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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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*Sally Mann's daughter Virginia
in "Falling Child, 1989."*



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What an artist captures, what a mother knows and what the public sees can be dangerously different things.

**Text and photographs by
SALLY MANN**

I N S E P T E M B E R

1992, I published my third book of photographs, "Immediate Family." The book contained 60 photographs from a decade-long series of more than 200 pictures of my children, Emmett, Jessie and Virginia, who were about 6, 4 and 1 when I started the project. The photographs show them going about their lives, sometimes without clothing, on our farm tucked into the Virginia hills. For miles in all directions, there was not a breathing soul. When we were on the farm, we were isolated, not just by geography but by the primitive living conditions: no electricity, no running water and, of course, no computer, no phone. Out of a conviction that my lens should remain open to the full scope of their childhood, and with the willing, creative participation of everyone involved, I photographed their triumphs, confusion, harmony and isolation, as well as the hardships that tend to befall children — bruises, vomit, bloody noses, wet beds — all of it.

I expected that the book would be received in much the same way as the one I published four years earlier, "At Twelve." That book, which showed pictures of young girls on the cusp of adolescence, resulted in modest attention and took about a decade to sell out its small press run. That's not what happened with "Immediate Family." Within three months, it sold out its first printing of 10,000, and the publisher soon ordered another printing, a sales pattern that continued. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with mail, faxes, phone calls and strangers knocking on my door. Not even the remoteness of little Chitlin' Switch (as a friend called the area where we lived) protected us. During those first two years, I received 347 pieces of fan mail, much of it addressed simply to "Sally Mann, Lexington, VA." These letters came with photographs, of course, but also books, journal pages, handmade clothing, 35 preserved butterflies, jewelry, hand lotion, porcupine quills, Christmas-tree lights, sharks' teeth, recipes, paintings, a preserved bird,

mummified cats, chocolate-chip cookies and a hand-painted statue of the Virgin Mary with a toothy demon on a leash.

The overwhelming response was due, in part, to an article about my work by Richard B. Woodward that appeared as a cover story in this magazine around the time the book came out. During the three days of interviews at my home, I was a sitting duck, preening on her nest without the least bit of concealment. So I can hardly fault Woodward for taking his shots at me. In my arrogance and certitude that everyone must see the work as I did, I left myself wide open to journalism's greatest hazard: quotations lacking context or the sense of irony or self-deprecating humor with which they were delivered.

Woodward, though he was somewhat sympathetic, pressed his foot hard on the controversy throttle, framing the discussion of my work with a series of provocative rhetorical questions:



The magazine published a cover story on Sally Mann's work in 1992.

"If it is her solemn responsibility, as she says, 'to protect my children from all harm,' has she knowingly put them at risk by releasing these pictures into a world where pedophilia exists? ... Do these sensual images emerge from the behavior of her subjects or are they shaped by the taste and fantasies of the photographer for an affluent audience?"

Woodward wrote me afterward, teasingly, that he had "dined out for months" on the article, and I'm sure he did. It generated lots of mail to the magazine, all of which the editor was kind enough to send me, although reading it caused me the same furious pain the article had. That it was essentially self-inflicted made it all the worse.

I was blindsided by the controversy. It occasionally felt as though my soul had been exposed to critics who took pleasure in poking it with a stick. I thought my relative obscurity and geographic isolation would shield me, and I was initially unprepared to respond to the attention in any cogent way. And all of this was worsened by the cosmically bad timing of the book's release, which coincided with a debate around an exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs that included images of children along with sadomasochistic and homoerotic imagery, stimulating widespread discussion about what constituted obscenity in art. Into this turbulent climate, I had put forth my family pictures. Although barely a quarter of them depicted a nude child, I was unfailingly described as the woman who made pictures of her naked kids, an assertion that inflamed my critics, many of whom had never actually seen the work.

My intern and I read all the letters from The Times and divided them into three crude piles: "For," "Against" and "What the ... ?" The Against pile beat out the others, but not by much — nearly half the letters were positive, and not in the creepy way you might expect. (An example of semi-creepy: "As an editor and publisher of a nudist-related publication, I too am subject to public humiliation.") Some were critical-but-trying-to-be-helpful letters; a few were from people who had either been abused as children or were themselves treating abused children. These were concerned, sometimes fraught letters. Several recounted the writers' own painful life stories.

"I went into therapy 14 months ago because of depression," one said, "never thinking for one moment that there were incest issues in my past. After five months, the horror of flashbacks and memories began. I was incested over and over and horribly tortured."

A particularly agitated letter from Staten Island, with a P.S. apologizing for the "primitive

This article was adapted from "Hold Still: A Memoir With Photographs," to be published in May by Little, Brown and Company.

method of handwriting,” queried: “Was it really art, Ms. Mann, or was it covert incest?”

The letters that stabbed me to the quick were the “Bad Mother” letters. Though I made my share of mistakes, as all parents do, I was devoted to my kids. I walked them to school every morning and walked back to pick them up at 3. I never forgot to sign the innumerable permission slips and attended all their piano/flute/oboe/ballet recitals and soccer games. (O.K., so strictly speaking, that’s not true,

am not particularly proud of this moment, this clash of titanic stubbornnesses, but my children would sit at our adult friends’ tables anywhere in the world, eating whatever was on their plates and engaging their dinner companions in conversation. And yes, without being asked, write a thank-you note.

The Bad Mother letters usually raised the question of informed consent. But the kids were visually sophisticated, involved in setting the scene, in producing the desired effects for the

that photographing his loss of dignity would cause him pain. (Once, after his death, I was asked what he had died from, and I replied, “Terminal pride.”) I did not take a picture on the day that Larry picked up my father in his arms and carried him like a child to the bathroom, both of their faces anguished. To do so would have been crossing a line.

It’s hard to know just where to draw that stomach-roiling line, especially in cases when the subject is willing to give so much. But how can they be so willing? Is it fearlessness or naïveté? Those people who are unafraid to show themselves to the camera disarm me with the purity and innocence of their openness.

Larry, for example. Almost the first thing I did after I met Larry Mann in 1969 was to photograph him, and I haven’t stopped since. At our age, past the prime of life, we are given to sinew and sag, and Larry bears, with his trademark stoicism, the further affliction of a late-onset muscular dystrophy. In recent years, when many of his major muscles have withered, he has allowed me to take pictures of his body that make me squirm with embarrassment for him. I call this project “Proud Flesh.” In taking these pictures, I joined the thinly populated group of women who have looked unflinchingly at men, and who frequently have been punished for doing so. Remember poor Psyche, chastised by the gods for daring to lift the lantern that illuminated her sleeping lover. I can think of numberless male artists, from Bonnard to Weston to Stieglitz, who have photographed their lovers and spouses, but I have trouble finding parallel examples among my sister photographers. The act of looking appraisingly at a man, studying his body and asking to photograph him, is a brazen venture for a woman; for a male photographer, these acts are commonplace, even expected.

It is a testament to Larry’s tremendous dignity and strength that he allowed me to take the pictures. The gods might reasonably have slapped this particular lantern out of my raised hand, for before me lay a man as naked and vulnerable, and as beautiful, I assert, as Cupid. Rhetorically circumnavigate it any way you will, but the act of taking those pictures of him was ethically complex, freighted with issues of honesty, responsibility, power and complicity. He knew that, because he is a practiced model, and he also knew that many of the pictures would come at the expense of his vanity.

To be able to take my pictures, I have to look, all the time, at the people and places I care about. And I must do so with both ardor and cool appraisal, with the passions of eye and heart, but in that ardent heart there must also be a splinter of ice. And so it was with fire and ice that Larry and I made these pictures: exploring what it means to grow older, to let the sunshine fall voluptuously on a still-pleasing form,



Mann's daughter Jessie with a piece of flounder she refused to eat.

Virginia says. She jokingly reminds me that I missed the All Regional band performance in Covington when she gave her oboe solo. And I bet there were some soccer games, too, but let’s just say I did the best I could.) With my husband, Larry, holding the flashlight, I picked pinworms from itchy butts with the rounded ends of bobby pins, changed wet sheets in the middle of the night, combed out head-lice nits and mopped up vomit. I baked bread, hand-ground peanuts into butter, grew and froze vegetables and every morning packed lunches so healthful that they had no takers in the grand swap-fest of the lunchroom.

I was somewhere between a “cool mom,” as Woodward described me, and an old-fashioned mom who insisted on thank-you letters, proper grammar, good conversational skills, considerate behavior and clean plates. In the snapshot above, Jessie is shown at 9:30 at night, still at the table after everyone else has gone to bed, sitting before a piece of flounder she refused to eat. I

images and in editing them. When I was putting together “Immediate Family,” I gave each child the pictures of themselves and asked them to remove those they didn’t want published. Emmett, who was 13 at the time, asked me to exclude one picture from the book. He had been playing Bugs Bunny and fell asleep still wearing nothing but long white socks on his arms, meant to look like the white legs of a rabbit. He was uncomfortable not because of the nudity but because he said those socks made him look like a dork. It was a question of dignity.

Maintaining the dignity of my subjects has grown to be, over the years, an imperative in my work, both in the taking of the pictures and in their presentation. As my father weakened with brain cancer, I tried to photograph him, in the manner of Richard Avedon or Jim Goldberg, whose work I admire. But I put away my camera when I began to see

to spend quiet winter afternoons together. The studio's wood stove was insufficient, but he had two fingers of bourbon to warm him. No phone, no kids, NPR turned low, the smell of the chemicals, the two of us still in love, still at the work of making pictures that we hope will matter.

And it is because of the work, and the love, that these pictures I took don't disturb Larry. Like our kids, he believes in what we do and in confronting the truth and challenging convention. We all agree that a little discomfort is a small price to pay for that.

One New York Times letter-writer predicted an outcome for my children that did, in fact, come to pass: a "third eye," as this writer eloquently put it. By this she meant a shameful self-consciousness, a feeling of guilt and moral doubt about the pictures. And of the three kids, this most afflicted my youngest, Virginia — my carefree, lissome river sprite.

That third eye was painfully drilled into Virginia just before she turned 6 by Raymond Sokolov, who wrote a confounding op-ed article in *The Wall Street Journal* in February 1991. He was knicker-twisted over government funding for art that the "non-art-going public" could find "degenerate" or in which a "line was crossed."

An image called "Virginia at Four," which appeared on the cover of *Aperture* in 1990, set him off. At the time, oceans of ink were being spilled over arts-funding controversies. Sokolov asserted that selective public funding was not the same thing as direct government censorship. As the government had neither funded nor censored my family work, its relevance to his argument was unclear. (I had received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, but not for the pictures of my children.) Sokolov's rather banal article acquired an undeniably arresting force on the page, thanks to the accompanying illustration, the photograph of Virginia at 4 with black bands crossing out parts of her body, which *The Wall Street Journal* printed without my permission. The nation's largest-circulation newspaper cropped and disfigured my photograph as if it were Exhibit A in a child-pornography prosecution.

When we saw it, it felt like a mutilation, not only of the image but also of Virginia herself and of her innocence. It made her feel, for the first time, that there was something wrong not just with the pictures but with her body. Heart-breakingly, the night after seeing the picture with the black bars, she wore her shorts and shirt into the bathtub.

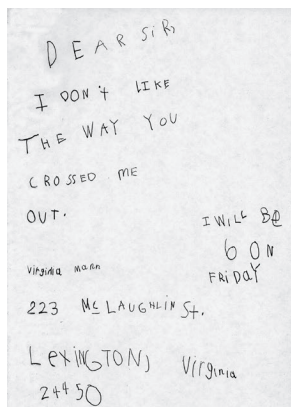
Of course, the doctored image excited art-aware lawyers. The Visual Artists Rights Act, which protects works of art from intentional destruction, still had some teeth left, and they were prepared to use them to take a bite out



Virginia on a 1990 cover of *Aperture*.



A response to the image on *The Wall Street Journal's* op-ed page.



Virginia's letter to *The Wall Street Journal*.

of *The Journal*. I was glad to hear from them and was spoiling for a fight. But as it became clear that Virginia would be a David to *The Journal's* Goliath, we backed off. The thought of the depositions she would face and the likely tone of the questioning by opposing counsel were important factors in our decision. The third eye of shame was already in place. No need to blacken it.

Instead, we suggested that Virginia write a letter to Sokolov, which she did. After some legal pressure, Sokolov and Daniel Henninger, his editor at *The Journal*, each wrote a letter of apology to Virginia. But the last sentence of the letter from Henninger was particularly galling: "The groups of people who often argue with each other about things like this would probably be better off if they gave each other something many people have forgotten called common courtesy." How he thought this was an appropriate ending for a letter to a 6-year-old, I cannot fathom.

For all the righteous concern people expressed about the welfare of my children, what most of them failed to understand was that taking those pictures was an act separate from mothering. When I stepped behind the camera and my kids stepped in front of it, I was a photographer and they were actors, and we were making a photograph together. And in a similar vein, many people mistook the photographs for reality or attributed qualities to my children (one letter-writer called them "mean") based on the way they looked in the pictures. The fact is that these are not my children; they are figures on silvery paper slivered out of time. They represent my children at a fraction of a second on one particular afternoon with infinite variables of light, expression, posture, muscle tension, mood, wind and shade. These are not my children at all; these are children in a photograph.

Even the children understood this distinction. Once, Jessie, who was 9 or 10 at the time, was trying on dresses to wear to a gallery opening of the family pictures in New York. It was spring, and one dress was sleeveless. When Jessie raised her arms, she realized that her chest was visible through the oversize armholes. She tossed that dress aside, and a friend remarked with some perplexity: "Jessie, I don't get it. Why on earth would you care if someone can see your chest through the armholes when you are going to be in a room with a bunch of pictures that show that same bare chest?"

Jessie was equally perplexed at the friend's reaction: "Yes, but that is not my chest. Those are photographs."

Exactly.

Not only was the distinction between the real children and the images difficult for people to understand; so was the distinction between the images and their creator, whom some found immoral. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I actually was, as some New York Times letter-writers suggested, “manipulative,” “sick,” “twisted,” “vulgar.” It should make no difference to the way the work is viewed. If we revere only works made by those with whom we’d happily have our granny share a train compartment, we will have a paucity of art.

It is fair, however, to criticize my ambition, my project, to argue that I’ve done my job clumsily or tastelessly, to tell me, as a letter-writer did, that I’m a maker of “badly composed frame[s] of an amateur home movie,” or to wish to see restored the view of children as decorative cherubs with no inner lives of their own. But at no point in that dialogue about the work should my private character as the maker of the pictures be discussed. Nor, for that matter, should the personalities of the children, the actors and models, be considered.

I tried not to read what was written about my work, though occasionally a review or an article would float past me, often with interpretations so rudderless, ill rigged and in every other way unseaworthy that I marveled it made it out of dry dock. When Mary Gordon attacked my work in the 1996 summer issue of *Salmagundi*, she went after my favorite image, “The Perfect Tomato,” asserting: “The application of the word ‘tomato’ — sexual slang for a desirable woman — to her daughter insists that we at least consider the child as a potential sexual partner. Not in the future but as she is. The fact that the children are posed by their mother, made to stand still, to *hold the pose*, belies the idea that these are natural acts — whatever natural may be.”

I felt this required a response and replied in an essay in a subsequent issue:

“It is a banal point that no artist can predict how each image will be received by each viewer, and that what is devoid of erotic meaning to one person is the stuff of another’s wildest fantasies. Mary Gordon seems to have these aplenty, but it is her retailing of lurid impressions of ‘The Perfect Tomato,’ a photograph of unassailable purity, that elicits this rebuttal.

To back up her denunciation, Gordon homes in on the offending title. I am now informed that ‘tomato’ is slang for a desirable woman among the hard-boiled gumshoes of certain faded detective novels (a meaning which the Oxford English Dictionary does not recognize). I cannot imagine that this sense is ever used today,



From left: Virginia, Emmett and Jessie. “The fact is that these are not my children,” Mann says of her photographs. “They are figures on silvery paper slivered out of time. They represent my children at a fraction of a second on one particular afternoon with infinite variables of light, expression, posture, muscle tension, mood, wind and shade.”

except in ironical allusion to that genre. Certainly I had no thought of it when I gave ‘The Perfect Tomato’ its whimsical title, a nod to the only element in the picture that’s in focus.

When I turned and saw my daughter dancing on the table that day, I had no

time to make adjustments, just ecstatically to swing my view camera around and get the exposure. There was no question of trying to retake the picture; it was, to pilfer a line from W. S. Merwin, ‘unrepeatable as a cloud.’ ‘The Perfect Tomato’ is one of those miracle pictures in this series that preserve

spontaneous moments from the flux of our lives. For other images, we replayed situations that had arisen — *pace* Gordon — ‘naturally’ or within the evolving circumstances of a photo session.”

Oscar Wilde, when attacked in a similar ad hominem way, insisted that it is senseless to speak of morality when discussing art, asserting that the hypocritical, prudish and philistine English public, when unable to find the art in a work of art, instead looked for the man in it. But as much as I argued this point, other voices still insisted that the rules were different for a mother. This is a typical sentiment from a Times letter: A mother should not “troll the naked images of her children through waters teeming with pedophiles, molesters and serial killers. Sally Mann’s photos not only put her children at risk, but all the other children in Lexington, Va., as well.” This got to me, too. All the other children of Lexington?

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IF EVER THERE WAS a man who knows about “pedophiles, molesters and serial killers,” it is Kenneth Lanning, a former member of the behavioral science unit at the F.B.I. Fretting about this letter, I cold-called the department and lucked out by being referred to Lanning. I asked if we could talk about these spectral, nightmarish figures and whether I should be concerned about them. I also hoped to get from him, in effect, a declaratory judgment as to whether my studio was going to be subject to the kind of ungentle attention that the agency paid to the photographer Jock Sturges, whose images of naked children on a nude beach in France were confiscated by the F.B.I. after a raid in 1990.

Larry and I went to see Lanning at his office in Quantico, Va., in April 1993. The kids were with us and got a tour of the place before Lanning sat down to look at what I had brought — the family pictures I had completed up to that point. When he was finished, he gathered up the pile of 8-by-10-inch contact prints, tapped it against the table to even the edges and looked over at us. He spoke at some length, a sad, too-knowing smile playing across his face. He said what I already knew: that some people would be aroused by these pictures. And then he said: “But they get aroused by shoes, too. I don’t think there is anything you can take a picture of that doesn’t arouse somebody.”

He stressed that in his profession, context and perception were everything. I remarked, somewhat wryly, that they were in mine as well. I certainly knew that the context of place was important in my family pictures, but I also knew that I was creating work in which critical and emotional perception can easily shift. All too often, nudity, even that of children, is mistaken for sexuality, and images are mistaken for actions. The image of the child is especially subject to that kind of perceptual dislocation; children are not just the innocents that we expect them to be. They are also wise, angry, jaded, skeptical, mean, manipulative, brooding and devilishly deceitful. “Find me an uncomplicated child, Pyle,” challenged the journalist Thomas Fowler in “The Quiet American,” by Graham Greene, adding: “When we are young we are a jungle of complications. We simplify as we get older.” But in a culture so deeply invested in a cult of childhood innocence, we are



"White Skates, 1990."





A self-portrait taken for the magazine in March by Sally Mann, with her husband, Larry.

understandably reluctant to acknowledge these discordant aspects or, as I found out, even fictionalized depictions of them.

Another loaded issue the photos raise is the nature of desire — there is sexual desire, but there is also maternal desire, marrow-deep and stronger than death. When the doctor handed Emmett to me, tallowy and streaked with blood, it was the first time I'd ever really held a baby. Here he was, the flesh of my flesh. I was gob-

the six years of fantasy, supplication and menace issuing from the computer of one obsessive who lived in an adjoining state. This man was our worst fears come true, troubling our waking and sleeping hours for years; to this day, despite the fact that he has moved overseas (where he has a job teaching children), Virginia reports having nightmares about him.

Sometimes using his real name, more often a transparent alias, and occasionally posing as

A psychiatrist who read the letters suggested buying a box of rhino shells for the shotgun, and a police officer concurred, reminding me to be sure to drag the body thus dispatched over the threshold and into the house. The cumulative effect of this creepiness was, paradoxically, almost to make our stalker the family member he claimed he wanted to be. Though I didn't carry Larry's picture in my wallet, I started carrying this man's, and I would watch for him with

**HOW CAN THEY BE SO WILLING? IS IT FEARLESSNESS OR NAÏVETÉ?
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smacked by my babies: their meaty beauty and smell, the doughy smoothness of their skin, the pulsing crater of fontanel. I loved the whole sensual package with a ferocious intensity. Yes, it was a physical desire, a parental carnality, even a kind of primal parental eroticism, but to confuse it with what we call sexuality, interadult sexual relations, is a category error.

In the pictures of my children, I celebrated the maternal passion their bodies inspired in me — how could I not? — and never thought of them sexually or in a sexual context, remarking to Woodward, “I think childhood sexuality is an oxymoron.” I did not mean my children were not sexual; all living creatures are sexual on some level. But when I saw their bodies and photographed them, I never thought of them as being sexual; I thought of them as being simply, miraculously and sensuously beautiful.

Once the work was out in the world, I was puzzled as to why that sensuous beauty should be signposted as controversial, while magazine pages were filled with prurient images of young girls, all aimed at selling commercial products. Lanning understood and noted the difference between the images of my children's bodies and those of the pornographers or the profane consumer culture. That day in Quantico, he reassured me on some points but cautioned me on others: No, law enforcement wasn't likely to come after me, he said, but I was in for a rough time nevertheless.

He was right on both counts.

While Lanning seemed to think it improbable that serial murderers and molesters were coming for the children of Lexington, or even just mine, it seemed to me that we were in some jeopardy. Some letters I received had troubling return addresses bearing inmate numbers and correctional institutions; some gave off an indefinably creepy vibe. The creepiest stuff of all was

an author researching a self-help manual for “recovering pedophiles,” this guy began his epistolary assault by carpet-bombing editors and journalists. But his were not letters of complaint; instead, and more worrying, they asked questions about the kids.

Many recipients tossed these letters in the trash, but many other people, alarmed, forwarded them to us. This creep was tireless: He wrote to people who knew us, asking for unpublished gossip, and to the kids' schools, asking (repeatedly) for assignments, yearbooks, grades, contest entries and artwork. When he received no response from the schools, he got a local man to try his luck at getting the material.

A suspicious clerk was on duty in the medical records department at the hospital when our stalker's official-sounding request for the children's birth certificates came in, and fortunately she called me about it. Subscribing to the local papers to scan them for our names, he would taunt us with his knowledge of ballet recitals, school honor rolls and lunch menus. Once he sent registered-mail letters to the kids, and I had a friend sign for them, not wanting him to have even a signature.

Those who received his outpourings were regularly informed of his being “bedridden with lovesickness for the Mann children,” of his desire to receive “a blessing from the Mann family's holy presence” and of his resentment of us “for stealing my piece of the pie, so I hoped somehow to steal it back from them.”

For years, I was sleepless with fears of Lindbergh-baby-like abductions and made sure that the windows were locked, that the house was always occupied, that the children were accompanied by an adult. Of course, I contacted Lanning, who gave me advice but was limited in what he could do, as were private protection agencies, because the man had made no threats.

something close to the fervor of a lover, checking cars, peering down dimly lit library stacks, scanning the audiences at public appearances for an ordinary face that thousands of faces resemble. This is the first time I've publicly referred, in any detail, to the shadow this weirdo cast for so many years. I knew that it would only validate those critics who said I put my children at risk. And it will make their vengeful day when I admit now that they were in some measure correct.

WITH LOVE, RAPTURE and perhaps some measure of foolishness, I made pictures I thought I could control, pictures created within the prelapsarian protection of the farm, those cliffs, the impassable road, the embracing river.

That's the critical thing about the family pictures: They were possible only because of the farm, the place. America now hardly has such a thing as privacy, at least not the kind we had at the cabin. How natural was it, in that situation, to allow our children to run naked? Or, put another way, how bizarre would it have been to insist on bathing suits for their river play, which began after breakfast and often continued long after dark, when all three would dive like sleek otters for glow sticks thrown in the pool under the still-warm cliffs?

They spent their summers in the embrace of those cliffs, protected by distance, time and our belief that the world was a safe place. The pictures I made of them there flowed from that belief and that ignorance, and at the time seemed as natural as the river itself.

As ephemeral as our footprints were in the sand along the river, so also were those moments of childhood caught in the photographs. And so will be our family itself, our marriage, the children who enriched it and the love that has carried us through so much. All this will be gone. What we hope will remain are these pictures, telling our brief story. ♦