

The stranger in the photo is me

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The author in England, 1944.

I was never one to make a big deal over snapshots; I never spent long evenings with the family photograph album. Let's get on with the living. To heck with yesterday, what are we going to do tomorrow? But with the accumulation of yesterdays and the possibility of shrinking tomorrows, I find myself returning, as I suspect many over 60s do, for a second glance and a third at family photos that snatch a moment from time.

In looking at mine, I become aware that it is so recent in the stretch of man's history that we have been able to stop time in this way and hold still for reflection. Vermeer is one of my favorite painters because of that sense of suspended time, with both clock and calendar held so wonderfully, so terribly still.

The people in the snapshots are all strangers. My parents young, caught before I arrived or as they were when I saw them as towering grown-ups. They seemed so old then and so young now. And I am, to me, the strangest of all.

There is a photograph of me on a tricycle before the duplex on Grand View Avenue in Wollaston I hardly remember; in another I am dressed in a seersucker sailor suit when I was 5 and lived in a Cincinnati hotel. I cannot remember the suit but even now, studying the snapshot, I am drunk on the memory of its peculiar odor and time is erased.

In the snapshots I pass from chubby to skinny and, unfortunately, ended up a chub. Looking at the grown-ups in the snapshots I should have known.

In other snapshots, I am cowboy, pilot, Indian chief; I loved to dress up to become what I was not, and suspect I still am a wearer of masks and costumes.

It would be socially appropriate to report on this day that I contemplate all those who are gone, but the truth is that my eyes are drawn back to pictures of my stranger self.

And the picture that haunts me the most is one not in costume but in the uniform I proudly earned in World War

II. I believe it was taken in England from the design of the barracks behind me. I have taken off the ugly steelframed GI glasses, a touch of dishonesty for the girl who waited at home.

My overseas cap with its airborne insignia is tugged down over my right eye, my right shoulder in the jump jacket is lower because I have my left hand in my pocket in rakish disregard for the regulation that a soldier in that war could never, ever stick a hand in a pocket.

The pockets that are empty in the photograph will soon bulge with hand grenades, extra ammunition, food, and many of the gross of condoms we were issued before a combat jump. This GI item was more a matter of industrial merchandising than soldierly dreaming — or frontline reality.

The soldier smiles as if he knew his innocence and is both eager for its loss and nostalgic for those few years of naiveté behind him.

I try once more to enter the photograph and become what I was that day when autumn sunlight dappled the barracks wall and I was so eager to experience the combat my father wanted so much for me. He had never made it to the trenches over there in his war.

When that photograph was taken, my father still had dreams of merchandising glory, of a store with an awning that read Murray & Son. I had not yet become the person who had to nod yes at MGH when my father asked if he had cancer, to make the decision against extraordinary means after his last heart attack. When this photo was taken, he had not yet grown old, his collars large, his step hesitant, his shoes unshined.

Mother was still alive, and her mother who really raised me had not died as I was to learn in a letter I received at the front. The girl who wrote every day and for whom the photo was taken had not yet become my wife, and we had not yet been the first in our families to divorce two years later.

I had not yet seen my first dead soldier, had not yet felt the earth beneath me become a trampoline as the shells of a rolling barrage marched across our position.

I had no idea my life would become as wonderful or as terrible as it has been; that I would remarry, have three daughters and outlive one. I could not have imagined that I actually would be able to become a writer and eat — even overeat. I simply cannot re-create my snapshot innocence.

I had not had an easy or happy childhood, I had done well at work but not at school; I was not Mr. Pollyanna, but life has been worse and far better than I could have imagined.

Over 60 we are fascinated by the mystery of our life, why roads were taken and not taken, and our children encourage this as they develop a sense of family history. A daughter discovers a letter from the soldier in the photograph in England and another written less than a year later, on V-E day. She is surprised at how much I have aged. I am not.

I would not wish for a child or grandchild of mine to undergo the blood test of war my father so hoped I would face as he had not. In photos taken not so many years later I have a streak of white hair. It is probably genetic but I imagine it is the shadow of a bullet that barely passed me by, and I find I cannot enter the snapshot of the smiling soldier who is still stranger to me, still innocent of the heroic harm man can deliver to man.

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