



MY VIEW

Old Photos help us understand who we are

The subject of the email reads, “picture of our grandmother.” I click on the attachment, and a young woman unfolds before me. In the old photo, all her features are grainy, softened, but there is enough. Enough to see her shiny, brown hair brushed back, a forthright look straight into the camera. Enough to see she is a formidable woman. I immediately assume the picture is of my father’s mother, whom I knew.

Then I realize, no, this is my mother’s mother, my grandmother Delia Duggan, who died long before I was born.

How many of us have pictures in dust-covered albums, or stuffed away in drawers we never open, pictures that would mean so much to those in the family who haven’t seen them? In a town near Boston, Massachusetts, a thoughtful cousin has been going through family pictures after the death of his parents, and found this one, and was kind enough to send it along. Could he have imagined how much this tiny gem of history would mean to me, and to my three sisters? Our mother died when she was forty-five, in a sudden car accident, a single cataclysmic clash of metal and mortal that snatched her away and changed our lives irrevocably. I was seventeen. Forty-four years later, I still miss her, still wonder: why did she die so young?

I print the picture my cousin sent. Tears spring to my eyes as I examine this portrait. I search the picture for clues to who this woman was, for similarities to my mother. I want to fill in the bits and pieces of my life, of my heritage, to understand this link to an earlier generation.

Turning back to the computer, I look there again at the picture, and blow it up to full-screen size. An icon in the shape of a tiny open hand allows me to move around within the picture, to focus on my grandmother’s eyes, her uncompromising look, the set of her mouth, how the shadows fall across her face. As I click to move around in the picture again, the icon hand closes, almost as if it is touching her skin, and I imagine for a moment that I can reach through the decades and into the past with my own hand, and I am overwhelmed with the yearning to touch her face, stroke her cheek, to look into her eyes and ask, “Who are you? What was life like for you? What was my mother like when she was a little girl?”

In the picture of my grandmother Delia, I see the shape of my mother’s face. I run from the computer to search upstairs and down and finally, find a picture of my mother, not yet hung from our move last year to the house we live in near Buffalo, far from Massachusetts, where we lived for so long. In that picture of my mother, I find the same straightforward gaze from almond eyes, the same shape of the nose and lips. And I rush now to get a picture of myself, and I line them up, these three pictures - my grandmother Delia, and my mother Mary, and me, and I can see what I am searching for: I am of them. They are my own true flesh and blood and made me who I am.

Do you have pictures of ancestors in your basement or attic, gems of your own history that your children or grandchildren haven’t seen? Dig them out, share what you know of the stories behind the pictures. If you haven’t already, help your kids and grandkids put together the bits and pieces of their heritage. Help them get to know those who in some measure large or small, shaped their lives, those from whom they come.