

Portrait of My Mother, Who Posed Nude in Wartime Marjorie Sandor

My father was the photographer in our family, the one with a sense of occasion, and he bore this burden alone, as my mother refused to distinguish between famous moments and the rest of life. He made gallant jokes about this, calling himself the accursed husband; she was the only wife in their circle who didn't keep a family album, simply threw snapshots and mementos into an old shoebox where they went yellow and curled up. This is how we lost the late winter and spring of 1945, when he was in the Army medical corps, and she was pregnant with me. Indiana, 1945 is our family's gap, our sole unrecorded moment. He mentioned this to her once, but she was unrepentant. "Oops," she said. "Oops isn't sorry," my father replied, but she said no more, only gave him a look of such mild surprise that he knew she'd never admit anything. Maybe he had his own secrets, because he dropped the subject fast. After he died she would tell me this story, but for years, all I knew was that my mother, who had never before seemed mysterious to me, could seal a piece of time like a letter and send it away.

There is, in fact, a picture from that spring--Grandma Eva must have taken it at my father's request. Early evening, and March, I'm guessing, because there's still a little snow in Eva's yard. My father would have seen the light fading as they ate their dinner, and risen swiftly from the table. "When else, when else?" he'd cry in his exulting, worried way, his hands trembling a bit as they did on even the smallest occasion, as if he still hadn't gotten over his own miraculous change of fortune. That was what he called it, so that as children we had a confused image of him as a boy in rags at a carnival booth, winning his college scholarship and our classy mother all in one night.

In the photograph he stands with his foot on the running board of a big dark car, reaching for my mother's shoulder, coaxing her into the frame. My brother Gabe, who would have been four by then, isn't in the picture--probably running wildly around the yard, already impossible to catch. So it's just the two of them: my slender, nervous father in his Army uniform, all dark with gleaming buttons, and my mother in something dark, too, with a white collar and cuffs, to make you think of Pilgrims and convent girls. Somber, stoic, just right for the year of moving back in with her mother. Was he hoping for a romantic wartime portrait: No luck: he was still in the act of pulling her in when Grandmother Eva clicked the shutter, so both of them appear a little tipped, off-balance. My mother's dress is all wrong, too. It blends into the twilight, leaving her face and the white collar and cuffs pale and detached, floating off from my father, the car, everything.