

David Levi Strauss / ODILE & ODETTE, EPILOGUE

Dear Odile & Odette,

“Either the world is so tiny, or we are so enormous;
in either case, we fill it completely.”

Dear Odile,

In the end, it was loneliness that killed you. A mass growing inside, larger and larger until there was no more room to live. Inoperable. Inoperative. Even the morphine did nothing to alleviate that pain. Only memories, and these black and white ghosts.

Dear Odette,

There was a time when you were not a photograph. Not caught in that happy crowd, radiant in a white bathing suit. Not a memory. You were a woman before being named Hattie Lee, but I can't know anything about this. I know my mother loved you. I think they all did, but especially her. She went to meet you just before she died, in her morphine dreams. She said the sun broke through the clouds and glinted off the surface of the flood waters. You walked out, between my father and her, the three of you holding hands. Then she had to come back, to her bed and her pain, but you and my father went on.

“Divided for love's sake, for the chance of union.”

They always said, “Hattie was so sensitive, everyone wanted to be near her.” Even after you killed yourself in the asylum. Especially then. Especially my father, but it took him much longer to drown himself. The flood waters rose and fell. *Sie lebte zu nahe ans Wasser.* She lived too close to the water. Like the river, sorrow was always there, and every once in a while it would reach out and take someone.

Dear Odile & Odette,

"I feel now like a little black box projecting slides without captions."

"When the world was young, images were strong." They have been depleted over the years, from overuse and understanding. After the old man gave up photography he said that all photographs "deal in things that are constantly vanishing."

No one was ever the same after that.

These are all just fragments, the merest of images. They accumulate, somehow, and we cling to them. We say we don't cling to sorrow, but cling to these scraps like rafts, and this amounts to the same thing. "A ghost was hiding in the invention of photography."

Dear Odile & Odette,

In the hours just before you died, I could not take my eyes off your face. It was the most beautiful, most naked face I have ever seen in my life. Every trace of artifice or circumstance had been burned out of it. It was your face, and it was the first time I'd ever seen it. As if the other faces you showed me throughout your life had been masks. The poet said, "Death is the mother of beauty."

I was surprised by how young you became, at the end. Your skin, your voice, your face. Younger and younger, like in the photographs.

So much has changed, so much water under the bridge. But the photographs don't change. They are incorruptible and inhuman. They mock us from the shadows. Trust your car to the man who wears the star. *Ad astra per aspera*. Pay no attention to the man in the shadows.

They manipulate time and distance. They steal our memories and transform them in their own image. They simplify and flatten everything. They reduce us to glances and gestures. They sum us up. And then, they wait for us to die.

Dear Odile & Odette,

This is the day set aside to remember the dead. One day out of the year. I wonder how many days the dead remember us. And I wonder if their world is as full of distractions, as preoccupied as this one.

The airport today is filled with passengers moving between worlds, remembering and forgetting. It is difficult to tell by looking at them which is dead and which alive. I think the live ones move more jerkily, with less patience. They are always out of balance, always leaning on something or someone.

The dead ones look more like photographs. There is an intricate system of lights and sounds that moves them around.

I am a slow learner. You always knew this about me. It's taken me half my life to remember that we are all born *in between things*.

. . . and you never saw him again.

The passengers all look so very sad, shuffling toward their destinations. They teeter along, carrying their pain in bags.

This was the house where you were born.

This was your first family.

This was your face.

Dear Odile & Odette,

"The people are dreaming—when they die, they become awake."

END.