

THE PHOTO

BY RENEE MARTON



Left to right: Tibou Lubart, Renee Marton, Sandy Haas

My office at home is a sanctuary for photos of family and friends. A sanctuary because the photos, as physical objects, represent persons, both living and not, with whom the narrative of my life is entwined. A sanctuary or preserve because memories (even though some of them are probably misremembered) come to mind when I look at the photos. You won't find selfies here, nor Snapchat photos that self-delete. And no digital expressions, unless printed.

Created of paper and ink, these photos are a pictorial diary, with history and chronology attached. Most are individually framed, and as you look around my

office, the sharp angles of metal or wood frames enter your visual field, a nanosecond before the actual images do.

For long-standing friends and family, I often construct a photographic lifeline: a series of horizontal or vertical images of one person, from childhood through adulthood, middle and older ages. I sometimes have a few images of any one person to manipulate, which I sort into non-chronological order the first time I put them together. Once I finish entertaining myself with the odd mix of ages, my rational self takes over and I put everything in chronological order. Sometimes, I hang the photos on those long metal strips with little clips, sort of like photographic laundry lines.

Even though many photos are individually framed, I keep the “framees” together so I can peruse the grouping at my leisure. When you gaze at someone over and over during a long time span, you think of so many more memories than one photograph would normally bring to the surface. Especially the big themes: the passage of time, whether someone has aged well or badly, whether he/she had a good life or was unlucky, what they have accomplished professionally and still may accomplish, friends, spouses, children, grandchildren. That’s the obvious stuff, but there is more: what might have been different if other roads had been taken—the ones you know about, at least. What is not seen are moments or periods of time in my relationships with those photographed, when my memory reminds me that X and I didn’t speak for several years, or that Y learned at a young age of impending catastrophic illness, or even just a plain old fight that later was resolved.

I even have a row of photos of myself—about six so far, although I hope to contribute more in the future. Doing this gives me a feeling of control over time, even though I know that this is a fantasy. I don’t care—I’m all for the placebo effect.

Even in high school, I took pleasure in meeting my friends’ parents. I felt as if I were looking into the future, engaging in telescoping time travel that allowed me to see what someone would be like later in life, both physically and psychologically.

While I pore over these photographic biographies, details sometimes indicate features that one might not otherwise notice. For instance, within one group of four of my cousins (all siblings), they and their parents all have a slightly asymmetrical smile-- a very similar asymmetrical style. I doubt that I would have noticed this, unless I happened to see the photos together. Add to these idiosyncrasies memories of a particular person, and you have a memorial quilt of many squares, with colors and textures to match.

They say that eyes are the windows to the soul, but I would add that photos are the windows to a person’s past, both real, imagined and omitted.

One photo in particular evokes an intense longing and sadness whenever I look at it. It has been seventeen years since the photo was taken, but my emotions are still intense. In it are three women in their early fifties, smiling broadly at the server who took the photo with my phone. The three of us are at a bistro on Madison Avenue near the old Lycée. Standing behind me are Tibou (Lubart) and Sandy (Haas). We look delighted because we are.

Tibou is draped in a heavy (it's November), frilled red and gold shawl. The glint from gold threads bounces off her cheeks. Her hair is thick and wavy, still dark brown and barely gray. She has stark well-defined features and olive skin. Thick right-angled eyebrows with widely spaced green eyes. An aquiline nose leads to a shapely mouth. Tibou became a flamenco dancer, which seems totally appropriate for her body type. During her married life, she and her husband were a famous duo. She was known as La Tormenta; they performed in Western Europe and the US, including at Carnegie Hall. She danced, often with castanets, while her husband played guitar and sang Romany songs.

Despite having spent many nights at her home when I was at the Lycée, I lost touch with Tibou after we graduated. Our lives went in different directions, and we probably would not have seen each other again if not for the intervention of Sandy.

In 1995, I saw Tibou perform, by chance, after seeing a poster of her in the window of a Spanish restaurant on Hudson Street in Greenwich Village, where I lived at the time. I watched her dance, with her husband singing, and spoke to her once on that trip. I did not see her again until our dinner in 2002. Tibou had a difficult life after high school, although I didn't know anything about this until we met for our reunion dinner. After the Lycée, Tibou moved to Spain to further her dancing career, married, had two boys, and danced for two decades before she eventually divorced her abusive husband, and started a flamenco school in Valencia, Spain. One son remained in Spain, while the other, who had become deaf from meningitis when he was three, was attending Gallaudet University in Washington DC. When I last saw Tibou in 2002, she was in New York visiting her son, and her mother, who was in her late 80's.

When Tibou and I were together then-- I stopped in at her mother's apartment, we laughed a lot, and reminisced about "the old days" and all the good and bad times. We compared memories, as if to make sure that what we thought had happened-- had actually taken place-- confirmation by supportive witness. It felt as though no time had passed since we were rebellious young teenagers, sharing boy stories and wondering if we would ever wear the same bra size (we never did). Our shared memories were like a braided rope keeping us from meandering too far away from each other—at least for a while.

People often comment on this when reconnecting with old friends-- about how magical it is to know that someone you haven't seen for thirty-five

years can still elicit—in both of you—the same joy in being together, just like in high school.

Sandy, who lived in Baltimore, was my other friend at dinner that night in 2002. I had known her since elementary school and we were close friends for many years, until around *Troisième*, when our social circles no longer automatically overlapped, and our allegiances changed. Even though our affection for each other remained, I was in touch with her even less than I was with Tibou. I had slept over at Sandy's home many times (and vice versa) when we were around 8 to 10, and remember thinking that her mother Mildred was really nice, if rather quiet. Sandy and I played dress-up with her mother's makeup, combs and hairbrushes. Her father was an orchestra conductor. I did not see him often, but classical music was always playing at their home, and there was a baby grand in their living room.

Sandy was a very cute and perky teenager, a little on the chubby side. She had a button nose and thick dark brown curly hair no longer than her earlobes. Even though her hair had grayed completely by the time of our dinner, she was otherwise completely recognizable when we met in 2002. In the last year at the Lycée, Sandy disappeared suddenly. No information was to be had from her parents or the school-- this is how I remember things. But of course, something must have been said. Medical leave is what we were told, I think. After high school I was not in contact with Sandy for a couple of decades. Many years later we reconnected by phone and eventually Facebook and email.

After high school, and college, Sandy lived in Baltimore and became a substitute teacher (she was a Comparative Languages major in college), and later a real estate agent. She had developed congestive heart failure by her mid forties, and by the time we had dinner in New York, she was wheeling around a small oxygen tank in a portable cart. Even though she was sometimes out of breath, her upbeat personality still shone through—at least it did that night. In fact, she was responsible for suggesting our reunion and had gotten the ball rolling some six months earlier.

Sandy had a daughter when she was 17. The baby was adopted (it was her parents' decision). Twenty five or so years later, Sandy found her daughter and they came together briefly. She told this story at our reunion dinner, and made it clear that she regretted the decision to give up her daughter. Sandy had invited her daughter—now in her early thirties, to Baltimore so they could spend the weekend together. I spoke to her just before the weekend took place, and she told me how much she was looking forward to meeting her daughter in person. Unfortunately, the weekend ended badly, and a long separation ensued. I don't know what happened between them after 2002.

Tibou died in a car accident in Spain in 2003. Sandy died of heart failure in Baltimore in 2011.

I had planned to visit each of them, and we had discussed this at dinner. For some reason, the fact that each of them knew I would eventually visit gives me peace of mind, even though I never did visit either one of them. Since their deaths, I rummaged around for any old photos I might have, so as to construct a pictorial lifeline for each of them. I have a couple, but more would be great. I don't have any Lycée yearbooks (there might be one stashed on a closet shelf, but I haven't looked). I know there is material online. Sandy had a Facebook page, and links to our high school alumni association. And Tibou had her own website as a dancer, known as La Tormenta. And they each had a brother (Andre Lubart and Richard Haas), both of whom were living in Brooklyn in 2002.

Now, when I look at the memorial photograph from the bistro, I see my two old friends from elementary school, and one survivor. I miss them.