

Memories of Elsa Dorfman



I'm the proverbial luckiest guy in the world. I ended up meeting Elsa by sheer happenstance.

During my third year of law school, I had a part-time job with a small, Downtown Boston law firm that handled two kinds of cases – criminal defense and divorce. I was not interested in divorce law, but I was interested in criminal law. The name of the firm, located at 41 Tremont Street (a building long-since torn down), was Crane, Inker and Oteri. Crane had long since retired; Monroe Inker did divorce work; but Joe Oteri did criminal defense, and so I was assigned to work with Oteri.

Oteri told me that he wanted to engineer a test case challenging the constitutionality, under the state constitution, of the Massachusetts anti-marihuana statute. He asked me how that might be done. I suggested a method of attack: Since smoking tobacco, a very harmful product, was legal, it was irrational that marihuana, a relatively safe substance, was a felony. Oteri approved that approach and assigned me to work up the test case.

A young lady by the name of Elsa Dorfman was struggling to make a living as a photographer. (In those days, before Polaroid, she used her fabled Hasselblad, a very fine camera that I still have at home.) To supplement her income, she wrote magazine articles. She assumed that an article about the marihuana test case would be an easy sale to some magazine. Hence, she made an appointment to see Joe Oteri.

But when Elsa arrived at the firm, Oteri suddenly had a client emergency. My intercom sounded, and I heard the voice of my boss: "Hahvey – his accent, like Elsa's, betrayed his Boston roots – there's a Dorfman broad here to see me. She's doing an article on the marihuana test case. Can you take care of the broad?" "Sure," I replied, "send her in."

And that's how Elsa and I met. It was pure serendipity – a favorite phrase, by the way, in Elsa's lexicon.

And I recall our first date as if it occurred yesterday. Just a few weeks after the interview at Oteri's office, she invited me to dinner at her studio apartment at 1699 Cambridge Street in Cambridge. I brought with me a 27-inch long Wetzstein's New York kosher salami. Elsa cooked roast beef. It was quite awful, but I didn't have the nerve to tell her so. Those of you who've eaten at our house know that meals were always "take out," because neither of us could cook. So, unless a friend or guest put on an apron and did some cooking, it was "take out." (Indeed, Isaac would have starved without take-out.)

At the time we first met, I was living on the Boston Waterfront – 108 Fulton Street, to be exact, near my law office. I continued to live there for another year. But then I moved onto her street in Cambridge. She lived at 19 Flagg Street, where nearly all of the photographs appearing in *Elsa's Housebook* were taken. I moved to an apartment on 5 Flagg Street. The following year I moved in with her at 19 Flagg Street, where Isaac was born.

My running into Elsa started an adventure that lasted for 53 years. I've never met anyone like her. She was a serious photographer, an incomparable wife and mother. And all of you know of her capacity for friendship. Even her quirks told us much about her – her choice of clothing, her memorable giggle, her fabulous Boston accent.

She was also incredibly brave. Some of you in this room will remember Elsa's arrest, when she threw a glass of water at a physician and a security guard at Boston City Hospital to protect a classmate of Isaac's. (That "kid" is now a father of four.) Elsa went on trial in the Cambridge District Court, charged with assault-and-battery. Half of Cambridge showed up to cheer her on. Elsa was represented by my law partner at the time, Andrew Good. (I was unable to participate in representing her because I was a

potential witness.) Elsa testified in her own defense. The Boston Globe's Paul Langner reported, on Friday, December 31st, 1993, in an article headlined **Woman acquitted of assault on officer**: "Widely known portrait photographer Elsa Dorfman was acquitted yesterday of assault and battery for slapping a hospital security guard in the ear with a cup of water. East Cambridge District Judge Jonathan Brant ruled that Dorfman used a small amount of force while defending a teen-age friend of her son's who she had taken to Cambridge City Hospital...."

I'm sure many of you remember this trial. What I also remember is that when I arrived at the hospital – Elsa had phoned me to get over there ASAP – I saw three policemen loading my wife into a Paddy Wagon. Once I straightened out the hospital staff and threatened them with a malpractice suit if they abused the boy, I headed to Cambridge Police Headquarters, then located in Central Square. I asked the desk sergeant where I might find Elsa. He directed me to her holding cell. There I saw an ebullient Elsa (even though she was seething with anger toward the physician and the security guard), laughing and having a great time with three Cambridge cops. Even the police adored her, and they were not surprised that she rose to the occasion to protect the boy.

And here's an additional memory. A few of you will recall the circumstances under which Elsa and I got married. The bottom line is that she got pregnant. Back in the day, there were considerable legal problems encountered by illegitimate children. Neither Elsa nor I were much into ceremony. I asked a friend, David Nelson, whom I'd met when working at Crane, Inker & Oteri, at the time a partner in the firm (later a federal district judge sitting in Boston), if he would marry us. He readily agreed: Nelson liked me, but he adored Elsa. And so Nelson made reservations for eight at the dining room of Boston's fabled Parker House Hotel. Present, if memory serves, were Elsa and Harvey, Dave Nelson, Gail and Mike Mazur, Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn, and Elsa's sister Sandy Dorfman. Nelson performed the wedding right at the dinner table, between the main course and dessert. The waiter seemed surprised and curious – not only to see a wedding performed over dinner but performed by a Black man. Back then it was somewhat unusual to have a Black person seemingly in charge of a proceeding involving a group of white folks.

The next day – a Sunday – Elsa and I went back to work. I went into my law office; she went into her darkroom. We told our parents about our marriage a few months later. And Isaac was born a legitimate child, not, in the inelegant terminology of the day, a bastard.

In addition to being a fabulous photographer, Elsa also had considerable writing talent. But it was the first of her books – *Elsa's Housebook: A Woman's Photojournal*, published originally in 1974 by Godine Publishers, started and run by David R. Godine, a close friend of Elsa's and still a friend of mine today, for which she is best remembered. The book was such a hit that Elsa, with the able assistance of her close friend Margot Kempers, produced updated editions in 2012, 2016, and finally in 2017 (all printed and bound, by the way, at The Harvard Book Store), after which time her deteriorating kidney function made further editions impossible.

In one of those later editions (the third) I wrote:

"My life with Elsa can, in some important ways, be divided roughly into two segments: pre-*Elsa's Housebook*, and post-*Elsa's Housebook*.... *Elsa's Housebook* told me so much about the woman with whom I felt instantly in love during that 'marihuana test case' interview and gave me the courage to do something I was not until then certain I could manage – becoming a husband and a father."

And I continued:

“Elsa’s work has come a long way from the days when she pedaled gorgeous ‘vintage’ black-and-white prints from a borrowed shopping cart in Harvard Square, armed with a letter from me, duly typed on my law firm letterhead and signed in ink, as a warning to any police officer or merchant who attempted to drive her from her perch on the street because ‘vendors’ were not allowed unless blessed with a special peddler’s license. Elsa’s street sale of her photographs, warned my letter, was protected by the First Amendment and the equivalent free speech protection offered by the Massachusetts Constitution.”

Many of you will remember when Elsa took black-and-white portraits, before her Polaroid phase, but one thing remained constant: She had a profound talent for capturing an instant, and with only rare exception a happy and affirmative instant, in the lives of ordinary – and some extraordinary – human beings.

And in this 2016 edition, I ended my essay with the following words:

“Life with Elsa has been quite an adventure thus far, and now, with the advent of another edition of *Elsa’s Housebook*, I see our life together entering yet another segment, surely the final one, but with surprises yet to come.”

Those surprises ended on the date of her passing: May 30, 2020. But I’m sure that all of you remember some of these “Elsa stories.” For others, this is the first time you’ll have heard them, at least from me. And as this memorial program unfolds today, you’ll hear many other Elsa stories. For me, these stories constitute a woven tapestry of an incredible life.

Indeed, I am the luckiest guy in the world.

Harvey Silverglate

Elie was a pioneer in so many ways, everyone here knows that. But one way that's pretty relevant to me- and only me- is her having a child at 40. That's still not very common today but was obviously quite rare 45 years ago.

By comparison, Annette and I had Seth, our youngest, when we were 38. About the same age as Elie had me. But we had our first, Sarah, when we were 34.

Elie having me at 40 meant she had a whole, rich life way before I came along.

Growing up, so many people would come visit us at 607 Franklin- and all her old friends who shuffled in and out of our house, knew her from practically a different lifetime.

An important decades-long chunk of her life had nothing to do with me. I really love thinking about that.

I love that whatever I managed to do right as a son. Whatever happiness I brought her, perhaps it was kind of icing on the cake of her life. And that's a good thing- Elie loved icing.

Anyway, Elie was Elie, and that made her an amazing mom. She was optimistic. Much needed in a house with Harv and myself.

It wasn't that she believed things would always work out. Or that things happen for a reason. Things would either work out, or they wouldn't. But it's ok if they don't, you'll live. You'll be fine. You'll have a good story, and you'll learn. Clearly, she'd seen that over and over in her own life.

She celebrated the little things. Little things made her proud. I appreciated this more and more as I got older- into my 40s. Anything I did that had a nugget of value or interest, she'd get so excited. A good grade, a misshapen clay figurine, an ad for Snickers. Always the same: "Oh I thought it was faaaaabulous".

She'd shrug off small, flawed things- which drove me insane. Or not even shrug them off really, she'd appreciate them. By the time I'd come into her life, an appreciation of imperfection was fundamental to her art. So that bled into everything. A little stain here, a little chip there. Made anything more interesting. What a wonderful way of looking at life.

Looking back, I feel she really did parent the way she lived. Happily. Not consistently happy, I think as a teenager I made sure of that. But fundamentally happy. And I'm really grateful for that.

Isaac Dorfman Silvergate

“What is grief if not love persevering?” That is actually a quote from an android in a superhero TV show. But it really resonated with me in thinking about losing my dad and Elsa within a year. I was dreading today, thinking grief would be the overwhelming feeling, but that quote reminded me that today is not about what we lost when Elsa passed, but about celebrating the love we still feel for her and from her. So, today I’d like to share the story of when I first met Elsa and started loving her.

The first time I met Elsa and Harvey I was terrified. Isaac and I had only been dating for 4 months and there I was driving to Cambridge to meet the parents for the very first time on Thanksgiving. Isaac assured me that it was going to be great but all I kept thinking was “Isaac’s Jewish parents are going to see me, his new Dominican/Puerto Rican girlfriend and send me packing!” I couldn’t have been more wrong. From the minute I walked through the door of 607 Franklin Street in November of 2006 and every minute after, I never felt anything other than love and support from Elsa & Harvey. I was welcomed into their little family unit and felt at home ever since.

There are a lot of funny stories I can tell about that first meeting alone, but since we’re at the MFA I’ll tell my portrait story: when we went to the studio for the annual family picture that trip, I thought about how cool it was going to be to have my picture taken by Elsa...my first Dorfman (possibly only...it was a new relationship after all). I did my makeup perfectly, wore a nice outfit, and waited patiently on one of the tiny little stools in the studio (maybe the cow one?). Elsa, Harvey and Isaac posed for their picture, and like the professional models they were at that point, they were done in literally a flash. As they started packing up, and I saw Harvey pick up his Elsa Dorfman tote bag, I realized that I would not get my portrait taken that day. But I was thrilled to have witnessed that magic of the Polaroid and Elsa. Later I found out that because every girlfriend of Isaac’s and Matt’s that Elsa had photographed had soon thereafter become an ex-girlfriend, she had a “no pictures until engagement” policy. At the time, I was a bit bummed, but it worked! My first Dorfman was our engagement picture and Elsa was gracious enough to include my parents. It is one of my favorites and hangs in our apartment next to the one of Sarah and Seth.

I miss my mother-in-law very much. I miss our phone calls, I miss getting manicures and pedicures with her, I miss her infectious laugh, I miss sneaking her treats behind Harvey’s back. I miss her positivity and wondering how in the heck she managed to stay such an optimist despite living with two Silverglates at once! I wish I had her advice for how to handle them...I now have hers and mine!

My entire family loved Elsa and were benefactors of her generosity and thoughtfulness. My mother, Ysa Morales, has been in the Dominican Republic since the beginning of the pandemic and regrets not being here. She sent the following message...

I always thank god for the mother-in-law she gave my daughter. She was like a second mother to Annette. Even though I don’t speak much English, I feel like Elsa and I communicated very well when we got together. I’ll always remember her kindness, humility and her beautiful smile.

Annette Morales

For Elsa

The month I met Elsa, September of 1972, was one of the BC-AD intersections of my life. I've written in *Elsa's Housebook* about how I met her: waiting for the official granting of a year's leave from Harvard, I answered an ad on the Mather House bulletin board for a student to help Elsa mount an exhibition of her work; the pay was a photograph. It seemed a good thing to do, and at some point, while hanging the show, after a short trial period which cannot have lasted more than two hours, I was admitted to the circle of her friends in perpetuity. It was no credit to me; it was a quite easy circle to enter. Elsa's view of everybody seemed to be that they were uniquely great, thinkers and artists and everyone else in their own way. But I took better advantage of the entrée than most: when Elsa came to understand that I was trying to take a leave on almost no savings or income, she employed me to organize her photographic life, then her domestic life in general. When I was done with that, Elsa hired me to develop all her undeveloped photographs, mainly because she wanted to continue to support my year off, during which I was trying to write a novel.

That meant I was in her house at 19 Flagg St. every weekday for about a year. Elsa was always able to invest her addresses with a paradoxically unassuming mystique: I remember that address after I've forgotten several of my own. For a year, whoever visited Elsa at that charmed address visited me, because when I wasn't working, I was hanging around. I have clear, almost still habitable, memories of each downstairs room. When Allen Ginsberg came with Peter Orlovsky, Elsa asked me to let them in, because she had an appointment at the time they were due. Ginsberg tickled me at the door with one of the crutches he was using after a fall that winter, and Peter Orlovsky, first thing upon entering, guessed the correct spelling of my last name. Gregory Corso showed up for a few rambunctious days of that vivid week, which culminated with Ginsberg's reading "Howl" at Eliot House. Why was I suddenly on the inside of this circle of light? For Elsa, there was no inside and outside distinction. If you were not born great or hadn't achieved greatness, she was utterly democratic in her thrusting greatness upon you. If Robert Creeley or Bobbie Creeley arrived, anyone around could join the party. If Gail Mazur was her friend, then Gail Mazur should be your friend, and you could be present at the founding of the Blacksmith House Poetry Series. It didn't matter if you particularly believed in the attribution of greatness; Elsa did. There were no second thoughts.

So I saw Elsa every weekday for about a year; next year, my senior year next door at Mather House, about once a month; then after graduating, of course, much less. But I had a final encounter with the Elsa experiment in borderless democracy maybe eight or so years ago. I mentioned that John Harbison was coming to Williams, where I teach, to conduct some of his own music; Elsa told me that he was a neighbor—the new magical address was on Franklin St.—and wondered whether I wanted to go visit him. Well, yes. So, we walked to his house and stood outside, not quite sure what to do when we arrived at his front gate. His wife saw us lurking out there and invited us in. John Harbison was upstairs and apparently composing, but he hurried down—he had been hoping Elsa would come by. They had a lengthy conversation about instruments, his musical instruments and her Polaroid. I had nothing to contribute by way of mastery of arcane artistic technology, but once again I was invited to be on the inside of the high-class, highly accomplished, and articulate group, regardless of qualifications.

That diminishing frequency of our seeing each other reminds me of how it similarly works with parents. We see them every day for many years, then every couple of months for a while, then much less. And in one way, it doesn't matter. They're as much a part of you when you're away from them as when you're in their presence. Elsa was almost exactly halfway from my age to my mother's age: the non-necessity of continuously earning her love and support, the fact that they were always available without interruption despite distance in time and space, seemed half the generosity of a friend, half the blindness of a parent. Grace was irresistible, as the Puritans used to say.

I've noticed that when people in my life die, I either accept it or do not. I don't think it's a case of classic denial according to Kubler Ross clichés. Nor is it primarily a function of the depth or acuteness of the grief, which in either case may be deep or acute. It has to do with something that still seems physically alive rather than ghostly in the memory. When I think of the quality of Elsa's giggle, it makes no sense to attach it to someone who is gone. It's not merely still alive; it's still girlish. That laughter is still part of Elsa's timelessness. I also hear, rather than (it seems) remember, the low huskiness of her voice when she would decide that something you had just said was half-interesting or a quarter-scandalous: she would say, "you have to write about that," and would begin to imagine on your behalf the newspaper or magazine or book publisher who'd be interested. Or perhaps you just needed to tell Harvey, who could use it as evidence for something he was writing. Of course, I don't remember any of the items that impressed her as publishable over almost half a century; what I remember is the conspiratorial stage whisper, the still palpable vocal reach, of her encouragement. That seems the right word for the courage she transmitted.

John Limon

Elsa's death was a great loss not only to the art community but to her beloved husband Harvey and the many Silverglate family members who knew her personally.

When we had any conversation with her, we always found that she was a warm, intelligent, happy and fulfilled individual who embraced not only us but all family members with love. A kind down to earth human being.

Her talent in photography knew no bounds and we were fortunate to be recipients of her work.

What a legacy she has left
We will remember her with love and friendship.

With love,
Larry and Dale Silverglate

An Appreciation of Elsa Dorfman

I met Elsa in the early 1970s when I was a student at The School of The Museum of Fine Arts. Elsa was already a committed photographer hawking her photos from a cart in Harvard Square . I stopped to say hello and look at her work. That chance encounter changed my life forever as Elsa became a role model extraordinaire! How did a middle-class Jewish girl, like me, became so avant-garde? But she helped me relax as she shared with great warmth and sincerity her observations of life and people. Two decades later, I was able to honor our connection by documenting her life and work in children's book, *In Real Life: Six Women Photographers*. Like many others, I will always miss Elsa. I can still hear her laughter.

Leslie Sills

I knew about Elsa long before I actually met her. That was when my wife and I moved to Cambridge in the early 1980s, back when Cambridge was Cambridge. My 2 daughters Sarah and Jojo were just kids then and I really wanted to get Elsa Polaroid portraits of them. But we did not have a lot of money, and Elsa's fee back then may not be a lot by today's standards, but her price was out of our reach. My mother died in 1985, and among the stuff I got was an original cel of Sleepy and Doc from the 1937 Disney movie, *Snow White*. I was able to sell it at a Sotheby's animation art auction held in New York in 1992. It sold for \$3,000, and that was enough to get two double portraits of my daughters, then 6 and 10, one in jeans and T-shirts, and one in swimsuits. (Elsa said my timing was perfect—any later and they would have been too self-conscious for swimsuits.) The pictures were taken in 1993. They hang in our stair well and I have been glad to have them be a part of my daily life for the last 30 years. It turned out Elsa lived just around the corner on Franklin Street, and I would see her on the street or at Au Bon Pain on Sundays. She would always ask about Sarah and Jojo, their schools, their progress, and what they were doing next. It was almost like we all became part of Elsa's huge family. I am very grateful for that.

Nick Read

My heart will hold Elsa's warmth & humility forever. Elsa was a great mentor and inspiration to me in ways which I am still exploring. We shared an alma mater (Tufts), a love for the magic of 2 1/4 cams & the incredible blessing of a loving spouse.

My best way of honoring her memory will be to hold her gently in my Insight Meditations & to teach others, as she had, with a curious mind, unveiled heart and an open embrace of serendipity. There will never be another like her. For her uniqueness, I am eternally grateful.

Linda Hirsch

The last time I saw Elsa she was at an outdoor table at a restaurant in Cambridge on Massachusetts Avenue. She was with Harvey, laughing freely, eating happily. We chatted for a while. I recall thinking upon leaving “What a cool couple!” He was dedicated to his law practice. She was dedicated to her photography. They were both devoted to one another and their son Isaac. The loss we continue to feel in the aftermath of Elsa’s passing is unlikely to leave us soon, if ever. It is the bitter-sweet legacy of having known a remarkable, generous, and loving wife, mother, and friend.

Randall Kennedy

Elsa Dorfman

I used to see her walking in the neighborhood with her son, Isaac, and their rescued greyhound. That's the kind of person Elsa Dorfman was. She rescued animals and children. In a curious, disarming manner, Elsa had concern for all of her neighbors. She had a way of making everyone feel as though they were her best friend.

I was one of a team of educators at our neighborhood school where Isaac was a student. When he was small, she dropped him off every morning, and every afternoon she came to fetch him. When he was in the fifth and sixth grades, I was one of his teachers and Elsa often visited with us in the classroom after school. Anything we needed, she and her husband, Harvey provided. Extra paper, tissues, a copying machine. They introduced us to our first benefactors when the Algebra Project was getting its start. They took in stray kids, providing a bed, a meal, a shoulder. Elsa and Harvey were loved by everyone in the school.

When Isaac was in kindergarten Elsa decided to make an annual class portrait. Every year until graduating the eighth grade, the kids walked the few blocks to her studio and had their group picture taken. She always had treats and showed the kids around the studio. To the delight of the school community, after a party celebrating the twentieth anniversary of its founding, Elsa invited everyone to see the pictures she had taken over the years. She became important to many of the kids in the photographs, such that they returned to visit her during high school and through to adulthood, some even assisting in the studio.

Elsa advocated for the safety and health of children. When a Cambridge child was mistreated at a local hospital she intervened, resulting in her spending a night in jail. Her arrest made the papers and she succeeded in bringing attention to the issue. The case against her was ultimately thrown out.

When we met in the neighborhood Elsa was always cordial and after a while, we became friends. We shared our children's bar mitzvahs, an engagement party and other festive occasions. She was wonderful to my son Aaron, occasionally putting him in front of the camera for portraits. She and Harvey gave him his first bicycle and hockey gear knowing full well that I hated hockey. For a while Isaac was my mother's helper and a few days a week after school, he came to my house and played with Aaron while I took care of household business. Elsa sometimes stopped by on those afternoons, and we caught up with the news. When Aaron moved to New York to pursue an acting career, she and Harvey attended some of his plays.

We had an email correspondence over the years. Elsa's letters echoed the rhythm of her speech, and I can hear her voice when I read them. The emails reflect pride in Isaac, sending me news of his latest achievement. Sometimes they were mundane; a referral to a gardener or an electrician. Once in a while they were magical; a poem chronicling her day that included a reference to my visit with my new puppy and my kvelling about Aaron's starring role in a play. There is a stack of her postcards that I cherish.

Elsa had many gifts and she shared them widely. To the public she was an icon who shared her art, and to her friends she was someone who could be counted on to share her heart. With Elsa there was no

pretense. She was sincere, had a strong sense of justice, and loved to laugh. She was modest, curious, and generous. Her devotion to Cambridge, her neighborhood, and her neighbors will be missed.

Pamela S. Paternoster

Alex had a black eye. And Annie is wearing her sweet little dress.
Elsa knew I lived that picture and when she came across it she took a picture of it for me.

One time Lucas and Isaac took magic markers and scribbled all over Elsa's Eames chair. She wasn't happy about it.



I remember Elsa walking down the street every day for years - sometimes with a dog (greyhound) and sometimes with Isaac when he was little.

One time Barry and I and Elsa and Lucas and Isaac went ice skating. Elsa kept yelling "glide Isaac glide" It was really fun watching the boys learning to skate.

Joyce P. Singer



Alex and Lucas Drpman



Alex Hughes. Drpman

Meeting Elsa and Harvey just before Isaac was born was one of those moments in life that sets everything in a new direction. My boyfriend and I were offered Harvey's old apartment on Flagg Street in exchange for childcare help and some shopping. I definitely got the better end of that deal. I was hoping to start a career in photography and Elsa was hugely generous with her critiques and encouragement. She took me to lectures, lent me her tripod, told me my photographs could use more of a sense of humor.

In 1977 when Isaac was still a babe in arms, Elsa had a one woman show, "Portraits of Women" at the UC Berkeley Art Museum. My mother lived just up the hill from the Museum and Elsa and Isaac stayed with her for the opening. Elsa took what I consider to be the best portrait ever made of my mom on that visit. Chomell looks as I remember her, solemn and kind and beautiful. That was Elsa's gift. She gave us a reflection of ourselves, and those we loved.

Many years later, with my own children mostly grown, a dear friend and I opened a bookstore in Berkeley. My mom had long since died but Elsa and I were still checking in on the phone and visiting each other. She always mentioned how proud my mother would be to see this thriving bookstore and it was another way she gave my mom back to me. Elsa was a force of life. She shared her energy and vision widely. When she laughed there was often a question mark attached that hung in the air. It had the effect of making me dig a little deeper, think a little harder and at the same time experience a wave of gratitude to have known her and shared this friendship.

Ann Leyhe

COMMONWEALTH v. ELSA DORFMAN

My name is Andrew Good. I am one of Harvey Silverglate's former law partners. Our practice was primarily engaged in the defense of criminal cases. I met Harvey in 1968 and met Elsa soon thereafter. Elsa was not yet well-known. She sometimes sold her photos from a shopping cart in Harvard Square, offering "AHT" to passersby. At first, Harvey and Elsa lived a few doors from each other on Flagg Street near the river. After a few storms, starts and stops, Harvey moved in with Elsa, and the Silverglate/Dorfman family began to form. The lives depicted in Elsa's Housebook are from that era.

When Isaac was an adolescent, he had a close school friend whose family was somewhat troubled. For some years, Elsa and Harvey stepped in to provide support, frequent overnight stays, and stability for Isaac's friend. But, one day, the friend became so agitated that Elsa decided to take him to the Cambridge Hospital's Psych unit. The friend was a big, sweet kid and happened to be black - not physically threatening in appearance or behavior, but tall for his age.

When Elsa and the friend arrived at the unit, Elsa explained what brought them there. The psychiatrist's response was to have a security guard tie the friend down on a gurney with four-point restraints. Seeing her effort to help this very stressed kid backfire and making it clear to the kid that she did not intend that he be tied down, Elsa loudly protested. But the security guard didn't stop. So Elsa picked up one little Dixie pill cup full of water and threw it, splashing the guard with maybe an ounce of water. Not being entirely free of impaired judgment, the Psych Unit called the Cambridge PD and had Elsa arrested for assault and battery.

Having received a call from Elsa, Harvey arrived at the hospital to help, only to witness his handcuffed wife being placed in a paddy wagon car for the short trip to the old Cambridge PD Headquarters on Western Avenue in Central Square. Elsa was allowed one call to a lawyer so, of course, she called the office. I drove over from Boston, and immediately went into the lockup to see Elsa. There she was in an otherwise empty cell, in the basement cellblock in that old, cold granite fortress of a building with steel bars in its windows and doors. As anyone who knew her would expect, Elsa was calm, anything but humiliated, scared, or chastened, but quietly furious. She was promptly released and went home with Harvey.

Never known for prosecutorial discretion, the DA's office decided to prosecute Elsa for assault and battery in the Cambridge District Court. So, I had the honor to defend our client in the infamous, but not very famous, criminal case: Commonwealth v. Elsa Dorfman.

Back then, defendants had the option to have an initial non-jury trial of relatively minor criminal cases in Massachusetts local courts, followed by a jury trial if the defendant was aggrieved by the outcome and sentence. So, one morning we had our non-jury trial.

Most people are familiar with the legal concept of self-defense. But the law also provides a person with the right to defend someone else against violence. Unlike self-defense which, under Massachusetts law, imposes an obligation to retreat unless retaliation is the only realistic option, defense of another does not require an obligation to retreat rather than use commensurate force to defend the victim. "Defense of Another" was our defense. Elsa was promptly and easily acquitted. Isaac's friend eventually thrived and now has a wife and four kids. He and Isaac are still friends to this day.

Andrew Good

I will always regret not getting out to the Rehabilitation Center in Cambridge to see Elsa where she was recuperating after a fall in her driveway several years ago, just before the waves of the Covid plague shut up the world of easy back and forth between Boston and New York. Whenever I came into Harvard Square, from NYC, or our summer cottage in Nantasket, (whose beaches and amusement park were the backdrop for one of our collaborations, Elsa taking the pictures and my memories filling some of text), I wanted to see her. I expected to find her as I had for years now, calling just before I stopped by (scolded when mobile phones became common, for not having one). A visit with Elsa was one of the remaining delights in traveling into Cambridge, sitting at a table laden with books, and envelopes, edging each other off it for space, catching up on the latest news of this friend and that one. This last time however, time seemed too tight to get beyond the familiar precincts of the Square to the rehabilitation center, but I should have rescheduled.

Not just the pleasure of talking with Elsa and absorbing some of that amazing warmth that always radiated from her presence, enriched my life and my wife Inger's since her house was a terminus of intellectual joy and inspiration where lifelong friendship were formed or deepened. I wanted to talk to her about doing a book based on her photographs in the BU Journal and the Globe based on the Blue Hill Avenue and Nantasket pieces which seemed to me to stay unique and speak to a Boston that few who haven't grown up in these places know about.

In the second edition of Elsa's *HOUSEBOOK*, I wrote a short essay about how important its first edition was. The additional pages in its 2016 edition amplified this, Elsa's portraits and the material that accompanies it, her observations, her friends' remarks, capture a world not just of famous poets, writers, but opposites, of situations where my friend, Francis Russell who could appear as a crusty old Yankee aristocrat, faces a zany woman convinced of the power of faith to heal. Not only is the collision amusing, but even more so is Elsa's speculation about how Allen Ginsberg would have deftly managed the woman's enthusiasm. Another sketch finds a talented undergraduate helping to sort and hang photographs at Elsa's house, who first finds Ginsberg off-putting as compared to Gregory Corso, but watching Allen work his magic, draw an audience into the spell of poetry, sees why Elsa adores him. The *HOUSEBOOK* introduces us to a secret Cambridge, separate from the University and the academic.

I am in the *HOUSEBOOK*, but I drew Elsa out of her Cambridge home back into worlds that we both knew in childhood. I hoped to publish an edition of the essays and photographs of a hidden Boston and its summer watering place in Hull. I spoke with Elsa the last time I did sit with her at her home on Franklin Street, mentioning that I believed that there were many more photographs that had not been published both from the world of Jewish butcher shops, delicatessens, synagogues, from our common streets in Dorchester, Mattapan and Roxbury, The sea of books and documents before us on the table testified to the cornucopia of work that had poured out of her camera, and she nodded genially but wondered where the photographs were in her archives. The first of these collaborations had been e-published in the Boston University Journal in an essay on the world of Blue Hill Avenue, the Jewish district of Boston, but the Globe had foolishly taken only my text without Elsa's photographs, pasting in a few nondescript shots of the Avenue, which lacked both the pathos and particular Jewish humor that Elsa's portraits evoked. Later, the Globe did recognize its mistake in separate pieces in the Sunday magazine that ran my text and Elsa pictures in a photographic essay on Nantasket Beach, and the synagogues that clustered on several streets just off of Blue Hill Avenue.

Many ghosts now thread through the Housebook for me, but the strangest one to encounter was my father who, like me, was genially haunted by his years at Harvard. He loved to come back into the Square, taking me there as a boy for the Commencements, leaving gifts of flowers for professors who

were mentors to me during my four years, like William Alfred (including Elsa's house on Flagg Street in his round of dropping off flowers and flowerpots). (Elsa's portrait William Alfred 1993 was the cover of *Fiction*, the magazine I edit, in which his memoir appeared.) As an immigrant child coming to the Jewish homes spanning Seaver Street and Blue Hill Avenue's, the axis of Dorchester, Mattapan and Roxbury in which Elsa and I bloomed. My father at 14 had joined his father in the downtown Flower Market. As a lawyer he often took his fees in the flowerpots and boxes of roses and carnations he distributed to friends. It was he who guided Elsa and me to the synagogues on Woodrow Avenue for a unique photo essay that appeared in the Boston Sunday Globe. And it was in the Globe as well that we collaborated on one about Nantasket, this time with Elsa's photograph of brilliant colors on the cover of its Sunday magazine.

Elsa greeted me like an elder sister, with open arms and delight each time I came through the door of her houses, particularly that precious home, the houses of the HOUSEBOOK, where I was treated for no apparent reason as a special guest, from the very first time I met her, and we talked and laughed and dreamed together. She was an encyclopedia of worlds I knew and worlds I learned about through her. Ralph Waldo Emerson left a set of portraits (without photographs or pictures) called *Representative Men*. It preserved a New England world that would have been unrepresented without them. Elsa's photographs of men and women has also preserved a representative New England that would otherwise have been lost.

Mark Mirsky

I know that Elsa had many, many friends and I am one of them. I am a painter and Elsa offered to sit for me. We had a wonderful time together, lots of laughs and she was so generous with me. She did not begrudge sitting for me. (Many people find the process of having their portrait painted very tedious). I realize the best portraits of Elsa are her own self-portraits, but I thought you might like to see it.

My favorite book of Elsa's is her House Book. If I were told to make a syllabus of what I think is called first wave feminism, Elsa's book would be at the top. It would be Required Reading.

Harvey, you must miss her so much. I hope I haven't caused you more pain by chiming in rather late. I can't attend her memorial, but it sounds wonderful, and I wish I could be there.

Judy Kramer



Painting by Judy Kramer

Elsa

I arrived on the Elsa fan train late in the game (relatively speaking). I had known her slightly for years, but it wasn't until I moved to the Riverside neighborhood in Cambridge that we became friends. Prior to my move here in 2000, Elsa would occasionally contact me about wedding work that she had been approached for and didn't want to do. She was actually the only other photographer I knew who had a foot in both the art and commercial worlds. Most of the photographers I knew taught to feed their habits. I was an event photographer until I eventually joined the teaching ranks part time in my forties. One of the many things I admired about Elsa was that she managed to seamlessly marry her commercial and art careers. They were one and the same. In this way, she continued a long and illustrious tradition of studio photographers.

Elsa was like no one else on the photo scene. Sporting her trademark bold print dresses and running shoes, she was ebullient, direct, and ferociously funny. She had that rare quality of making everyone feel special. She was deeply and genuinely curious about the people she met which is probably what made her so good at what she did. Having been raised on photographers like Arbus and Larry Clark and told that unless your subject looked miserable it wasn't a good photograph, I didn't really know what to think of Elsa's work at first. It wasn't until I grew up a little that I realized just how remarkable her work was. It looks so effortless but anyone who takes portraits knows how tough it is to take a good one. You have to be part performer and part cheerleader.

As I look at Elsa's pictures, I realize that they bear testament to one amazing love fest after another. It is clear that Elsa loved what she did and transmitted that love to her subjects who returned it in kind. One after another, they stand in front of Elsa and her gigantic camera with trust and pride, showing off humanity at its best and most celebratory.

Shellburne Thurber

Upon hearing of Elsa's death, I fell into a deep sadness. Over the following months, my sadness has not diminished. Nor do I expect it to. But it has been leavened with joyous memories and mementos that kindle an unending gratitude for the time that I had with her.

I met Elsa on February 3rd, 2005. She greeted me at the entrance to 607 Franklin Street. I was there to interview for a position with Elsa's partner, Harvey — or “Haahhh-vee” as she would say. (Partner is far too small of a term to encapsulate what Elsa and Harvey shared, fought for, and built together.) I was fortunate to receive a job offer from Harvey and started working out of their house a few months later. The following two years, I spent innumerable days with Harvey and Elsa. They quickly became part of my family of choice. They helped to unlock a world of possibility for me, and they became lifelong friends of mine. Indeed, as I moved abroad for school and later returned to Boston, Elsa and Harvey remained sources of enduring love and strength for me — and, of course, for each other.

Over the years, Elsa showed me many things, not least what it means to make your life on your own terms. She and Harvey had a marvelously unconventional life together. Here as in so many other ways, Elsa inspired me.

When I married my partner in 2014, Harvey officiated. One of the most marvelous pictures from that day is a portrait of Elsa and Harvey. Set against the backdrop of a gray fall afternoon on a beach in Rhode Island, Elsa wears a gorgeously bright print dress while Harvey dons — along with one of his trademark vests — a tie cut from the same cloth. Both Elsa's and Harvey's glasses have those detachable sunglass covers. It is one of my all-time favorite captures of two of my all-time favorite people.

Elsa was a fount of endless warmth, generosity, and zaniness. I loved her. I miss her terribly.

Dustin Lewis

Elsa, Harvey, and I met only a couple of times, but over the years we exchanged greetings, and kept up with each other's work in photography, she with her Polaroids and I with my artwork and photographic history.

Although Elsa's work came out of the nineteenth century traditions established by Nadar and others, a tradition refined by Avedon and his blank backgrounds, her final product was Elsa's alone. Her photographs did not seek to chronicle an entire generation, or to project power as did Avedon's large pieces; rather her work, despite its size, retained a certain intimacy, reminiscent of her earlier days as a photographer using a 35mm camera. Her subjects have a playful almost rakish edge to them, of being invested in the moment, of being alive to the instantaneity of her camera. Overall, her work manages to be both joyful, extemporaneous, and monumental.

Diana Emery Hulick

Memories of Elsa

I met Elsa in the fall of 1982 when I began teaching kindergarten at the King Open School. She stopped by my classroom before school began to meet me and checkout the classroom. One of the first things she noticed was the condition of the classroom bathroom. Although it was painted in colorful flowers, it needed cleaning up. Elsa acted. She sent someone over to put a piece of fresh plexiglass behind the toilet. It really helped refresh the room. Then she asked me what I needed. Having never taught kindergarten before, I wasn't sure. She checked in with me weeks later when I had a better idea. Then she really surprised me. She took me to a hardware store, a toy store and a bookstore and told me if I needed anything for my classroom from these three places, I could just sign her name. I had been teaching for twelve years and worked with some wonderful parents and teachers, but I had never met anyone so generous.

That year Elsa arranged for our whole class to go over to the Museum School to have our picture taken with the 20X24 Polaroid camera. She generously gave me a copy entitled Room 101. Seven years later when I was visiting, we gathered six of those same students and took another Polaroid titled The Survivors of King Open School. The two of them sit in my home office today.

When King Open School was having administrative problems in 1987, Elsa and Harvey held community meetings in their home to strategize. That administrator left the following fall, and I became the teacher in charge of the program. I never would have had that opportunity without them.

The following summer, my boyfriend was coming from Michigan to Boston for six weeks to spend time with me. He wanted to volunteer and keep busy while he was there. Since he was also interested in photography, Elsa called Lou Jones and set up an opportunity for Boku to apprentice with him.

After moving to Michigan, we have visited Elsa when we're in Boston. One of our last times we just rang her bell. No one answered but then Elsa pulled into the driveway. She invited us in and made some tea and we had a lovely visit.

I'll never forget Elsa. I can still see her walking into my classroom to pick up Isaac with Moozer the greyhound. I can see her behind the camera or in her home studio. I can hear her laugh and see her quirkiness. I can feel her generosity and friendship. She was one accomplished woman who shared her gifts, camaraderie and love and made the world a better place.

Valerie Hendrickson-Carr

I guess what I remember most about her was a phrase she used...
Oh, you should do that!

I first met you and Elsa in the Summer of 1977. My girlfriend at the time and I had arrived in town that winter and were living on Flagg Street across the way from you. One evening in July we went out to a concert at City Hall Plaza and returned to find the street filled with fire engines and our apartment, which we'd just finished fixing up, burned out.

After the firemen departed, as we stood in shock and despair out on the porch feeling helpless wondering what to do, Elsa came over and introduced herself. After a few minutes of sympathy, she asked if we would like to come over, take showers and get away from the devastation.

This was my first encounter with her assertiveness and generosity of spirit.

Over the years since then I found that this quality was really at the core of her personality.

Over the years when I'd run into her on the street and we exchanged stories of our present lives and I'd tell her something I was thinking of doing she'd always say...Oh, you should do that!...and expand on the idea with variations and thoughts of what it might lead to.

That sort of encouragement and her outpouring of ideas changed my life. Her creativity and positivity made a real difference to me.

So that fire ultimately brought a good thing into my life--Elsa Dorfman-- and I'm grateful to have known her.

Emmet Sheehan

I am not exactly sure how my husband Ralph first met Elsa. I think it was through a mutual "out there" friend. It was the heady days of the 70's in Cambridge and when the culture was truly revolutionary and an anything goes attitude prevailed. Ralph was the first of us to fall in love with Elsa and G-d only knows the two of them were outliers. Ralph knowing that Elsa was a photographer, who had this amazing relationship with Land's huge portrait camera that allowed everyone involved to capture the moment instantly and forever.

He proposed the idea that Elsa could take photographs of us making love that would be a transformative experience but private for us. Elsa loved it and the issue became how to convince me to engage me in such an intimate experience.

When I met Elsa, we bonded in a beautiful way; I felt I had known Elsa all my life and I now had a second Jewish Mother and a new best friend. Elsa had a wonderful way of being completely there with you while taking the photographs. And furthermore, we had paid for her to do these photographs for us alone.

Elsa's energy was boundless, and she created a special world with almost everyone she met. Elsa had a wonderful giggle as she invited you to share her world.

Surprisingly for us the next thing we knew we were in a book, a joint project with Robert Creeley and Elsa's photographs. Only Elsa could have the chutzpah to pull that off and still be your really good friend. Elsa was a wonderful, loving being a one-off. It is difficult to know that she has passed she is very missed a really good soul.

Molly Hoagland

I first met Elsa when I lived in Harvard Square. It was a time when up-and-coming musicians and artists could easily afford the rent to live in the area. There were small shops and boutiques and her large photographs always seemed to be displayed somewhere around the square. Elsa was a well-recognized figure, walking fast with her full canvas bag. We always found the time to stop and chat exchanging news about different exhibitions and concerts or just general neighborhood gossip.

Also living near the square at the time, was a close friend, playwright, and Harvard Professor William Alfred. Elsa's photo of Bill was exhibited around the square, and I would always stop to gaze at it, because Elsa seemed to somehow capture the essence of this distinguished man.

Elsa and Harvey organized a reading of Allen Ginsberg's, "Howl" that was going to be broadcast live on radio, to break the FCC ban on reading the poem over the airways. Quite a diverse crowd gathered inside and on the steps of Grolier's poetry bookshop. There was wine and cheese and it turned into quite a festive event.

Not long after, Ginsberg himself was staying at Elsa and Harvey's Cambridge home. I was honored to bring Professor Alfred over to meet Allen. Bill was a very close friend of Robert Lowell's and Lowell dedicated one of his most famous collections of poems, "For The Union Dead" to Bill. Lowell read several times with Allen, which made a unique merging of poetic styles. Allen and the professor hit it off immediately as Elsa was snapping away. Elsa's photograph of Bob Dylan giving Allen a guitar lesson, has become one of my many favorite photographs of hers.

One day as we were chatting, she asked if I'd pose for a session with her using the large Polaroid camera. It was such an interesting experience, not only was I honored to be asked, but watching firsthand, Elsa at work was poetry unto itself!

Peter Wolf

I met Elsa Dorfman fifty-plus years ago. My roommates and I had moved in as the first wave in Harvard College's new Mather House dorm. And Elsa, in turn, brought photography to Mather as part of its first wave of graduate and community advisors and mentors.

Excited to deepen my photography, I connected with Elsa from the start. Elsa had helped Mather design a first-class darkroom, and Elsa taught a small group of us the art and artistry of black-and-white photo work. And Elsa also mentored us in learning her style of street photography, leading us by example.

Most Mather advisors were resident Harvard grad students and other insiders. Though Elsa took her role seriously, she did not bear all the weight of representing Harvard. Elsa helped put the Harvard experience and our future paths in a context in those tumultuous and rebellious times. For me, at least, mentorship with trust became a friendship.

Elsa's enthusiasm and openness made everything an adventure. I remember the fun we shared bringing Alfred Eisenstaedt for a special workshop for Mather students.

My roommates and I had a great appreciation and love for Elsa. In the five-year reunions that followed, Elsa joined in as one of us and as a guest of honor whenever we met privately with friends and families for dinner.

In those years, photography had the right mix of the social and the private, of engagement and introspection. Elsa bridged the two for me. I have such memories of Elsa's infectious laughter, spirit, and energy wandering Harvard Square and enlarging upon this or that otherwise everyday experience. When we met for coffee at her Flagg Street apartment, if a conversation started with photography, it went here or there unpredictably.

Like almost no one else I knew, then or now, Elsa spoke from the heart and without pretense. I cannot now remember details from our conversations. Her life energy, starting with her laughter, nestled deep inside me, and has rested there in the five or so decades since. She inspired me and continues to do so. And if I felt this, I am sure everyone in her circles did as well.

In the years that followed, Elsa and I still met from time to time to prowl around Cambridge. We still talked and laughed. Gradually that slowed, for reasons I could understand yet also made me sad. We always kept in touch and enjoyed it when we did connect in person.

I have always carried Elsa with me. I have always had two or three photos Elsa gave me on my wall. I have those up with one I took of her on one of our photo walks. Whenever I stop to look at them, my spirit lifts. I am glad I will always have that.

Steve Backman



Photograph by Steve Backman

Harvey's instructions were for personal memories....so here goes!

I'm one of Elsa and Harvey's Franklin Street neighbors. In the mid-eighties, while Elsa spent long hours in her basement office organizing negatives, writing emails, and developing her wonderful website, I was across the street in my office, writing my dissertation. We'd often end our separate "work days" by walking outside to catch each other up on news. We'd yak about anything and everything and usually laugh ourselves silly.

As the years passed our gab-fests became more productive; I started helping with simple tasks related to the many projects Elsa always had going. By the time I retired from academia in 2011 we'd developed a solid working relationship that involved daily phone calls, emails, texts and visits. As I was very much involved with Elsa's day-to-day activities she decided to bestow on me the title of "Special Assistant to Elsa Dorfman" – We both found this very amusing. Being Elsa's "special assistant" was an amazing ride - my learning curve was steep and I had the good fortune to meet many wonderful people.

Here are some of my favorite recollections:

- I still hear her greeting me each day as I walked in to 607 Franklin Street - "Mahgoh darling!"
- Early on Elsa asked me to check over one of her business emails just to make sure she'd responded adequately to all the issues; I automatically started "correcting" what I assumed were typos. I'm sure most of you here remember how quirky Elsa's emails were – now try to picture Elsa informing me that we really weren't concerned with things like spelling, punctuation, and formal sentence structure.
- In the hours we spent together in her Framing Studio I'd occasionally ask about her supply-purchasing patterns (e.g., "Elsa, why are you ordering 500 hundred tiny bubble-wrap bags that don't fit anything that's here?"). Elsa's standard reply was always "Hahvey taught me to do this." (And here's a timely update: several days ago Harvey proudly justified his order of a new supply of very large bubble-wrap bags by saying "you can never have too much bubble-wrap.")
- Sometimes Elsa and I would take a break from work and go on field trips. In Cambridge, usually on Sundays, we'd walk to local open houses because Elsa simply loved seeing how other people lived. We also took a few memorable road trips around New England, including one hilarious overnigher that led us to Middlebury, Vermont. We arrived at sister Janie's home, unannounced, on the day Elsa knew sister Sandy would be visiting. Both Janie and Sandy just couldn't believe their eyes because, as they put it, "Ellie never leaves Cambridge!" Elsa constantly talked about the members of her family and her many friends – she loved everyone fiercely and was proud of everyone's accomplishments.
- While there is no way of knowing the exact number of Polaroid portraits Elsa took in her 955 Mass Ave studio it was thousands upon thousands. She never grew tired of the big camera, and each and every time she unpeeled one of her portraits she'd exclaim "it's a miracle!"
- Elsa loved collaborative work and did everything she could to make it easy for others to use her photographs. Maybe a decade or so ago a German PhD student asked permission to include material from THE HOUSEBOOK in her thesis on photo diaries; Elsa was utterly thrilled to receive a copy of the dissertation – in German - that credited her with creating the one of the first examples of photo-journalism.

During Elsa's last years she became more dependent on others. She increased her efforts to gloss over memory lapses but she knew she was declining. I'll never forget the day, as we were at the DR table (sometime in fall 2017?), when she quietly asked: "Mahgoh, what's going to happen to me?" Such a

poignant moment! My response was simple: “Elsa, don’t worry – you’ll continue to live here in your house and Harvey will take care of you. And I’ll help Harvey take care of you.” And that is what happened.

As you all know, Harvey shouldered myriad responsibilities and dealt with mounting challenges as he cared for Elsa during her last years in their beloved Franklin Street home. Throughout, family and friends joined together to provide support and to help preserve her legacy.

As documented in Errol Morris’s wonderful tribute film “THE B-SIDE” Elsa’s portraits are found all over Cambridge and way beyond. Elsa’s paper archive – which includes early diary selections, wide-ranging newspaper columns, scholarly articles and an astounding collection of letters is in Harvard’s Houghton Library. Important examples of both Elsa’s Polaroid work and her earlier black and white photography are now in the permanent collection at the MFA, and Elsa’s entire photographic archive (including over 5,000 original Polaroid portraits (and many more related replica prints), close to 400 vintage b&w prints and over 100,000 b&w negatives) is now at MIT. Elsa, I’m certain you would agree that the real “miracle” is that your life’s work is now permanently and safely preserved.

Margot Kempers

“I Remember Elsa”

My Memories of Elsa are vivid because she was vivid. Her unforgettable laugh still rings sometimes in me. Elsa was vivid in her emotions and in her intellect. And she was direct, in a way that reached inside of you some, and was warm, in a way that made her a cozy thing.

“Why not wear this color with that?” “Why not talk openly about this or that aspect of sex?”? “Why not ask that famous poet this question?” “If there’s going to be a burlesque show, why not have the men as well as the women in it be naked?” That’s what Elsa was like, the way I remember her.

Her openness, her curiosity, her readiness for the new, all made her a very sympathetic person to talk to. You felt that she delighted in your differences or your different experience from hers. She would laugh and laugh.

How can we not miss her? She was so engaging and so much fun! She thought your difference of opinion was just hilarious and you’d stay up late into the night talking with her and Harvey, having a marvelous time.

She had a sense of outrage too and she could be incisive and blunt in her assessment of people. Put another way, her openness, which had something of the childlike in it, was not to be confused with superficiality or an inability to confront a person or an idea.

In her photographic studio, she had a deceptively off-handed way of arranging her subjects in front of her giant camera. She was casual enough so they might think she was not really paying attention to their facial expression and body position. She was paying attention. Especially since practically speaking, she had to get it right the first or certainly the second time: that film for the big camera was bulky and expensive. And she could only take so many shots of any given subject anyways because what she was looking for was fleeting and her subjects would only remain spontaneous and unselfconscious for a little while.

Like most of us, who also only be patient, spontaneous and unselfconscious for so long in this mortal life that also only lasts a little while.

With love for Elsa and love for all the assembled I sign,

Jonathan Richman

I am so happy to be with everyone here tonight. Weren't we all so lucky to have had Elsa, Ellie in our lives. Tonight, I would like to talk a little about her before she was the darling of the Boston Globe and the star of Errol Morris' wonderful B-Side film. I would also like to emphasize the fact that Elsa represented for me the circular nature of lives and the interconnection of relationships, and we all know how keen Elsa was about relationships. Tonight, I believe was a testimony to this.

The first time I heard of Elsa was in 1948 when I was 9, having transferred to the William Lloyd Garrison Elementary School in Roxbury. I heard of this vibrant, engaging person who lived in Nazing Court and how she stood out from the rest of the elementary school students during those days. Ellie Dorfman, who was she? I thought. Feeling shy I never did learn more about this young person until I received a letter from Tufts in 1955 informing me that as an incoming freshman at Jackson my roommate would be Elsa Dorfman. Oh my God, I thought, how is this going to work. With great trepidation I began one of the most wonderful friendships in my life. With warmth and vivaciousness, Elsa welcomed me into her world and what a world that came to be. We roomed together three years at Tufts, each spending out junior year off campus, she in France and me in Oregon only to come back together to share our differing adventures and complete our final year. I learned so much from Elsa ranging from evaluating all the chocolate shops between Somerville and Cambridge to learning about Renata Tebaldi, the opera singer and Eugene O'Neil's Long Days' Journey into Night. As my maid of Honor at my wedding she wore a dress she had designed from a fashion in Elle Magazine. Yes, Elsa in high fashion and did she ever look beautiful. One of my favorite stories about Elsa took place during our senior year in college. We were both taking a History of the Middle East with Dr. Abbot, an authority on the Koran. One day as Dr. Abbot was describing the differences between the Shiites and the Sunnis, Elsa raised her hand and asked: "Dr. Abbot, Dr. Abbot can you tell us how it must have felt for the women to have had to wear the burqa?" I think that Dr. Abbot was quite taken aback, and I remember wondering how she could ask a question like that in the middle of a political discussion. It is only after, when thinking about the question, I realized what an Ellie question that was. She was not interested in the details of politics but the reality of the experience for the person and this reflected in her amazing photographs as she tried to capture each person's individual experience. Even during my early years as a parent, it was Elsa who bought the kids' first copy of Goodnight Moon, introduced us all to Maurice Sendak and shared a copy of a book she helped write while at the Boston Children's Hospital, "What to Do When There is Nothing to Do?"

To say the least she was unique. As I said in the beginning, my history with her has a certain circular aspect to it. Long before Elsa got so sick, she introduced me to her beautiful future daughter-in-law Annette, who with Isaac, Sarah and Seth have become an integral part of my present life, having moved across the street from where I presently live. Was that an accident or did the inimitable Elsa have something to do with it?

Gail Gordon

Hello!

My name is Abigail Congdon.

My husband, Joe Azrack and I, are glad to be among you, with Harvey, Isaac, Annette and the children, for this celebration of our wonderful and memorable friend Elsa.

I met Elsa in the autumn of 1985 as I wandered through the just-opened and very empty galleries at the new Charles Square in Cambridge with my 2 small children, Nick and Adeline.

As we passed numerous empty shiny white glass enclosures, a woman in a colorful dress, sneakers, and glasses in front of a big smile popped out of the only occupied space, looked us up and down and said "Hi! Would you like to have your picture taken?"

We were instantly embraced in Elsa's bright warmth and enthusiasm as she ushered us into her budding gallery and showed us her pride and joy, a bulky wooden large format Polaroid camera, saying, "It's one of only 3 in the world".

Within weeks we were back, having a secret photograph taken for Joe as a surprise. I brought the kids, as firmly requested, in the clothes they'd worn all day in school and day care: jeans and ragged t-shirts, muddy boots, dirty hands and uncombed hair. "Perfect!" said Elsa.

This was the beginning of our 30-year friendship, and a tradition of family portraits taken over decades... of the beloved dog, the Sorel boots, new car keys and track shoes, which document the passage of time in our lives as we look at these images now.

Our last photograph was taken in 2011 with our daughter's fiancé, who she would marry the next day. Greedily, we hoped for more as babies and a daughter in law arrived, but Elsa said she was no longer able. It was a poignant moment for both of us.

My memories of Elsa are of one of the warmest, unique, focused, and funny friends I've ever had. Her devotion to her craft for decades of documenting willing humans in as close to their natural state as possible - "be you! wear your watch! bring the canary and the gerbil!" was always inspirational in that period of creeping conformity.

We all wish Elsa were still with us and we were having lunch, again, at Cremaldi's.

Thank you, Harvey, and family, for bringing us all together today to remember our wonderful Elsa.

Abigail Congdon

As with many of those gathered here, either in person or in spirit from afar like myself, I was fortunate enough to work at 617 Franklin St. -- Elsa and Harvey's "Cambridge outpost" -- for a few formative years after graduating from college. On my daily approach, I was first welcomed by the glow of their HOME neon which hangs in the kitchen window, a blue rectangle framing red capital letters fashioned in the style of the once ubiquitous OPEN signs which hung in storefronts to beckon the public in. Upon entering the front door, I would be greeted invariably by Elsa as she sat at her desk in the front sitting room, typically wrapped in chunky knitwear, combing through her morning correspondence. Having worked various jobs since, I marvel at how special this beginning to my day was, to be embraced in this simple yet loving way every morning. For Elsa, these quotidian loving gestures were manifold. She offered me her many specialty teas when I needed an afternoon pickmeup, introduced me to the wonders of arnica oil to soothe body aches, and generously shared anecdotes of her days as a young secretary at Grove Press, where she met Allen Ginsburg and the rest of the Beat milieu. With Elsa there was always plenty of time. Time to chat. Time to look (particularly at photographs). Time to discover oneself and one's vocation. The fact that she hadn't handled a camera until her late 20s was itself proof that, despite the increasingly frenetic pace of our modern condition, there. was. simply. no. rush. It is not surprising that Elsa's patience and love translated into her work as well. Photography can often be an aggressive practice. Shooting. Taking. A paparazzi-like hunt or sly voyeuristic capture in which the subject is rendered object and the man behind the lens is manipulating all. Elsa introduced me to an altogether maternal approach to image-making, from the manner in which she engaged and relaxed her sitters to the very physical and birth-like moment of extruding her 20x24" prints from her massive camera. I was lucky to witness several of these creations in person, each occasion as thrilling as the first. Elsa's creative energy was expansive. She permitted and encouraged all those around her to participate in her projects as well as embrace their own potential to live and create as humans should and must. Quite simply, to be in Elsa's presence was liberating. It is no exaggeration for me to say that I am the person I am today thanks to Elsa. Every day I carry her spirit with me as I move -- as she always reminded us -- "Onwrld."

Timothy Christian Moore

Nancy Meader:

Abbott and I met in Paris in the fall of 1957 and became friends with Elsa when she and I were both 20 years old. For a few weeks Ellie and I shared a room at the Grand Hotel des Balcons before she left for Brussels to work at the American pavilion at the 1958 World's Fair. More than ten years passed before we saw Ellie again. Abbott and I were married, spent two years in Colorado, moved to central Maine and gave birth to three children. In the early 1970's we renewed our friendship and had many wonderful visits at the Flagg Street house. What a generous host she was, welcoming all five of us into her home. One of my favorite passages in the Housebook was Ellie's reflection on having children or not: "Any child I had would be in nursery school when Darmon Meader was in college." And it came true. Darmon was in college when Isaac turned three. We continued to visit after Isaac was born and they moved to the big houses on Franklin Street. Ellie and Harvey were very supportive of our work, buying Abbott's paintings and my pottery and commissioning ceramic heads which hung for years in their dining room. Our two daughters went to college in the Boston area, so we'd drive down often to visit. We are honored to have been part of the Housebook and to have photos Elsa took on the big Polaroid: one of my 85-year-old father when he stayed at their house, and photos of all three children with their partners before they were married.

Jenn Meader:

Our family visits to see Ellie in "the big city" during the 1970's were childhood adventures I looked forward to with eager anticipation. For one thing, it was wonderfully reassuring to enter into the warmth and familiarity of a home as artsy, eclectic, cluttered, and lived in as my artist family's rustic Maine farmhouse. Entering Ellie's Flagg Street home as a somewhat shy and introverted kid, I was completely awestruck. I hung onto Ellie's every story and loved being enveloped into her warmth and positive energy. I came to understand and admire that like my mom, Ellie was a woman who was unafraid to be different and step outside society's norms and expectations. I credit Ellie with encouraging me to apply to her alma mater, Tufts University. She wrote a glowing letter of recommendation, took a photo of me on her classic couch, and in the fall of 1982, I began my Tufts career, where I knew I'd be ok because that's where Ellie went to school, and she turned out great! A favorite memory is sleeping on the floor upstairs in my sleeping bag at Ellie's, completely mesmerized watching the shadows from passing headlights move up the walls and expand across the ceiling. The "Cambridge Symphony" of honking horns, revving motors, and distant sirens was remarkably soothing, and so different from the rural sounds of crickets and the occasional train rumbling by my house in the middle of the night. Then, hearing the boisterous and lively voices from the grownups below, Ellie's laughter unfailingly ascended above all other sounds. Clearly the most comforting good night melody of all.

Abbott Meader:

I will just add a few thoughts. I think of Elsa's honesty, how she believed in it, and lived it. You see it in her vast body of work. Elsa clearly loved people - who they were and what they were. Real people involved in honest moments which Elsa's camera could lift out of time for us to contemplate. She could spot those often subtle moments and bring them into focus. I believe she saw our lives as a continuous act of creation wherein startlingly poignant and telling expressions of it might appear at any moment or place. She embraced it all and encouraged us to have faith in who we are. I know that I would, after a family visit with Elsa, leave with a revitalized belief in myself and my work. A gift from Elsa, a truly splendid human being, and what we shared together is not gone. The love will always remain.

I met Elsa in 1968 when I was a Technical Writer at Cambridge Computer Associates, a consulting company founded by Victor Oppenheimer, who is here today. We hired Elsa to be our Editor. Elsa and I were not only colleagues, we became good friends and champions of each other.

When Elsa was preparing her show at City Hall the summer of 1971, I mounted and framed the photographs. When I took a course in documentary filmmaking at MIT, I asked Elsa to be the subject of a 10-minute film, my class project. She was a little uncertain about being on the “other” side of the lens. (Errol, I prepared her.) The film’s World Premier (and only public showing) was as the short accompanying Dracula at the Orson Welles Theatre’s Midnight Matinee on June 16, 1973.

Elsa inspired me to start a business in Harvard Square, called The Big Picture, where we created poster-sized blow ups on demand. Elsa had discovered the Itek machine that enlarged and printed images in seconds, without a darkroom. Elsa was convinced it was a goldmine.

Elsa and I were pregnant together; our children played together and have remained friends over four decades.

When I moved to New York, Elsa pointed out a building just a few steps from her apartment and said, “You should live there!” A week later an apartment in that building became available, so of course I bought it. Elsa’s spirit imbues my apartment. I awaken to my Elsa photo wall and wear my Elsa Dorfman apron under the Julia poster that oversees my kitchen.

Elsa was a beloved friend, always bringing out the best in people. It was her special gift, her superpower. On Jan 5, 2016, a NYT article announced Elsa’s retirement. I sent her an email:

Dear Ellie, Here is my tribute to you:

You are not only one of the best friends anyone could have, but you have been that way to everyone you've ever photographed. I remember so many years ago, in Harvard Square, when voyeurs would shoot photos of the [so-called] "freaks", you always introduced yourself, learned the person's name, and asked for permission. You were so polite and showed such respect. I envied your ability to like people so much. Especially since you're an oldest daughter, which in my experience, sets one up for feelings of superiority.

Thank you for being you, for being my friend, for having a baby when I had one, for sharing lifetimes with me.

Harvey, thank you for helping me to visit Elsa during her final six months.

Especially for arranging a phone call in April, two years ago, so I could say “Happy Birthday!” to Elsa, and we could say “Goodbye” to each other.

Ilene H Lang

The first time I saw Elsa's amazing photographs was in 1986, I was walking down Mount Auburn Street in Cambridge and saw several of Elsa's stunning 20 x 24 photographs on display in a building window visible from the street. I was instantly drawn to photos and reached out to her immediately to ask her to take pictures of my two sons. It was the beginning of what became an enduring, loving, friendship for all of us.

Elsa took photographs of my family multiple times, and it was always such a treat spending time with her. She was such a warm and loving person. She had a way of making everyone feel comfortable and feel good about themselves. I was so enamored with her photographs that I purchased gift certificates for photo shoots, for my sons' school auctions. I like to think that this exposure helped to put Elsa on the map.

My family and I were deeply honored to be invited by Elsa to do a final photoshoot with her before she retired. When we arrived at her studio, we discovered that our family photo shoot was being filmed by the famous documentary filmmaker, Errol Morris as part of The B-Side documentary.

My family and I cherish these memories and are grateful to have known Elsa. She will always be in our hearts.

Barbara F. Lee

Some thoughts about Elsa

Affirmation is a theme throughout Dorfman's work. In her self-portraits a strong woman looks at the camera with resolve, her hand almost always on the cable release (declaring her professional life), picturing herself often with others, showing the value of being close to friends and family. In her portraits of others, friends and family, the composition is the same: frontal, figures captured in the in-between world of formal studio portrait and family snapshot. Subjects expressing their sense of self -- maximum comfort and ease of being within and of the world.

In her self-portraits she asks, "How can I assert who I am in relation to others without losing myself?" In her portraits of others she asks, "How can I assert that generosity to others is the healing balm of the world?"

In a portrait there are always three presents: the photographer, the subject, and the space in between. To create great portraits is not just to see the figure, but to share a space, and to make a connection such that the space between the artist and the subject becomes part of the image too. Great portraits are not about depicting form but expressing connections to a lived experience.

Elsa was the most empathetic of artists, a true seer who found the inner life of her subjects. She was proximate to her subjects, but she was reciprocal too, allowing her subjects to feel a connection to her, no matter how big the camera that stood in between.

Elsa is, to my mind, a great folklorist, and I mean that in two senses: that she identifies the ways in which individuals identify shared values that connect them to the past and connect them to others. Through that identification, they create community. Folklorists listen to the cadence of personal expression, identify the ways self is expressed in relation to the experience of those within their community. They continually link the visual worlds to the spoken and written worlds in ways that remind us that creativity is the affirmation of life.

I think of the loss that came with Elsa's passing: wife, mother, mentor, believer in possibility, chaser of dreams. I can only imagine the loss, but I also know this: that artists leave an imprint that encourages us to reach optimistically for the future. Put yourself out there. Assert that the way you see, and feel can be a beacon for others. Allow your example to release something – a potential in the world. Elsa did that, for all of us in this room, and countless others. Elsa was an artist for our time and for our future. Her work will endure.

It was our privilege to present an exhibition of Elsa's self-portraits at the MFA just over a year ago. We stood at her side, gave her a soapbox from which she could speak through her voice. Except, for Elsa, it wasn't a soapbox, of course. It was her studio, stuff all around, her standing at the same level as her subjects, sharing and creating a space together. And it felt just right.

May her work always bring joy. And may it encourage us to be who we are.

Matthew Teitelbaum
Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

I met Elsa in the early 1990s, not long after I started working at the MFA, and always appreciated her warm personality and the playfulness in her work. When compared with all the other photographers whom I knew, she always struck me as being in a class of her own.

In 1995, Cliff Ackley, the former head of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs—who will speak after me—organized a show of Elsa’s photographs. As a junior curator, I was his assistant on that project. The exhibition surveyed Elsa’s various themes, and in the text panel, Cliff channeled her wit by quoting her famous *Portrait Statistics*, such as:

- number of years portrait photographer: 30
- number of years using Polaroid 20x24: 15
- number of portraits taken on the Polaroid 20x24: 2393
- largest group photographed: 26 people, 4 generations
- age of youngest person: 14 days
- oldest person: 94
- number of sets of twins: 5
- number of triplets: 0
- different pets in one family portrait: 6
- most cats in a family portrait: 4
- most birds: 3
- most dogs: 3
- most frequently photographed breed: Labrador Retriever
- number of people wearing t-shirts: 437
- people wearing baseball caps: 426
- most frequent prop: soccer ball
- most men in tuxedos: 5 (one with scalpel, one with skis)
- number of clowns: 11
- couples who posed nude: 5 (one with Tobey, nineteen-pound Basenji)
- number of pregnant women: 6 (three nude, one with well-placed rose)
- tattoos: 11 (most impressive: dragon on a 9-month pregnant belly)
- and so on...

I started visiting Elsa regularly in 2017. I had heard that she was unwell, and really wanted to see her. We began to look at her archive, with the gracious help of Margot Kempers. So many pictures! I came a few more times, and our discussions led to talk of a gift to the Museum and to a possible second exhibition. I took lots of snapshots as memory aides. I discovered new aspects of her work that were thrilling to see.

I wanted to do a show that was different from what Cliff had done, and ultimately, we landed on the idea of her self-portraits for our show. This idea came to the fore in a conversation with Elsa’s friend the photography scholar Mary Panzer, a great advocate of Elsa’s work. I am so glad that we chose this as our theme as we could not only feature a new way of looking at Elsa’s photography, but we could also pay tribute to her as a person which, as we all know, is one of her major contributions to the field and to our community.

Elsa began her exploration into self-portraiture in the late 1960s. At the time, she was working with a small-format camera and black-and-white film. She created a project documenting the many friends who visited her Flagg Street home. This project had a strong conceptual base: an exploration of aspects of her day-to-day life. Many of these images were included in *Elsa’s Housebook: A Woman’s Photojournal*, which she published in 1974. As described in Russet Lederman and Olga Yatskevich’s recent book on

women's photobooks titled *What They Saw: Historical Photobooks by Women*, "Elsa's Housebook is a feminist publication that documents the rich social life of a young woman in the 1970s."

In 1980, when Elsa began working with the Polaroid 20x24, her first photograph was, quite naturally, a self-portrait. Taken as a whole, Elsa's extended series of images of herself made throughout her career are part of the broad conversation in our field around how photography intersects with the concept of time. They also reveal her straightforward manner, her buoyant spirit, and her sense of whimsy. They say so much about who she was and why we were all so drawn to her.

James Leighton, who was then a research associate in my department, worked with me on the show. We could never have exhibited all of Elsa's self-portraits, as she made too many to count. Many show her holding the long shutter-release cable, a reference to her decades-long connection to photography and to her beloved Polaroid process. Despite the cumbersome nature of her camera, all 200 pounds of it, and the length of time for set up, she was able to create images that had surprising spontaneity and freshness.

James and I loved all the photographs we found, and it was not easy to make the exhibition selection. Often Elsa's self-portraits commemorate special occasions—birthdays, New Year's Day, visits of special friends—and many celebrate her family. Our selection included some of these as well as pictures of Elsa alone. Like in all her work, every self-portrait was disarmingly casual in presentation and always accompanied by a descriptive title in the lower margin, written in her large, cursive hand.

Elsa's ebullience, apparent in her distinctive handwriting and so exuberantly conveyed in her photographs, is well-known to those of us who are here tonight. I am very glad that Erroll Morris made that a dominant theme in his film *The B-Side*. I want to thank Errol for letting the MFA include clips from *The B-Side* in our exhibition. Those clips took our show to another level.

I would also like to express our sincerest thanks to Lang Wheeler and Kathy Metcalfe, and to Abigail Congdon and Joseph Azrack, for their very gracious and strong financial support of our exhibition. Such support for exhibitions is inordinately vital to our institution. Thank you.

And I would like to express the MFA's deepest appreciation to Harvey for establishing an endowment in Elsa's name, and to Elizabeth Power Robison for reaching out to Elsa and Harvey's friends on our behalf for contributions. For the MFA to possess a fund to take care of her photographs and to preserve Elsa's legacy is very significant and meaningful. It is rare for a donor of artworks to realize that taking care of those artworks costs money. We are enormously grateful to everyone who sent in funds for this purpose. Thank you to all.

Anne Havinga
Estrellita and Yousuf Chair of Photography

From 1987-1998 all Polaroid Sales Reps from the Business+Professional division attended a one or 2-week orientation class with other new hires. Lots of bonding took place during that time, but it was the culminating Class Picture that brought so much pride to each participant as they returned to headquarters every year. Polaroid reps were a loyal bunch (we all loved it there) and it filled my heart with joy as they eagerly looked for "their class" in the gallery of photos hanging at the Training Center, sharing stories and remembering earlier times, seeing how much they had grown or changed. For many, the 'Class Picture' was much more than a picture - it was a touchstone that signified a treasured life experience.

I was a long-time admirer of Elsa's work but had never considered asking her to photograph my family. My secret was that I hated being photographed and couldn't bear seeing pictures of myself. That all changed in 1986 when I joined Polaroid and got up the nerve to commission Elsa for a 20x24 portrait of my family.

Sheepishly, I disclosed my distaste for being photographed. A little later, Elsa asked me if I'd like to come along to see the big camera while she stopped by her studio (then across from the MFA). I jumped at the chance and was fascinated by this magical picture machine and Elsa's unbounded enthusiasm. Elsa casually asked me to step in front of the camera to take a test shot of her new film, and I unwittingly obliged.

As the 20x24 photograph emerged, I had a feeling of leaving my body and wept (tears of shock?), seeing so much of ME staring back at me. Could this be me? Elsa, in the most casual, practical way, confidently affirmed with great joy that YES, this was me RIGHT NOW, as the camera saw it. She did not allow me to make up some story about what this meant, or if what we saw was worthy or unworthy - it was a moment in time, and it was beautiful, all of it - the whole flawed, awesome picture. In that moment I chose to believe her -- how could I NOT? She spoke the truth and I knew it, and that changed everything. I began the road to accepting myself as a whole person, imperfections included.

For years now I have been coaching other women who thought they had to be perfect to be loved, helping them see what Elsa's eye and camera saw - the shadow, the light, the whole beautiful mess. And our home and family are graced with several 20x24 photos taken throughout the years, treasures by any definition.

Thank you, Elsa - I miss seeing you on the streets of Harvard Square but maybe I'll catch a glimpse one of these days.

Katie Carlone

Love

Heard her voice today
All bright with sense and reason
Question wonder or answer
No matter
I always heard the true from Ellie
I knew her as Ellie
I knew her as true and rare
Guessing everyone did

Huntington “Hunt” Block

Dear Ellie,

You have passed from this life, but not from my heart and mind. My memories go back to when we met, at Newton High School (there was only one then, in 1955). Both of us had moved to Newton a few years before, and we bonded immediately, each of us feeling, still, a little out of place in this new community. We shared similar interests, and we each felt very comfortable in each other's home, visiting often on Solon Street and Dudley Road. We were close to each other's parents and siblings. I still have the five tiles that your family gave me at special times of my life.

In high school, you had the special opportunity, during the summer of your Junior year, to be selected for a student exchange. You were headed to Kassel, Germany, to live with a family for a month. This took a lot of courage, it seemed to me – you, a Jewish girl, living with a German family, not that long after WWII, and the Holocaust. But our excitement was overwhelming. I can see still, in my mind's eye, the two of us talking about this adventure, and my saying to you, "Ellie, you MUST take a camera!" I remember giving you a camera – a 35mm. which was quite advanced for that time. This was the first camera you ever held in your hands! I wonder if those early photographs from the stay in Kassel were ever saved!

Of course, we all know the rest of the story as far as your experiences and growth as a photographer, reaching the pinnacle of fame and critical appreciation, a solo show at the MFA! Though my family is proud to have the large Polaroid photos, we find great pleasure in the informal shots of our young children at a birthday party or whizzing down the driveway on a tot's three-wheeler.

As the years passed, our visits together were sometimes months apart. Yet, it was as if we had just talked the day before, so easy it was to continue the conversation, talk about relationships, difficult issues we were trying to resolve, our gardening, the latest photography exhibit, the Cambridge and New York Studio, Isaac's marriage, then a grandchild.

Ellie, you will always be with me and Billy, and with our children, many of whom knew you through their own marriages and the birth of (some of) their children. I treasure our friendship. It has enriched my life.

Constance Glaser Kantar

I first met Elsa through Harvey.

He was a young lawyer working for the law firm my dad used—handling some business for dad. When he found out I was a budding photographer he introduced me to Elsa who was busking her photos (wish I had bought some) in Harvard Sq out of a shopping cart. She was also making her wonderful book Elsa's Housebook and I thought "that's what I want to do. Take pictures and put them in a book." I would see Elsa and Harvey sometimes when I walked my dog Dolly around the block. They lived on Flagg St. and I was on Putnam. Sometimes they'd be out on the porch and at least one time chatting with Allen Ginsberg. I think something about god that Harvey and Allen seemed very engaged about.

Not to humble brag, but I take a tiny, very tiny bit of credit for Elsa's 20x24 career. I was working at Polaroid at the time and Elsa called me wanting to use the big camera. Approval was six steps above my pay grade, but I gave her a name and a phone number, and she ran with it. Sprinted really. What a thing she had going with that and with a little help from in-house counsel, I imagine. I didn't see either of them much in later years, maybe Harvey at Whole Foods now and again. And always when their pal Jonathan Richman played the Middle East. But I did bring classes to Elsa's studio, always a highlight of the semester. All my Westchester-bred kids listened in amazement to Elsa. Imagine. One time I recall a rude student checked her phone for her Facebook (?) feed and Elsa laid into her big time. Students were all taken aback, but I wasn't. Elsa was always Elsa. No one was about to change her.

Although her art practice was portraits, simple on the base level, they were really a document of a particular culture at a particular time. Cambridge folks in the 80s, 90s, and 00s. As a failed history student, I could really appreciate that.

Henry Horenstein Photography

<http://www.horenstein.com/>

MY BRILLIANT FRIEND

We met when we were 9. Our mothers had a mutual best friend. We went to high school together, where our friendship really began that lasted for the rest of our lives. I called her Ellie, so I will her that today. From the start, I found her fearless, breathtaking in her conviction that if you wanted to try something new, or something you were inventing, you could do it. That great confidence miraculously extended also to everyone she loved.

I'm sure I'm not alone in saying there's NO ONE like my friend Ellie. You'd think there was little we didn't know about each other, or about our families. But there's always more to know about someone you love. I'm still learning.

When we were 28, both living in Cambridge, Ellie introduced me to the Grolier Book Shop, the poetry bookstore that was a next of layabouts who wrote poetry. She had already befriended Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov and especially the crotchety old owner of the Grolier, Gordon Cairnie, all lifelong friendships. Neither of us was sure what we wanted "to do."

I'd say she changed my life, but it was more than that – my life's unimaginable without her. Ellie believed in her friends, an unshakeable kind of belief.

We often agreed that 28 is the turning point in life, as it was for her. That's when a colleague where she worked handed over his Hasselblad to her and she began her irresistible, extraordinary, absolutely idiosyncratic life as a photographer.

In Errol Morris' delicious film, "B-Side," she says it was "unthinkable" in those days for "a nice Jewish girl" who wasn't married not to live with her parents. "So, I had to have a *thing*." How brilliantly counter-intuitive for that nice girl to find her thing, as she did, in the shabby old poetry bookshop she called "a beacon of sanity," and to find its poet-denzens, outsiders all, perfect subjects.

From the Grolier and out into Mass Ave in Harvard Square, thanks to that camera-lending colleague, she negotiated the loan of a Stop & Shop shopping cart (when she was growing up, her father worked for Stop & Shop) and filled it with her amazing black & white photos of charming street people in Harvard Square, and lounge lizards at the bookstore, of Bob Dylan teaching Ginsberg some guitar licks, Robert Lowell in the Grolier. And she wheeled the wagon onto the plaza in front of Harvard's Holyoke Center on Mass Ave in her "fun fur" in all weather and peddled her pictures. She a legal writ, via Harvey, telling the cops she was entitled to set up shop in the Square (her First Amendment right!) and sell photographs.

Professors and kids and passerby snatched them up for less than the price of today's *lattes*. I hope most of them realize what treasures they have. I hope they took good care of them. Before the construction of Edwin Land's amazing Polaroid 20" by 24" camera, her Hasselblad was documenting the bohemian life of the Square in all its beautiful messy transient un-Ivy vitality.

I love what Mark Mirsky called the "warm glow of her courage." Her courage has imagination, wit, and inimitably style – it's the courage of an original. And it's encouraging.

She was ready for that huge camera, and it didn't just come to her. Her intuition told her she'd love making pictures on that scale. That's how she worked, the generous girl who'd left college and the low expectations of our youth, got a secretarial job in New York, and met and was loved by great poets now gone, alive still in their works and in her images.

Then she came back to a life she'd invent for herself in Cambridge, not far from the suburb we'd both fled. Who else would have thought to rent the gigantic camera all to herself, to rent a spanking new studio, all without funding, and for decades to make an incandescent portrait of our time, and our places in it?

Those portraits of Allen, the big camera's saturated colors so rich, are completely alive, animated with his love for the camera, and for its operator. In the 40 by 80 camera she used a few times, Ginsberg gets to pose standing naked, in front of the life-sized suit-and-tied Allen. Trusting himself, trusting the photographer. It's a Dorfman masterpiece.

The giant self-portraits of Ellie, Harvey and Isaac, of their grandchildren.

All her portraits are gaily, naturally, informed by her love of people, her compassion and respect for suffering, by her pleasure in the giddy pleasure of her subjects, for families and loners. All those shoots, radiant occasions of celebration, treasures.

"My work is about affection," she said. And "The camera is like a fork or a spoon (*what? What?*), it's an instrument you eat your soup with; it's not the soup." *Ohhh...* An artistic force of nature, she wasn't falsely modest, nor arrogant, but we know her portraits, her life itself, are works of genius.

One of my favorite moments in Errol Morris's wonderful film about her is actually a bit of home movie footage. Maybe 10 years old, exuberant, radiant, joyful, she is roller skating with every confidence she won't fall down, beaming at the accomplishment, the sheer joy of motion.

"There'll never be film like this again, never, never." Rueful, philosophical, upbeat in pink polka dot leggings or holding a dozen black birthday balloons, she's always been my inspiration. And the camera – as they say – loved her! So did we all.

Gail Mazur

In 2008 my parents both turned 60 years old and also celebrated their 35th wedding anniversary. My three siblings and I took it upon ourselves to plan a special celebration: a weekend trip for the family to NYC packed with all sorts of fun activities and surprises for my mom and dad. As we brainstormed and researched ideas, I remembered that my father had always expressed an interest in being photographed by a local celebrity photographer who specialized in large format polaroid images. An internet search quickly led me to Elsa's website, and after being amazed by her work, I was even more amazed to see that she not only lived in Cambridge, and not only in my neighborhood, but on the very same block I live on!

Giddy with serendipitous excitement I picked up the phone to call, expecting to leave a message, but was instead surprised to be lucky enough to reach Elsa directly. I was immediately greeted with her warmth, enthusiasm, and joyfulness. I explained who I was and why I was calling, and minutes later found myself down the block in Elsa's studio, totally taken in by her work and persona. We eventually got down to business and scheduled a photo session at Elsa's New York studio, but for me, more importantly, it was the beginning of a really special neighborly friendship that meant a lot to me over the following years.

The photo session itself was an incredible treat for the whole family. Our family went out for brunch beforehand, and the "kids" gave my parents a hint card for our next activity which said only one word: "CLICK!". My mother and father immediately locked wide-eyes and exclaimed in unison "Elsa Dorfman!!!!" My father especially could not finish eating fast enough, he was so looking forward to it! Elsa wrangled our motley crew with grace and ease, professionalism, and an easy humor. Both the memory and the amazing portrait are so treasured by my entire family, particularly in light of my father's untimely and unexpected passing later that year.

In the years following our first meeting I felt honored to continue to get to know Elsa and to consider her my friend. Whether it was meeting at Petsi's for a cup of tea, a chance encounter on the block, or just an exchange of emails, every interaction with Elsa was imbued with creativity, positivity, and a sense of fun and endless possibility. I am sure that are others in Elsa's life who can capture her unique essence in words much more eloquently than I can. But I can say that I truly miss that essence, I will try to carry it on in my own life in whatever small way I can, and hopefully pass a bit onto my daughters as well.

Alison Hammer

In early February 2020, when we were anticipating with great excitement the launch of Ellie's show here at the MFA, Ellie sent me a draft of the remarks she had prepared to give at the show's opening reception planned for March 16th. The draft began:

“This MFA showing of a selection of my self-portraits taken on the now-legendary Polaroid 20x24 Land Camera, hand-crafted by Dr. Edwin H. Land and his crew during the 1970s initially seemed to me to be somewhat funereal.”

Ellie went on to explain how little useable film remained, even with Dan Stern's Herculean efforts to preserve the supply. She continued,

“The concept of approaching the end of one's useful life has a certain resonance for me, as I will reach my 83rd birthday five weeks from now.”

In a cruel twist of fate, rather than gather together as planned that March to celebrate Ellie's photography, we faced instead an unprecedented global pandemic that forced the temporary closing of Ellie's show and caused the cancelation of the opening reception. And on May 30, just five weeks after her 83rd birthday, Ellie was gone. Funereal indeed. And here it is nearly two years later that we are able to gather together to remember her at her beloved MFA. And the pandemic remains a cruel character of the narrative. Just this morning a dear friend of Ellie's called me in tears on my cellphone at our hotel to say she wouldn't be able to join us tonight. She shared that her health made her at high risk if she were to contract Covid and the latest variant circulating was causing her great worry. I assured her Ellie would have been the first to counsel her to stay at home.

Ellie is my maternal aunt. She is my mother, Jane's, oldest sister by nine years; Sandy is the middle sister between them. You may be familiar with a photo in Elsa's Housebook in which my mother is brushing my hair with vigor, and in another I am sitting between Ellie's knees on the front steps of her Flagg Street apartment. That particular photo stands out because even at the age of 4, I gravitated toward Ellie.

She understood the need to push beyond one's family and yet always remain tethered. At the memorial for my maternal grandmother, Elaine Kovitz Dorfman (*of blessed memory*), Ellie said,

“I was always perplexed by my mother. I could never figure her out. Even though she talked all the time and was very verbal, I couldn't understand her. She never satisfied me.”

Ellie marveled at Elaine's energy, her genius for friendship, her interest in people, her love of conversation and the narrative of people's lives. Ellie recognized she was a lot like her mother and yet she saw her mother's life stunted by the time in which she lived. Ellie was determined to be an independent woman. Her greatest desire was to shock her mother and to be contrarian. Her mother's mantra, “*Don't get INVOLVED. Whatever the cause, don't get involved,*” was almost a challenge to Ellie to find the cause that would rattle her mother the most. And yet, Ellie married the nice Jewish lawyer and had her wonderful son, Isaac. Her role as a wife and mother mattered more to her than her career as a photographer any day.

Ellie spoke a great deal about the relationship between mothers and daughters. She always wanted to discuss and dissect the relationship that I had with my mother. She understood having a son but she couldn't figure out the mother-daughter dynamic. One of the things Ellie loved about family photo sessions was the chance to observe these family dynamics. During my undergraduate years at Brandeis, I was fortunate to spend considerable time with Ellie working in her framing studio and assisting during sessions at 955 Mass Ave. We talked endlessly. In 2016, I had a chance to reprise my role as her studio assistant at the Telluride Film Festival when the 20x24 was trucked (along with Harvey and Ellie!) across the country for the B-Side premiere. It was on this occasion that Elsa took a portrait with me and my daughter, Leah. The three of us together – with dear friend Jonathan Richman playing his guitar. This polaroid is priceless to me.

Over the past few weeks I've been reading through my email correspondence with Ellie. All of her words written in lowercase, typos galore, and very little punctuation. Certain themes emerge when reading through decades worth of correspondence from Ellie. The main one is her flair for the dramatic. She really should have been a fiction writer. Any story in the news (especially if it was in the NYT!) prompted an imaginary scenario of doom and despair. Here's a good example from January 2013, sharing information on the LA Art Book Fair:

hi sweet liz. here is an event that looks right up yr alley.

i know yr fine. we are ok. ou wont believe it but there is a case supposedly of nanny beating in boston right now. just as, according to fb, louise is getting married. how spooky is that??? of course it has been determined that there is no such thing as shaken baby syndrome, but tell the police that. fortunately, harvey isnt involved. phew. thank gd.

harv has written a lot abt the case of aaron swartz, the computer genius who MIT and the feds were giving a hard time. He hung himself. The police and MIT went way over the line. I am sure it is on harv's articles list. u must be on it.

hope mark is fine and having fun. his work life sure seems exotic.

it is freezing here today. no matter what i do, i shiver.

i hope you have a new england visit scheduled. i cant believe how short a time isaac and annette were in la. it was lucky though. cause his firm let go abt 300 people abt a week after isaac left town. surely he wd have been one of those let go. and there arent many advt. agencies in SF.

love th inking of you in the warm air. xox. Ellie

Danger averted! 6 months later in June 2013 she writes:

Subject: was that shooter near u?

now something else to worry abt.
never mind yr madcap travels
now to worry abt school invasions.
yuck.

thinking of y ou and loving u.
xox.onward.ellie

And a month later on my birthday:

i dont understand facebook enuf to know how to reply. happy happy birthday.
i wish u were nearby. i was sooooo glad that south korean plan wasnt going to LA and that you and mark and traveller leah werent on it!!! eeeeeek. yr country hopping made it seem like anything cd be possible. So happy birthday indeed.

can u believe all that is happening in julies neighborhood????
and in ours we had the marathon bomber.

xox. and happy happy. ellie

Then actual tragedy struck in March 2014 when my brother Matt died on a reporting trip in Uganda. Honestly, I had to skip over these emails. But this one from June 2014 is so perfectly Ellie:

did i tell you that last week the nyt and the wsj BOTH had articles on heat strokes and their dangers, like stealth killers. and when i was at harvard vanguard to see the docs w/ harv. i saw that they have a FOREIGN TRAVEL medice dept.....w/ a brochure. And the brochure didnt mention the dangers of excessive heat and activity. It sd to allow 2 weeks !!!! to acclimate to excessive heat. anyhow it wd be a good project to educate the departments of travel advisory

And in July 2014 she wrote to a family group:

read article in nyt and on its web site
and see photo of white flags
on the towers of Brooklyn Bridge.

surely done by a friend of Matt.
Matt knew the structure well.
even camped out inside one of the towers.

surely done in his spirit.
NO DOUBT.
love to all in the family.

In October 2017 when she was hospitalized at Mount Auburn, I awoke to a series of frantic emails from Ellie and other messages from Margot and Annette trying to give contexts to Ellie's bad reaction to medication she had been given. Ellie's note to me is priceless, though:

Inprisoned. Locked up. Wish you cd be in charge of effort to free me. Harvey is there. Strange. Call annette and isaac. I am trying to put this on internet. Weird. I know it sounds weird.

She later wrote:

Subject: To be

Continued. If you have time to call. Or to write. I am here in hospital Imagining you a producer. Organizing the show. Onward e

The time of imagined drama had given way to real trauma. And yet her pride and love still came through. After seeing the B-Side for the first time in Telluride, I told Errol it was the greatest gift to have this film made. How many people have an Academy Award winning filmmaker create such a brilliant movie about their beloved aunt? Re-reading Ellie's emails, I realize the treasure of her words preserved in those messages. I don't know if there are many studies of aunt-niece relationships. But, I know that I am one lucky girl to have had Ellie as my eccentric aunt. She influenced so much of who I am and I hope my daughter, Leah, appreciates the wonderful gift of each of these extraordinary women from whom we descend. May Elaine and Ellie's memories be for a blessing.

Elizabeth Power Robison