyes again, and I take the other shot for them.