

Reelin'

BY DAYNA TORTORICI

I GOT THE PROJECTOR IN AUGUST, 2008. IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL MACHINE: A COMPACT BELL+HOWELL LUMINA AUTO-LOAD, C. 1960. BACK IN JUNE I'D DECIDED I WANTED TO BE A FILMMAKER, AND SO I SPENT MY SUMMER BUYING ANTIQUE CAMERAS AND OTHER NOVELTIES ON EBAY.

AS IT HAPPENS, THE PROJECTOR STARTED OUT A MISTAKE. I'D MEANT TO BUY A SUPER 8 PROJECTOR—NOT AN 8MM ONE—WHICH I SOON LEARNED WAS NOT THE SAME THING...

BUT MY FRIEND PAUL, MY "FILM MENTOR," INSISTED I KEEP IT.



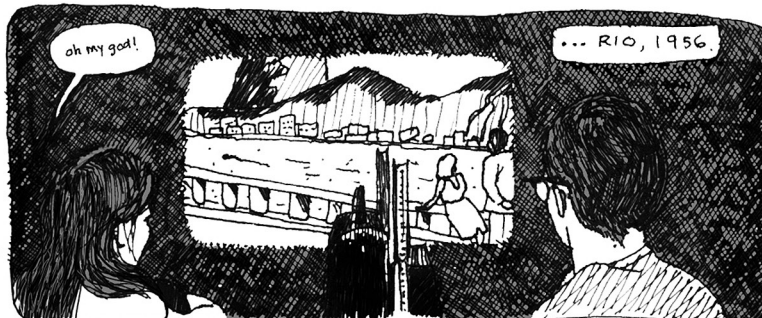
We turned OFF the lights,

FLIPPED ON THE SWITCH. THE REEL LURCHED FORWARD, TRAILING FILM THROUGH THE GEARS. THE PROJECTOR EMITTED A SOFT CLACKING SOUND, LIKE THE FLAP OF A BASEBALL CARD AGAINST A BICYCLE SPOKE. WE HELD OUR BREATH AS THE MUDDY PICTURE SPATTERED AGAINST MY BEDROOM WALL.



SUDDENLY,

THE GRAINY SEPIA EXPLODED INTO GORGEOUS KODACHROME: LUSH GREENS, RICH BROWNS; THICK, VELVET BLUES; BRILLIANT FLASHES OF YELLOW AND ORANGE. A SMILING WOMAN'S MOUTH, PAINTED RUBY RED...



PAUL'S MOTHER, INGRID, HAD GROWN UP IN BRAZIL. THESE REELS WERE HOME-MOVIES FROM HER CHILDHOOD — FILMS THAT HAD GONE UNSEEN FOR OVER 50 YEARS. I WATCHED PAUL'S FACE AS THE IMAGE FLICKERED ACROSS TIME; CUT FROM HANDHELD PANORAMAS OF THE IGUAZU FALLS...



... TO HIS INFANT MOTHER, BELLY-DOWN ON GREEN GRASS.



THESE SILENT, QUOTIDIAN SCENES—BATHED IN THAT FADING AMBER GLOW—MADE ME WISTFUL FOR A PAST I'D NEVER EXPERIENCED. THESE LOOKED LIKE MEMORIES, AND ALTHOUGH THEY WEREN'T MINE (COULD THEY EVEN BE PAUL'S?), I MISSED THEM.



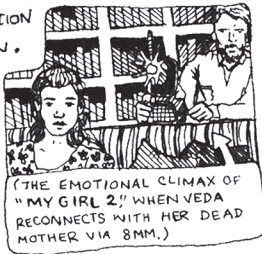
PAUL, TOO, SEEMED TO FEEL THIS ACHE. YET FOR ALL OUR RAW SENTIMENT—FOR ALL THE QUIET REVERENCE OF OUR VIEWING (THE SHIFTING VOTIVE LIGHT OF THE BULB; THE FAN'S MECHANIC BREATHING)...



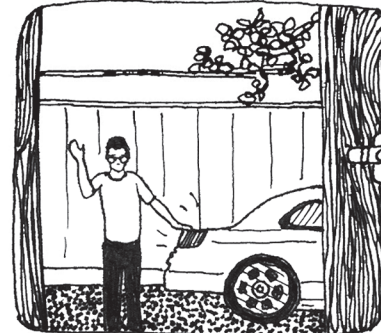
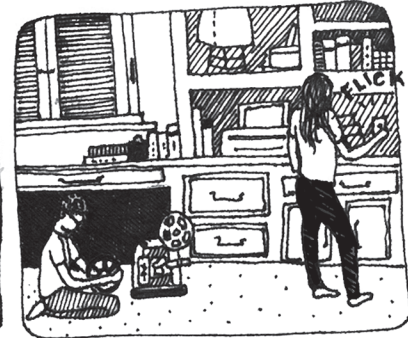
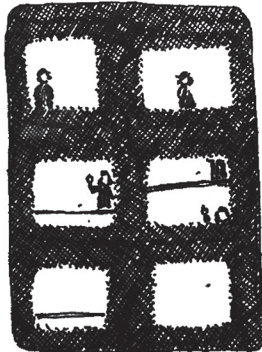
IN HOLLYWOOD MOVIES, MOMENTS OF PERSONAL MEMORY ARE ALWAYS CAST IN KODACHROME. EVEN IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CAMCORDERS, IT'S THE FILM STOCK OF NOSTALGIA.



WHAT'S MORE, THE VIEWING-WITHIN-A-VIEWING HAS BECOME A STANDARD SCENE OF INTROSPECTION AND REUNION. PEOPLE IN FILMS OFTEN COME TO UNDERSTAND THEMSELVES THROUGH FILM.



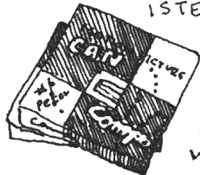
But THAT WASN'T WHAT WE WERE THINKING ABOUT...NOT THEN, ANYWAY.



ONE MONTH later,

PAUL RETURNED THE PROJECTOR. I WENT BACK TO SCHOOL AND TOOK IT WITH ME.

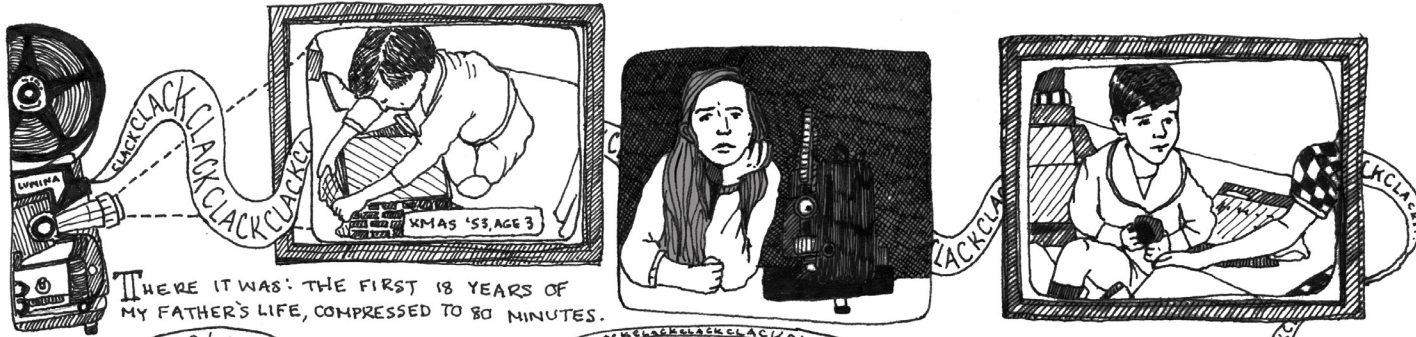
Around that time, **NONNI**, my paternal grandmother, sent me **TWO** 400 FT. CANISTERS OF 8MM FILM THAT **POPPI** (MY GRANDPA) HAD SHOT WHEN MY DAD WAS A KID. THE BOXES WERE LABELED "#1, PETER" AND "#2, DAN" FOR MY DAD AND HIS BROTHER, RESPECTIVELY.



WITH NO SMALL CEREMONY, I MADE A MONASTIC HOME- THEATER OF MY DORM ROOM.



AND UPON LOADING "#1, PETER," I MENTALLY PREPARED FOR THE ENSUING STRANGENESS.



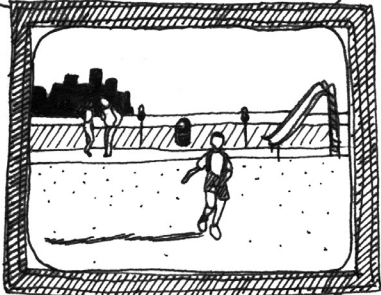
THERE IT WAS: THE FIRST 18 YEARS OF MY FATHER'S LIFE, COMPRESSED TO 80 MINUTES.



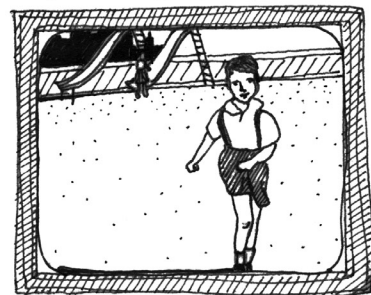
I UNDERSTOOD THEN WHAT PAUL MUST'VE FELT.

THIS WAS MY DAD, HIS MANNERISMS, HIS FACE.

MORE THAN AN EXERCISE IN 'META-MEMORY'...



... OR A STRIKING EXAMPLE OF CINEMATIC CLICHÉ...

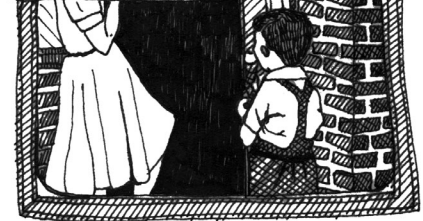


...THIS WAS SOMETHING AFFECTING, SOMETHING WOUNDING: FAMILIAR, FUNDAMENTAL.



SOME-THING FOR WHICH I HAD NO LANGUAGE.

HOW COULD I MAKE YOU UNDERSTAND?



NOTHING I SAY WOULD KNOCK THE WIND OUT OF YOU, GRIP YOU AT THE CHEST.



HOW COULD IT?



THIS IS NOT YOUR FATHER'S FACE.



I COULD SHOW YOU THE RESEMBLANCE;
DRAW
WEIGHTY
PARALLELS
BY TRACING
THE SHAPES
OF OUR
SHARED
FEATURES.

ME, AGE
4, 1993

MY DAD, AGE 4,
JUNE 1954

BUT WOULD THAT BE
ENOUGH? PERHAPS

I COULD

CUT OUT THE PARTICULARS --
MY FATHER, 1954 -- AND TRACE

this ineffability to

THE MEDIUM,

THE ELUSIVENESS OF FILM
ITSELF. FOR EXAMPLE:

BUT THEY KNEW THIS ABOUT "LAVIE"
FROM THE PHOTOGRAPH.

WHAT CAPTURED THEM --
WHAT THEY HADN'T EXPECTED
-- WAS THE WIND IN THE
LEAVES, THE PAPPLED LIGHT
THROUGH THE BOUGHS. THIS
WAS "LE VIF," MOVEMENT
ITSELF, CAPTURED AND
REPRODUCED. THIS WAS
THE MAGIC OF CINEMA.

THEY CAN'T ACCOUNT FOR WHY -- WHEN
WATCHING THESE FILMS -- I FEEL
LIKE MY DAD IS ALREADY DEAD...

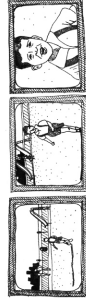


... OR WHY I RECOGNIZE
THINGS, PLACES, FACES,
THAT I'VE NEVER SEEN.

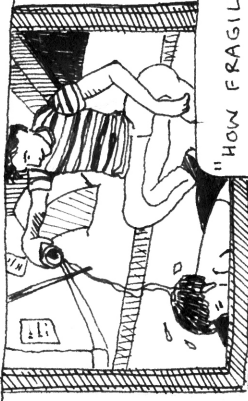
I'M TOLD THAT **MEMORY** MOVES
THE SAME WAY: THAT EVERY
RECOLLECTION OF A MOMENT
RE-WITES THE ORIGINAL,
WEARS DOWN AND MODIFIES
THE INITIAL PRINT.

As THE FILM

PHYSICALLY CHANGES WITH
EACH RUN, SO DOES THE VIC-
ARIOUS, MEMORY-LIKE EXP-
ERIENCE OF WATCHING IT...



OR I COULD SAY, "THAT'S MY DAD'S COUSIN FRANK" -- THE ONE WHO DIED
IN VIETNAM FROM EXPOSURE TO AGENT ORANGE, JUST YEARS AFTER
THIS FOOTAGE. I COULD WATCH HIM PLAY WITH MY FOUR-YEAR-OLD
FATHER ON THE ROOF OF A NEW YORK CITY APARTMENT AND SAY,



"HOW FRAGILE!"



PARIS, 1896

I COULD RECALL FOR YOU
THAT FIRST AUDIENCE OF THE
LUMIÈRE BROTHERS' CINE-
MATOGRAPH, AN EARLY
FILM PROJECTOR.

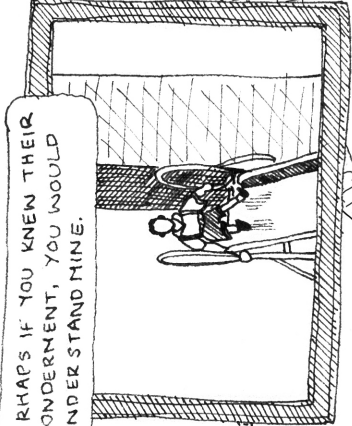
... AND EXPLAIN HOW,
UPON SEEING
"REPAS DE BÉBÉ" --
A 50-SECOND, ONE-
TAKE FILM OF
AUGUSTE LUMIÈRE
FEEDING HIS DAUGH-
TER -- THAT AUDI-
ENCE, TOO, STRUG-
GLED WITH IMAGE
THROUGH
LANGUAGE.



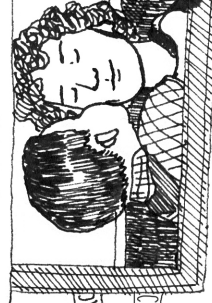
THE BABY, THE
CUTLERY -- THAT
WAS ALL "La
vie," THE
EPHEMERAL
"LIFE" OF AUGUSTE
& HIS FAMILY
CAUGHT ON
CAMERA. "LA
VIE" BROUGHT

ITS OWN ACHE, ONE THAT SAN MORTALITY
INSCRIBED IN THE CELLULOID INFANT'S EVERY
MOVE.

PERHAPS IF YOU KNEW THEIR
WONDERMENT, YOU WOULD
UNDERSTAND MINE.

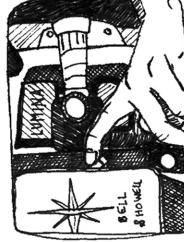


BUT THEIR TERMS -- THE CINEMATIC
EQUIVALENTS OF ROLAND BARTHES'
"STUDIUM" AND "PUNCTUM" IN PHOTO-
GRAPHY -- CANNOT SAY WHAT I NEED
THEM TO SAY.



"#1, PETER"

ENDS THE SAME WAY
EVERY TIME. THE IMAGE
FLICKERS OUT, THE
CLACKING HALTS; A
CELLULOID TAIL WHIPS
AROUND THE REEL
AND I SWITCH OFF THE
MOTOR. FOR A MOMENT,
THE HOT MACHINE JUST
BREATHES, BLANK STARE
THROWN AT THE WALL.



EVERY TIME I REWIND
I KNOW I'M LEAVING THE
FILM A LITTLE WORSE FOR
WEAR. EACH SCREENING
IS DULLER, SCRATCHIER
THAN THE ONE BEFORE.

I WANT

TO RECLAIM THE
WORD "nostalgia," TO WIPE IT
CLEAN OF BAUDRILLARD AND COCA-COLA AND
DISNEYLAND AND KODAK, AND ROOT IT,
UPRIGHT, HERE -- IN SINCERITY.



AND THOUGH I'VE ACCEPTED MY
INABILITY TO ARTICULATE OR
RESOLVE THE STRANGENESS
OF THESE FILMS, I STILL CRAVE
A LANGUAGE COMMENSURATE
TO THE FEELING.

THE END