



Alex, Breanna, and Sharon walking to the Pine Flat Portrait Studio

One of my five half-sisters called me from the Sundance Film Festival. She wanted to let me know she had just seen Sharon's new film. "I think I know why it's in the so-called Frontier category," she said, and reported that early on, in a scene that consists of a ten-minute-long shot of a young girl in the grass reading a book, a few people in the audience clapped whenever a page was turned. I guess, in their eyes, nothing was happening. But quite a lot is always happening—is it not?—between each turning of the page.

Being a mother, I can't count the number of times people with kids have said to me "they grow so fast" or "you better enjoy this stage, it'll be over before you know it." The gist is that growing up is difficult to perceive—maybe precisely because it's happening all the time right before your eyes—yet given all its imperceptible slowness, it still happens painfully too fast. I suppose the degree of pain here depends on the ratio of what is lost to what is gained. If you've raised yourself a fine young adult who is a continuous source of pride, then maybe it's less painful to close the book on your child's childhood than if, conversely, you've raised yourself a troubled individual, susceptible to drug abuse, whose most adult characteristic is his or her ability to reproduce or be incarcerated.

What lies between these extremes is, perhaps, a bit boring. Like the impatient audience members at Sundance, we are often more inclined to focus on obvious indicators of progress and change, less inclined to patiently observe those myriad illegible, seemingly insignificant moments which ultimately add up to the people we become.

As much as there exists in all children the potential to thrive and lead happy or productive lives, there is equally the potential to waste away and to lead unhappy or unproductive lives. For kids these days, or for the kids in my life anyway, the chances of falling through the cracks seem greater than ever before. One could argue a myriad of socio-political reasons for why this is or is not the case. Let's just say that it is indeed true—if only for the sake of my getting on with my story—that many American kids have the deck stacked against them. You could blame it on the junk food forced on them by big corporate interests, or simply a school system that teaches less and penalizes more, or you could even blame it on the erosion of family values.

134

135

One of my other five half-sisters called me from Missouri the day before I took my one and only trip up the mountain with Sharon to visit Pine Flat. She left a message saying the Christmas card she sent had been returned and that she hopes I call back and something else that made me feel positively awful about my never returning her calls. This sister entered my head the moment Sharon introduced me to the first people we saw walking down the main street of the tiny town. It was a couple, around my sister's age, ten years my senior, on their way to the bar. Apparently no strangers to cigarettes and alcohol, they may—I imagined—have been a bit buzzed already. They may not have been, but they did look relaxed and especially young and old at the same time, like a couple of sweethearts taking a psychic break from a series of wearying hardships.

I guess, to be honest, my imagination turned them into members of my own family. I was specifically thinking of how my sister, whom I had yet to call back, had once moved to what I thought was the middle of nowhere with her boyfriend (technically our cousin, though not an actual blood relation) and wound up having his baby out there. She's not the only sister of mine to take off for a rural setting. I always resented the fact that they left for these remote places but never managed to live off the land or do anything especially rural with their lives. It was like they had this quasi-hippie idea, from too many Hallmark card images of grassy fields or posters of mossy creeks, that the less culture that littered the scenery, the freer they'd be. The funny thing is there never seemed to be an excess of freedom out there.

After being in Pine Flat for about fifteen minutes, my old, naïve question of why anyone who wasn't actually from the middle of nowhere would want to be in the middle of nowhere, suddenly became, "Who could resist this middle of nowhere?" Sharon's success as an artist affords her the freedom to occasionally get away from her hectic, congested schedule. The mountain, I'm sure, was originally for her a getaway, an oasis. I'm not sure, though, how long it was before she decided to set up a studio there, or how soon after her studio became Pine Flat Portrait Studio, or how soon after that every kid in town knew her car and would run up to it to greet her whenever she arrived. I do know that once in Pine Flat, she started

doing mostly everything herself, a significant reversal from the way she had been making films and photographs for at least a decade.

Sharon's portrait studio, and by extension her whole artistic practice, carved out a space for itself in a place that didn't necessarily have any room for, or even a need for, that kind of activity. Pine Flat Portrait Studio was not church, not school, not home. I have come to think of it as a one-woman YMCA. (It is probably more accurate to call it a two-woman YMCA, as Becky Allen, who recorded all the sound on the film, was a permanent fixture.) The spirit of this one-woman YMCA is one of cooperation and improvisation and has everything to do with paying very close attention to what and who surrounds you. And this paying very close attention to what and who surrounds you has everything to do with art. And art can drastically alter the course of your life, generally for the better. I know this to be true for me and for Sharon.

When I was in Pine Flat, I met several kids who appeared in the film and portraits, some we encountered on the road and some we visited in their homes. We stopped by one family's house to deliver some portraits Sharon had recently printed. The dad was cooking at the stove while Sharon laid out the portraits on the dining room table, and all four kids seemed a bit too busy with their various activities to fuss too much about what they looked like in the pictures. Some of them had already received their portraits. During the tour of their newly renovated house, I noticed one of the boys had tacked his portrait over his very cluttered, and obviously very utilized, computer desk. I fought hard to suppress the instinct to pull out my camera and take a picture.

Eventually my sister had to return from the middle of nowhere to the suburbs, when the father of her baby was jailed for something like armed robbery of a pharmacy. When I finally called her back, she told me that her now grown-up baby recently got out of jail and upon his release was slapped with an \$8,000 jail bill, which of course he can't pay, and that he's thinking of moving to Canada to avoid the fallout of not paying up. Also, because he has developed an allergy to what the doctors suspect to be fast-food hamburger meat, and this allergy causes him to go into anaphylactic shock, which is deadly, he's been visiting the emergency room a lot, and those bills are

piling up too. It seems he’s dreaming his escape out of the penal system and into socialized medicine. Socialized medicine, or anything vaguely akin to it, is a worn-down, hopeless cause of the liberal left, and this depiction of my sister’s kid is exactly why conservatives hate the idea of it.

This poster child for impoverished American youth is quite literally the poster child for Sharon’s very first film, *Khalil, Shaun, A Woman Under the Influence*, which she made while we were in graduate school together. At that time I believe Shaun’s father was still in jail, meaning my sister was a single mother with many hardships, and Shaun was not doing well in school, or doing well in general. While his mom was around he was a pill, a pain, and as soon as she left him to Sharon, he wasn’t. Their film and photo shoot, which involved a complex application of theatrical makeup, lasted several days, a lot of which I witnessed. Sharon’s casting of Shaun offered me a privileged glimpse into her engagement with her “subject,” expanding some notion that I already had about the way she made art, which I could never quite articulate without sounding trite. All I could say was there was something motherly about what she was doing, and this was before a mother figure featured prominently in her first film.

In *A Woman Under the Influence*, director John Cassavetes and actress Gena Rowlands collaborated to bring forth a mother character who is at once perfectly tender and loving and at risk of being utterly incompetent. In a scene taken straight from that film, Sharon portrays Shaun, disfigured by disease, being tenderly mothered. I saw Shaun transform momentarily into a different kind of kid when he was working with Sharon, and frankly I don’t know exactly what he’s transformed into in the intervening twelve or so years. I guess you could say I’m not a very good aunt. Over the years, Sharon has sent him books or other publications in which his picture appears. She’s been attempting to come to terms with the distance between the child frozen in the photograph and the adult he is becoming today.

My nieces and nephews think I’m sort of famous because they sometimes see that I made it into books or magazines, but that’s about as far as my role modelling goes. Sharon, on the other hand,

has this quality of using her fame—by which I suppose I really just mean her success—in ways that make kids feel like *they* should be famous, not in any delusional way about becoming stars, but in a grounded and positive way. She simply transmits to them the most positive aspects of fame: self-confidence and independence. I want to tell you to think of Andy Warhol’s screen tests, but I figured I’d leave that sort of thing out, though a reference to another artist and filmmaker, Larry Clark, is unavoidable at this point.

There’s a town down the mountain from Pine Flat. This town, Visalia, a suburb of Bakersfield, was ostensibly the inspiration for and the setting of Larry Clark’s relatively recent film *Ken Park*. The film is extreme, in that it explicitly depicts every Jerry Springer violation known to teens and their parents. It opens with an unforgettably disturbing scene of a kid racing toward his own suicide, which he proceeds to commit in broad daylight in front of his own video camera, in a skate park crowded with his peers. Sharon told me that when she was watching the film, there was a scene in which she thought she recognized one of the kids from her own movie. Maybe the kid in question had left the mountain to be with another parent, or maybe he had gone away to a special school after getting kicked out of the regular one, or maybe there was no reason at all for her to think one of her kids would be sharing bong hits and sad stories with other boys in front of Larry Clark’s camera. She said she was convinced it was him and had to rewatch the scene many times before she realized, with some sense of relief I suppose, she was mistaken. It is this double take, this impossibly unfavorable crossover between two worlds seemingly so far from each other that moved me to write what you just read the way that I did.

Frances Stark is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles. Her book, *Frances Stark: Collected Writing 1993–2003*, was published in 2003 (London: Book Works).