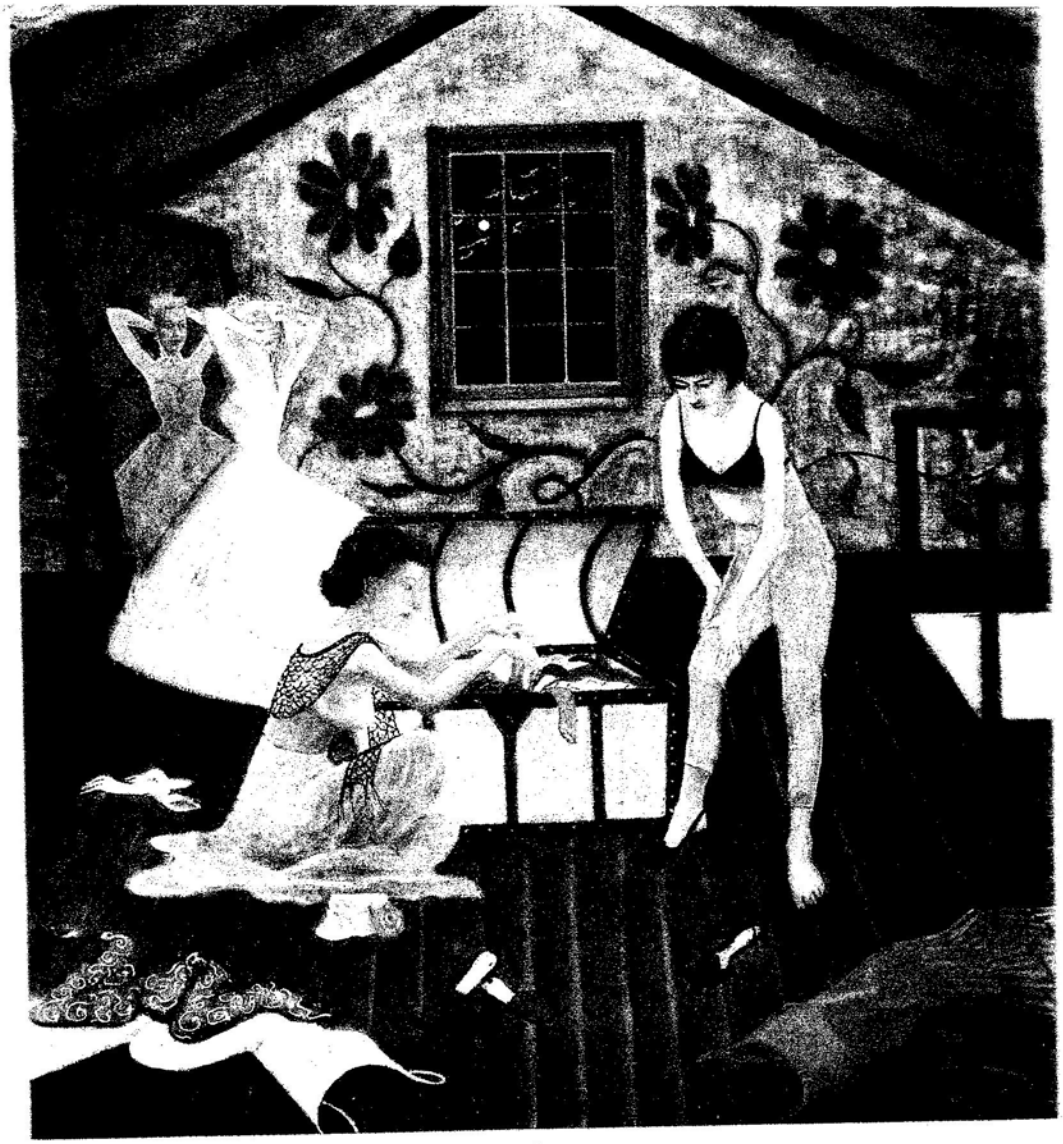

telling

confessions, concessions, and other flashes of light

marion winik

Sixteen Pictures of My Father

1. A small, square black-and-white photograph with a scalloped white edge on which the date May 1959 is printed in small type. I am the curly-headed baby in a white party dress sitting up on Daddy's shoulder eating a strawberry. Boyishly handsome in his crew-neck sweater and grown-out GI haircut, he smiles up at me, squinting into the sun. He is thirty, I am one, we are in love.

2. Twenty-five years later. My father and I at my sister's wedding, a beautiful summer day at the golf club. We are facing each other in profile, mouths wide open, very excited, talking at once. We are running the show. My father looks like Lee Iacocca with his white hair and his wire-rimmed glasses. The day he started wearing those glasses was the day he was no longer

young. If you look at this photograph long enough, my father disappears. I am alone in my fuchsia party dress, in profile, mouth wide open.

3. Nights when our parents are out, Nancy and I make Jiffy-Pop and show sixteen-millimeter home movies on the wall of the den. Our favorite is Mommy and Daddy on their honeymoon. They wear matching tennis sweaters and pretend to paddle around the empty swimming pool at Grossinger's. Young and happy, they hardly ever get on each other's nerves.

4. My father in flowered velvet bell-bottoms and a denim safari jacket, his wild gray hair sticking out all over the place. It is very late at night and he is at his discotheque, the Pandemonium, where Brother Duck is playing and everyone is drinking Harvey Wallbangers and smoking pot. The Pandemonium is losing money like crazy. My mother is home, loading the dishwasher and crying, mostly because he looks so ridiculous and he won't cut his hair. I hear her the next morning on the phone: He is a forty-three-year-old man, for Christ's sake.

5. In this picture, my father is writing a check. This check will feed me and clothe me and send me to college, will pay for my eyeglasses, my summer camp, my abortion, my psychiatrist, and my phone bill, will insure my car and fix my nose and take me out to dinner

on my birthday. Stereos, TV sets, diet pills, guitar lessons, collect calls from Europe, all covered. This is a very important check, but my father scribbles it out quickly, and hands it to me without looking up. Here you go, sport, he says.

6. This is a twenty-mile-long traffic jam created by New Jersey commuters trying to get into Manhattan. All eight zillion of them have to squeeze in by nine A.M. through two underwater tunnels or over a bridge. My father is not in this traffic jam—are you kidding? He gets off the turnpike, goes through the underpass, down the frontage road, over a bridge, zigzags through parking lots and shopping centers and the sleeping downtown streets of Union and Weehawken, gets back on the turnpike at a different exit only to cut off again and loop around, winding up ten minutes later at the front of the line. All the while he is listening to Chapter 6 of *War and Remembrance* on his cassette player and figuring out how to do a spreadsheet in Lotus 1-2-3 that will automatically compute the winnings for the Super Bowl pool.

7. My father is in his office at his perennially failing textile firm. He has an unusual group of employees, who have all been there forever and are devoted to him beyond reason. The tiny, ancient bookkeeper; the flamboyant male receptionist; the disheveled, disreputable delivery man; the enormous bald computer operator from

Long Island. At his desk, my father yells, Edna! Harold! Junior! Artie! Get in here! And his motley minions assemble to do his bidding.

8. We have the coolest father on the street. He plays war with all the kids on the hill behind the Mahoneys', takes us on Lost Rides in the car, teaches us about schneiders and double schneiders and other secrets of scoring for world-class gin rummy. We have a movie of him jumping rope, totally flat-footed, bringing his knees all the way up to his chin on every jump. He answers the front door in his boxer shorts. When I was very young, I thought he was Fred Flintstone.

9. Fred Flintstone is not amused when I call at two o'clock in the morning because the car has broken down on the way home from the rock concert, and six of us are stranded in a police station somewhere near Passaic, a good hour away from home. Morons! he says, stomping into the police station in his pajamas. Get in the goddamn car!

10. My father is having a heart attack in his Cadillac El Dorado during morning rush hour in the middle of the Lincoln Tunnel. He grimaces but continues driving into the city, where he parks his car in his customary spot on the roof of the Port Authority Bus Terminal and proceeds to his dentist appointment. You look like hell, Hyman, says the dentist. My father can barely reply.

The dentist calls an ambulance. My father's hospitalization coincides with the publication of *Iacocca!*, the autobiography of his corporate Italian look-alike. He receives about a dozen copies from various well-wishers.

11. Some years later, my father has a coronary bypass operation, after which he will eat nothing but chicken salad. Not just any chicken salad, we soon learn, as the nurses' refrigerator fills up with rejected deli containers. It should have large chunks of white meat! Maybe a little celery! Not this goddamn chicken paste! Soon everyone who visits is bringing chicken salad for his review. Now this is chicken salad, Hy. Try this. We drive in from Jersey with chicken salad made by his mother, the famous Gigi. Although this is certainly the salad against which all others must be measured, even it is not eaten with real gusto. They say my father will recover, as 99 percent of bypass patients do, but they are wrong.

12. I land at Newark Airport upon my return from New Mexico, where I have spent two weeks in the mountains with my guru. I am seventeen years old, barefoot, and wrapped in a Navajo blanket. Where the hell are your shoes, he says. Get in the goddamn car!

13. My father's body is lying in a box at the Bloomfield-Cooper Funeral Home, where my mother, sister, and I go to see it before it is cremated. I have never seen my father dead and I have never seen him wearing a yarmulke either, so this is a double surprise. I fear that this awful picture will stay with me forever and blot out all the other pictures of him in my mind, but later I can remember only that his head seemed too large for his body, the yarmulke, and his closed eyelids.

14. The last time I saw my father alive and well was the ignominious night he bailed us out of jail in New York City. My sister, Nancy, her husband, Steven, my then-fiancé, Tony, and I (Dey got yuh whole family? a fellow prisoner inquired incredulously) squirmed on the wooden bench, sobered up and scared to death after twenty-four hours in Manhattan's central holding tank. Too impatient to drive back to the apartment after scoring, we'd pulled over on a darkened street with our little packets of powder; the car was surrounded by cops in less than a minute. Out in the courtroom, my father was white with exhaustion and anger. It was after midnight when the judge set our fines and let us go. We were ashamed and miserable, but Daddy took us out to a restaurant, where we ate and drank by candlelight and soon were reminiscing about jail as if it were years instead of hours in the past. At four A.M., he left for home. We watched him drive off through a dense white fog.

15. Before you lose a parent, you think, Oh God, what will I do if one of them dies? Then it happens, and you find out you can't do anything. You just go on.

Maybe you can try to become what you miss most. My father is not in this picture, but his shoulders are. I wear the memory of those football-player shoulders like a magic cloak, indispensable for getting through traffic jams.

16. This is the face I remember best. He's in a swimming pool on one of those floating lawn chairs, drinking a Heineken. The two dogs jump in and paddle over to throw themselves into his lap, the gangly Lab pup and the miniature dachsund. The shutter snaps as he begins to topple in, surprised, laughing, holding the beer aloft.

Women Who Love Men Who Don't Pay Their Parking Tickets

He's the type of guy you can't resist: an eccentric jazz musician, a pothead, a hothead, a drinker, a dreamer, a drifter, an existential philosopher with great dimples and amazing hands. His eyes are the color of the ocean outside the cottage where you spent summers as a child. Some days he reminds you of Charles Manson. Others, he is as gentle and helpful as Flipper.

Soon you are spending all your free time in jazz clubs. I thought you hated jazz. Well, not anymore. Next thing, you move into his little garage apartment. It's so bohemian. So masculine. We're talking federal disaster area.

At first you don't notice that he never has any money. Then you do notice. You especially notice one sweet spring day when he phones from the police station, and