

What Light Preserves

Andrew Nordstrom

The scanner hums, a steady rhythm like breath. Another photo slides through: my fifth birthday, gap-toothed grin caught mid-laugh, my grandmother's handwriting on the back noting the date, the occasion, my favorite flavor of cake. The machine reads each image in strips, light moving across faces from years ago, like sunshine crossing a room. Some photos are faded, their edges softening into white, while others remain vivid as yesterday. The scanner converts each moment to data—ones and zeros preserving what memory might lose.

Each envelope tells its own story. "July 2003" written in my grandmother's careful cursive, the 'y' looping down with an elegant flourish that carries through birthdays and grocery lists, report cards and recipe cards. Inside, moments stack like geological layers. Beach trips, backyard sprinkler days, ordinary Tuesdays that seemed worth saving. The timestamps in orange numbers mark each one: 7:42 PM, 7:43 PM, 7:43 PM. Three versions of the same moment, as if one frame couldn't hold everything that needed keeping. Even then, she was shooting in bursts, bracketing her exposures like someone searching for the perfect light.

The process becomes its own kind of meditation. Remove photo from envelope. Place face down. Press scan. Wait. Check preview. Adjust if needed. Save. Next. Some are crooked, others overexposed, but each one matters. I find her Christmas portraits from fifteen years ago—dozens

of shots of our family around the tree, each angle slightly different, each expression caught between poses. She'd spend hours getting the lighting just right, understanding somehow that these moments needed to be perfect. Like counting beads or sorting buttons, tasks that seem simple until you realize they're holding something bigger together. The software offers auto-enhance, auto-correct, auto-sharpen. I decline them all. Even the blurred ones deserve their truth.

Fingerprints mark the glossy surfaces, ghosts of excitement from when these were first pulled from their paper sleeves at the drug store photo counter. "Look at this one," she would say, each image a treasure unveiled. Now my own fingerprints join hers, bridges across time as I guide each memory into digital light. The scanner reads them all: the smudges, the creases, the places where time has left its mark. In the older photos, her shadow sometimes falls across the frame, a familiar silhouette with camera raised. The photographer, proving her presence through absence, each careful composition a kind of truth she wanted to preserve.

Then I find it. An envelope labeled three different ways in her increasingly uncertain hand: "Easter Sunday," crossed out and replaced with "Garden Photos," then finally "Important. Perfect Grass." Inside, the chronology splinters. A photo of me in my first suit, age sixteen, standing proud beside her blooming azaleas, has been grouped with

yesterday's lawn pictures. On the back, her new notation reads only "Check edging." The formal Easter portrait from last spring, all of us gathered on her front steps, now bears the label "Pine needles on walkway." Thirty-two shots of the same patch of grass follow, immaculate and gleaming, no pine needle or branch daring to disturb its surface. Her eye for detail remains sharp as ever, but the lens has turned, focusing now on different treasures, different proofs of love. The recent envelopes tell a shifting story. Yesterday, I found her in her garden, camera in hand. "The light is perfect," she told me, photographing the same corner of lawn for the tenth time. Like her memory, she was trying to hold onto this moment with a clarity that kept slipping away, each new photograph an attempt to capture something already fading. "See how it catches each blade?" For a moment, I saw it through her lens: the perfection she was trying to capture, the order she was trying to preserve. Her photographs still document love, even if the subject has changed. Inside these newer envelopes, that same pristine corner of yard appears again and again, each shot slightly different, like variations on a theme she can't quite remember but knows is important.

The scanner's light moves steadily, transforming physical memories into digital code. Some would say it's safer this way: no fading, no water damage, no

corners slowly wearing thin. But I keep the originals too, tucked back into their envelopes with their handwritten dates. Some things need to be held to be understood, their weight measured in more than megabytes. I run my fingers over her handwriting, feeling where the pen pressed deeper in some places, lighter in others, like a map of certainty and doubt.

Night falls and I'm still here, envelope after envelope. The scanner's rhythm changes with each image: Save. Pause. Consider. Save. Each photo a small victory against forgetting, though I'm learning that preserving light isn't the same as stopping time. In these captured moments, everything is still whole: each smile complete, each gaze direct, each gesture purposeful with love. Between envelopes, I find myself pausing longer, watching the empty scanner bed glow like a blank page waiting to be filled. We're both archivists now, my grandmother and I, each of us trying to preserve what matters most. She with her careful documentation of every blade of grass, me with these endless scans. Both of us knowing, somewhere beneath our cataloging and calculating, that some things can't be fixed in place, no matter how perfectly we frame them. But we keep at it anyway, saving what we can, while we can, each in our own way holding onto light that keeps changing shape even as we try to name it.