

The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

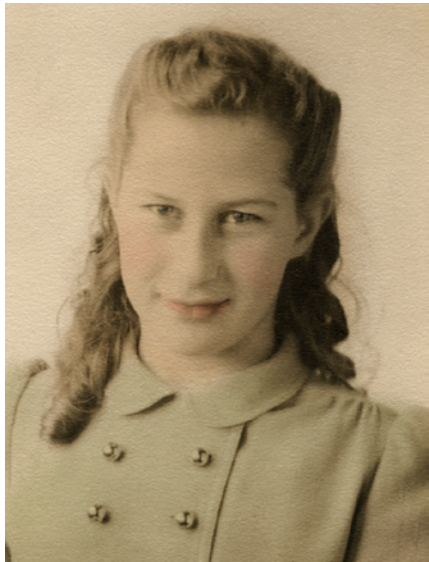
— Andrew Marvell



Mark Goodman

My Fictions – But Her Story

2011



Let her full glory,
My fancies, fly before ye;
Be ye my fictions – but her story.

— Richard Crashaw



I

Reenie, my aunt, is twelve when I'm born in 1946; she's my mother's youngest sister by fourteen years. I'm ten when she starts assembling her own photograph album, not so much a family portrait as a coming-of-age Declaration of Independence, a celebration of girlhood friendships, and a longing for romance and love. Reenie displays pictures of herself throughout her youth on the first forty-six pages, beginning as a six-month old infant in 1934, and continuing until she's a twenty-one-year-old woman in 1955. The next year, she fills thirty-two pages with snapshots of her social life; the last two album pages contain photographs taken at parties in early 1957. A final page remains blank.

II

At twelve, Reenie dresses in bobby socks, penny loafers with dimes in the diamond-shaped slits, and a kerchief in her hair. She poses for the camera with one hand on her hip standing on the sidewalk next to shrubbery outside the apartment building in Roxbury, Massachusetts where she, my parents, grandparents, Adele (my mother's middle sister), and I live together. At thirteen, in a black pleated skirt, white blouse, and cashmere coat with three oversized black buttons, she's seemingly tap dancing with her shadow on the street. Directly under this photograph in her album, she places a snapshot of me sitting in a wooden crib with my hand on a large rubber doll. At fifteen, arrayed in a formal white dress with a corsage pinned to the bodice and a string of pearls around her neck, a sign of maturity, she stands next to her happy-go-lucky father at her junior high school graduation. A second picture taken at this event presents my grandmother (not previously seen in the album) as a troubled woman in her early fifties dressed in black, startled to find herself outside in public, tense beside her third and last child.

Reenie is a fashion plate, from head to toe, her hair curled and bedecked with ribbons, flowers, or bows. She knows how to strike a pose with flair and hopes to influence the way others see her, striving for an elegant self that yearns to be cherished. Boys make themselves known in her album only in captions — “Irwin and Me,” two shadowy figures in the background, out of focus, and “Al Wolfson and Me,” a crowded dance floor at Sylvia Baker's sweet sixteen party — until Don Sharkey is singled out, front and center, with his own page of three photographs. His hair is wavy and slicked-back. He sports a sharp suit and tie. His overcoat collar is pulled up, framing his head, giving him a truculent look as he takes a drag on

a cigarette. He places his right foot on the rear bumper of a black Buick causing his trouser leg to rise, revealing snazzy argyle socks.

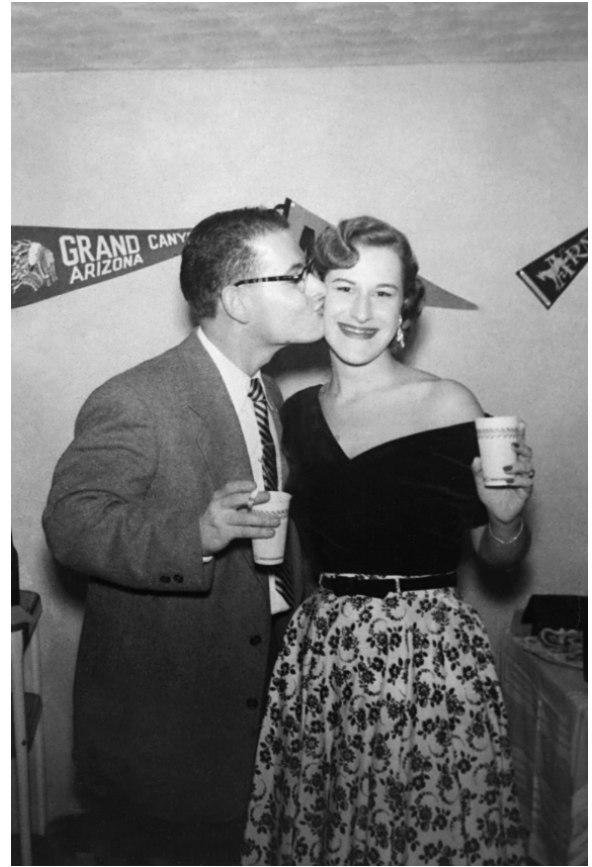
My family and I move six miles from urban Roxbury into a suburban duplex in modest, tree-lined Newton Highlands. In the backyard, on a swing set, a snapshot is taken of Reenie and me, the first of the two of us pictured together. I'm five. Reenie is seventeen. I'm sitting on her lap, my hand covering her bare right knee; her arms encircle me, hands folded across my chest, under the logo on my M.I.T. sweatshirt. My father works at M.I.T. as a computer aide, feeding I.B.M. cards into a machine eight hours a day, and on constant evening and weekend overtime shifts. There is a second photograph of Reenie alone on the swing, as if on a scale, with a cautionary caption, "142 lbs."

III

On June 7, 1952, Reenie graduates from high school with Sylvia and her other girlfriends, Sue Feldstein, Sandy Nescom, Gloria Resnick, and Mickey Sacks, each in cap and gown. The next day, along with Mickey and Sylvia, she poses for photographs in a bathing suit, free from school forever, her last summer vacation before finding work on my father's lead as a secretary at M.I.T. Other pictures taken at Mickey's house on this day show the three girls cuddling with stuffed animals; supine on the living room rug, overstuffed chairs, and a bed; sprawling awkwardly across a staircase; standing upright in the kitchen by the refrigerator with unopened beer bottles in hand, laughing at their would-be drunkenness. Mickey gazes dreamily into her bedroom vanity mirror while the camera unblinkingly sizes her up, focusing on the chunky shape of her body, not quite the image she wishes to tease from the looking glass, or the one she's counting on for teasing boys. At nineteen, Reenie attends a house party at Mickey's where Dave Simons firmly kisses her on the cheek. His eyes are closed. He holds a cigarette and a white Dixie Cup filled with liquor in his right hand, a practiced gesture of coordination that allows his left hand to wander freely, while the two of them stand under a Grand Canyon pennant pinned to the wall. Reenie smiles giddily into the camera. She, too, holds a Dixie Cup, slightly raised, as if proposing a toast to her own allure. Her black, V-neck blouse covers one shoulder while slipping low across the other. She is resolutely maintaining her diet regimen of black coffee and Mall Pall cigarettes. The next year, Mickey Sacks is married.

Hurricane Connie rips through Newton Highlands in 1954. Our house and my father's one-year-old, four-door DeSoto are spared, but a huge oak tree on the corner is uprooted, lifting a dozen yards of concrete sidewalk into





the air, creating a ramp to nowhere. The next day, Reenie and I pose for pictures amid the debris. I sit cross-legged on top of the DeSoto's roof; crouch on the trunk of the fallen tree; and sit in a lawn chair at the peak of the upended sidewalk with Reenie standing beside me, the two of us holding court. She's wearing a scalloped neck, white blouse and black slacks with an oversized belt buckle, on her way to a party. In the last picture on the page, Reenie and I waltz across the sidewalk, tilting our heads back, arms outstretched, smiling for the camera, as if we are the winners at an imaginary dance contest. The top of my head almost reaches Reenie's bare shoulder blades.

IV



In the summer of 1956, Reenie vacations at Nantasket Beach with several friends. On the beach, Arlene Corry lies on her back balancing Barbara Mann in the air on upraised legs. Provocatively, Reenie lolls on a beach towel in the sand with the back of her head resting across Phil Littman's right thigh; he raises himself on one arm above her, looking like a modish movie idol in dark sunglasses. Later, sailing on a lake in New Hampshire with Mike and Dan, Reenie, in a swimsuit, strikes a glamour pose on the deck of the boat as the two bare-chested men ogle her. She holds Mike's hand, pretending to boogie-woogie, simultaneously looking back eagerly over her shoulder at Dan. She is head over heels. Reenie suspends one foot off the boat above the water, as if her next step will take her over the edge.

Throughout the remainder of the year, and on New Year's Eve, Reenie is invited to parties at the homes of Arlene, Sheila, and Doris (whose parents are absent), where she and her friends flirt, hug, mug for the camera, dance, make out, smoke, gossip, and drink. In one photograph a couple wildly kiss; the man puts his hands on the woman's shoulders as she cradles the sides of his head in her hands. "She's engaged but not to him," reads the caption. "Him" is underlined in mock shock. At house parties, everyone dresses to the nines, as if attending a swanky nightclub where they must look sophisticated and suave, however, once the evening is underway and the liquor takes its effect, cultivation gives way to seductive frivolity.

Joe grabs Reenie from behind. She squeezes his wrists and squirms, laughing when he pulls her tight, a bear hug more than an embrace.

Chet and Stan, Dixie Cups in hand, simultaneously kiss Barbara on each cheek as she braces her right foot firmly against the wall behind herself for balance.



Sheila folds her arms across her chest and leans back against Rich.

Barbara, decked out in a black dress with a large white bow and zipped-up zipper that cuts downward between her breasts, curls up alongside Gerry on a couch and peers into his eyes. He stares across the room, lost in thought.

Les and Edith passionately kiss in a chair that envelops them.

Arlene and Freddie pose sedately for their picture at Christmas and wrestle with each other on New Year's Eve.

Reenie wears red lipstick. She leaves Kleenex *kisses* scattered about her room before going out in the evening.

There are two parties in early 1957, the first at Doris's and the second at Arlene's. In the last album picture titled, "Me and Lennie," Reenie reclines seductively in a chair; Lennie, in another chair, pulls up nearly alongside her while she's holding a Dixie Cup in both hands. Her mouth is wide open. She stares directly at the photographer, caught by surprise in mid-laugh, or mid-sentence, or at the first flush of tipsiness. Behind her head, flowery wallpaper seems like an imaginary conversation balloon declaring, "It's the springtime of our lives." Lennie glances at the photographer nervously, or perhaps coyly, while weighing his chances of cavorting among the birds and bees in a garden that he's hoping to enter. When Reenie assembles this album page, she tucks a stamp-size, grade school portrait of me under the picture's right side edge. I'm piggybacking on Lennie's left shoulder, mischievously whispering into his ear, "Not to waste a merry hour," as if I were Puck.



May 1959

Reenie and I are together on the front steps of the duplex having our picture taken at my thirteenth birthday party, the day of my bar mitzvah, the point I am considered to be a man. She is twenty-five. Not married, she begins referring to herself as an "unclaimed treasure." Her right hand is on her hip, while her left arm is around my back. I clasp her, too, squeezing her waist. We are now exactly the same height. We both gaze into the camera, almost smiling. We are posing for a formal portrait, though it's the true snapshot of a mismatched couple. Reenie wears Bermuda shorts and a black sweater. I'm dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, tie, and around my shoulders, hanging down to my knees, is a prayer shawl, the symbolic garment of a religion I will never accept. For my birthday present, Reenie takes me to see Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*.

FAMILY ALBUM

1. To Trace Their Shadows
 2. My Fictions – But Her Story
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Text & Editing

Mark Goodman

Bastrop, Texas

Pigment Printing

Peter Williams

AgavePrint

Austin, Texas

Binding & Box

Jace Graf

Cloverleaf Studio

Austin, Texas

Limited to an edition of three of which this is # ____

Irene Ezer
1934 – 1973

I'll see you in my dreams