

SNAPSHOT

She holds the snapshot like a prayer book. Clutching the thing. Forcing herself to look at the image, and to remember as she looks. A crack runs down the side of the snapshot where it was folded to fit into a wallet. To the right of the crack is the image of a family. Lucille wears a green print dress. Wrapped around her shoulders is a fox stole. She is smiling up at her gangly thirteen-year-old daughter. The daughter, in turn, represses a smile, hiding the braces that cover her teeth.

She rolls over on her back. Looks at her knees, looks at her legs. Six years from the photograph, and she is still the same girl. From the kitchen she hears the sounds of a dispute struggling to begin. Deep voices growl. She hears the sound of cans being opened. Someone turns on a radio. Someone turns it off. She runs a finger over a piece of brittle scotch tape that attaches a white border to the photograph. She thinks of her father ripping the print from the Polaroid, tearing the bottom section. In her memory, her mother is there, mending the snapshot. More voices, and goodbyes are said. The kitchen radio is turned on. Nat King Cole and her father sing in harmony. She carries the photograph to the mirror and turns on the table light. Sticks the photo in the corner of the mirror, watches it while she brushes her hair.

Outside her bedroom window, an orange cat stands watch near the bird feeder. No breeze, but the feeder twirls gently, a faint reminder of a recent occupant. The cat stretches, looks to the sky, and walks across the wooden porch.

She finishes brushing her hair. Seventy strokes or eighty strokes, she has lost count. From the snapshot, Lucille continues to smile. There are tiny lines around her mouth, laugh lines spreading from her eyes. The trace of a suntan brings out the redness of her lipstick. The girl takes the snapshot from the mirror. She turns it over and sees a date written in blue ink. "January 19, 1959," she reads. The script is that of a Catholic school girl's--the letters leaning so slightly to the right, clear and well-formed. The girl recognizes her mother's handwriting. And it is the handwriting that returns her mother to the girl. More insistent than the snapshot, it is the fading script that forces memory on the girl.

She sees her mother sitting in her late-night kitchen, sitting at the formica table. The woman sips at a cup of coffee. It is cold in the apartment, and her robe is buttoned to her neck. She listens to the radio as she catalogs the photographs of her daughter's graduation. She holds up the photograph of her daughter and herself. She sees the beauty that is not concealed by awkwardness. The snapshot is special to her. On the back, she writes a date.

Her mother, brought back to life, by writing on the back of a snapshot, crosses the kitchen. Feels the cold linoleum through her slippers. Her toes begin to go numb. She stands near the stove as the kettle whistles, then pours the boiling water into a cup of instant coffee. She stretches luxuriously. It is good to be awake while the family sleeps.

The memory begins to fade. The girl pushes at it. She wants to see her mother cross the kitchen floor, brush back her hair, straighten her robe. She wants to smell the smoke from her mother's cigarette and hear the ticking of the kitchen clock. Most of all, she wants to see her mother fold the photograph so that it will fit into her wallet. But the image is gone.

She walks around the room. Touches a book, a record album cover. She smiles at a stuffed rabbit, runs a finger over the fur on his remaining ear. A child's room it is, but it is more familiar than her own skin. A room where she lay on rainy afternoons, listening to records and dreaming. She tries to recall those afternoons,

but like her mother, they stay hidden in memory.

A gentle knock, and then her father appears in the doorway. Middle-aged and balding, it is hard to see the resemblance between the man and his daughter. He smiles at her, and tells her it is time to go. The girl goes to her father and kisses him. She hands him the snapshot.

Ronald Reed