

5 on 50

by Clint Hutzulak

She hated the colour green. One night, using a miner's headlamp for illumination, she painted the leaves of the maple tree in the front yard. In the morning, when her father stepped out to the porch to retrieve the bottles of milk, the tree appeared to have aged overnight from summer to autumn, so yellow were the leaves. She lay asleep at the foot of a tall ladder, her head on an empty gallon tin of yellow paint. A photograph from that day would have been black and white. The sleepy girl with the paintbrush, standing on the bottom rung of the ladder, pointing skyward with her brush, tells us nothing about yellow or green, but something of what it was like to be ten years old that distant summer.

That's the summer she took the camera from the top drawer of her father's dresser. With the cufflinks, the wooden dish holding spare change, the magnifying glass he had brought from the old world, was the camera. The camera had been his first purchase in Canada. It was a way of slowing down the world, of isolating a moment and holding it static, something that could be pored over with the magnifying glass, looking for clues. Up to their flight from Hungary, life had been lived as if in a continuous flow, history unbroken like a river. In the new country, time broke down into discrete pieces – their first step from the airplane onto the tarmac; their first meal; language swirling around them like snow, words that would not stick but rushed past without meaning. Every detail safely preserved on film, fixed in an unchangeable pattern, documenting their arrival in Canada, a story that could be examined again and again.

They sat to eat in the gymnasium and they smiled for the cameras. The television crews were ambassadors from a new society, broadcasting images of the immigrants, saying These people are like us – happy yet beset by problems, hoping to get back on their feet and start over in this, our peaceful land. Television a part of her vocabulary by the time she boarded the bus north to their new home in Powell River. The children already playing to the camera, unselfconscious, knowing just where to look, ambassadors also.

They moved inland to find better work. Her father bought a movie camera that winter and let her practice seeing the world through its viewfinder. Without film she walked up the hill behind the cabin and dreamed of a black and white world. Ice like the teeth of giants in spring breakup. In the summer she carried the camera to the edge of the river and six months later saw the processed film, holding the precious strip of negative up to the sky through the window of the cabin. She closed her left eye and pulled the film past the milky pane of glass, swam again in the summer river.

Film is the opposite of memory. Memories edit themselves over time, compressing themselves until only the skeletons of events remain. Unlike film, which remains whole, unchanging.

She carried the camera in one of her mother's cardboard hatboxes. In her suitcase were twelve reels of film and a jar of crabapple jelly. That first summer in Vancouver she lived in the sky. "We were like apes, I suppose," she later wrote to a friend. "We came down from the rooftop only when we foraged for food or drugs, to work or to listen to music. I didn't know if we had regressed or made progress. It was nevertheless a different world from that of our parents." She got a job in a store on 4th in Kitsilano that sold posters and books. The shop was busted for selling a book of poetry from a blown ointment press. She took the camera everywhere with her, spending what little money she earned on film and processing. She met painters, musicians, and a beatnik in a fishing hat, all exotic, fragile, telegenic. At that time, only men had language. Women looked away from her camera, moving out of focus like comets, pretending to be weightless. Everything revolved around the men as it had for her mother and her mother's mother.

The year I was born she moved out of the city to the islands. All the footage of me as a child was lost somewhere in transit, along with my father. On the islands she found the peace she was looking for after the roar of the city. An old man walked up the road every afternoon at the same time. It could have been her own father, my grandfather, lost in his memories, tracing always the same path. We visited the studio of a new friend. He was painting using a piece of cardboard in place of a brush. He gave me a bowl of cherries to eat and I painted my bare legs with the juice. I closed my eyes and when I reopened them I was ten years old.

We move back to the city and my mother takes a job teaching at the new art school. She buys a video camera. A student builds a large box and crawls inside for seven weeks in the dark. At the news conference his girlfriend cries. We never see him emerge. Fifty girls in red t-shirts occupy a downtown construction site. It might not even be art, but the reporter says the performance cost taxpayers \$140,000. A painter sells out a show after people lined up all night on the sidewalk. A piece sells for \$25,000. It's exciting. It's bigtime. The artist who says he'll kill a rat barely escapes a beating at the hands of an angry mob. "You belong in a camp," an old man spits in his face. The old man wears a parka with camouflage markings. This is what makes the evening news. There is no time for careful construction. Only the present tense is possible. Narrative is easily dispensed with. Image triumphs over story. Everything is spectacle now, if it is to be videoed for TV. There is a window of eight seconds before the viewer's attention will wander. Fill that space with something that moves.