

Candidate G evidence

Ophelia

My hand trembles almost imperceptibly as I reach for the padlocked tin box that contains my most precious possessions. These photos not only document my past, but possess my present. Each small white square a vital step on the road to here. The faintest glide of my hand over the image unlocks the memories of each event in my mind and I am transported back, back to the sights, smells sounds and emotions of the time. Reverently I lift my favourite, the first time I saw her. London. 1965. St James' Street packed like a tin of sardines, colourless sardines devoid of life, freedom, creativity. In my left hand I clutch a briefcase, as uncomfortable in my grasp as I was in this facade of a businessman, a hollow picture of power and money. My persona was one I had craved for, striven for, but it gave me no satisfaction. I was empty.

Then I saw her, among the hurried rush of people who threatened to overwhelm me. One girl sat on the wall as if the world moved around her and she remained a constant, becalmed. A yellow striped shirt hung, slightly off centre, from her slight frame, far too big but somehow perfect. She held a leather-bound book, on the spine 'Hamlet' etched in faded gold leaf. Serenity in a sea of chaos. I reached into the briefcase to awake my camera from its long slumber. With the click of the shutter she was captured. I remember it well, the first sight, the first photo; the first step on the journey.

As the bowler-hatted business life of 1960s London fades I pick up another photo. India. 1970. She strolled lightly through the bustling markets of Arpora, Goa, the heavy, heady smells of spices and bolt upon bolt of silk in a million hues making the sensory experience almost spiritual. The black leather strap hung heavy on my shoulders as I was frozen by choice and opportunity, what to photograph when everything was the perfect image. Then a side street of the market that the sun seemed to miss, a corner on the page that the child had forgotten to colour in. She ventured further into the oasis of quiet and cried out as she spotted it, a dog, curled and cold as alabaster. Thousands of stalls selling food and joy, yet starved and joyless he lay. She stood still as if moving would injure the dog more and a piece of her melted to a tear tracking a trail through the dust on her cheek. I framed the scene in the

viewfinder and heard the click of the shutter. The hushed drone, the camera captured a moment of tragic perfection. Doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt that I love.

I keep the room cold, the only warmth radiating from the light streaming through a crack in the door. I mourn the adventures we once had. My hand strokes the small pile of books gathered in the corner of the room, the first leather bound, the title "Hamlet" now almost invisible. I pull my hand away quickly and I see the next photograph, a dusty scene of warmth. Malawi. 1973. In the midst of a dusky evening she meandered as the warm air attempted to suffocate, dust gathering at the back of our throats. Yet she smiled effortlessly, an uncontrollable physical reaction to the sun. She jumped to the side as the bus passed and then spilled out its contents, an outpouring of laughter and sharing news, farewells as they headed home to their families to break bread. As she reached her shack he was sitting on the stoop. He cradled a small round ball covered in a layer of mud, looking at it as if he held a rare piece of treasure. He wore torn shorts and a baggy top, his arms like thin sticks on the verge of snapping. His stomach small, like a deflated balloon and his ribs straining as if attempting to escape the thin layer of skin stretched across them. He looked up at us with delight, eyeing the camera around my neck: an unspoken desire for this moment to be captured forever. She sat beside him, her slender fingers encircling his tiny hand, his infectious happiness reflected in her eyes. I brought the camera towards my eye and muttered a redundant "smile"; as if she would do anything else. The photograph pulses with youthful delight and warmth touching even this unhappy soul for a brief moment. I try to imagine her, frozen in this image, hidden from the grasps of time, her happiness still emanating on warm summer nights, not yet imprisoned by reality.

I tear myself away from the photo, gather my limbs and gravitate towards the air conditioning. The dial is already low yet I turn it lower, shivering but a necessity. Frost has gathered outdoors, slowly creeping in through the cracks in the windows. The three jumpers nearly insulate me but not quite. My breath is visible like a puff of smoke. London. 1976. As I peered around, I couldn't stop myself; I had to capture her beauty once again, even though she grew increasingly frail in each image, a cigarette held in her left hand, her fingertips stained slightly yellow and a cloud engulfing her blurring features. I rested against the barrier in the station, exhausted by her departure as she was about to board the train, 8:15, four minutes left. Her

pale skin, translucent like china so delicate, not warm, yet beautiful all the same. I knew the risk of the camera as I held it in my right hand. I reminded myself “there is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so”, as I lifted my right hand and pressed the shutter. I couldn’t let her go.

The final photograph. She lies, the pale blue dress falling around her, holding her, embellished and luminous, but drowned by darkness. The plants thrive around her, bright green illuminating the scene, nature filling the edges of the photo almost overflowing the frame; the winding limbs of the reeds arch over her protectively. Her brunette locks spread in the water creating a crown of chestnut spindles. The water is too shallow to engulf and instead cushions her fall. Her hand falls to the side as I position the flowers and the reds, blues and violets fall from her grasp onto her dress. Sweets to the sweet. Her skin is cold to the touch and yet she has not quite lost the blush of her cheeks. Her mouth lies slightly open as if taking her last breath or trying to utter her last message, some words of comfort or of condemnation? Her life is gone, but she will live on, captured forever in this image, safe from the ravages of the world. “This is the very ecstasy of love,” I think as I stand over her, my Ophelia.