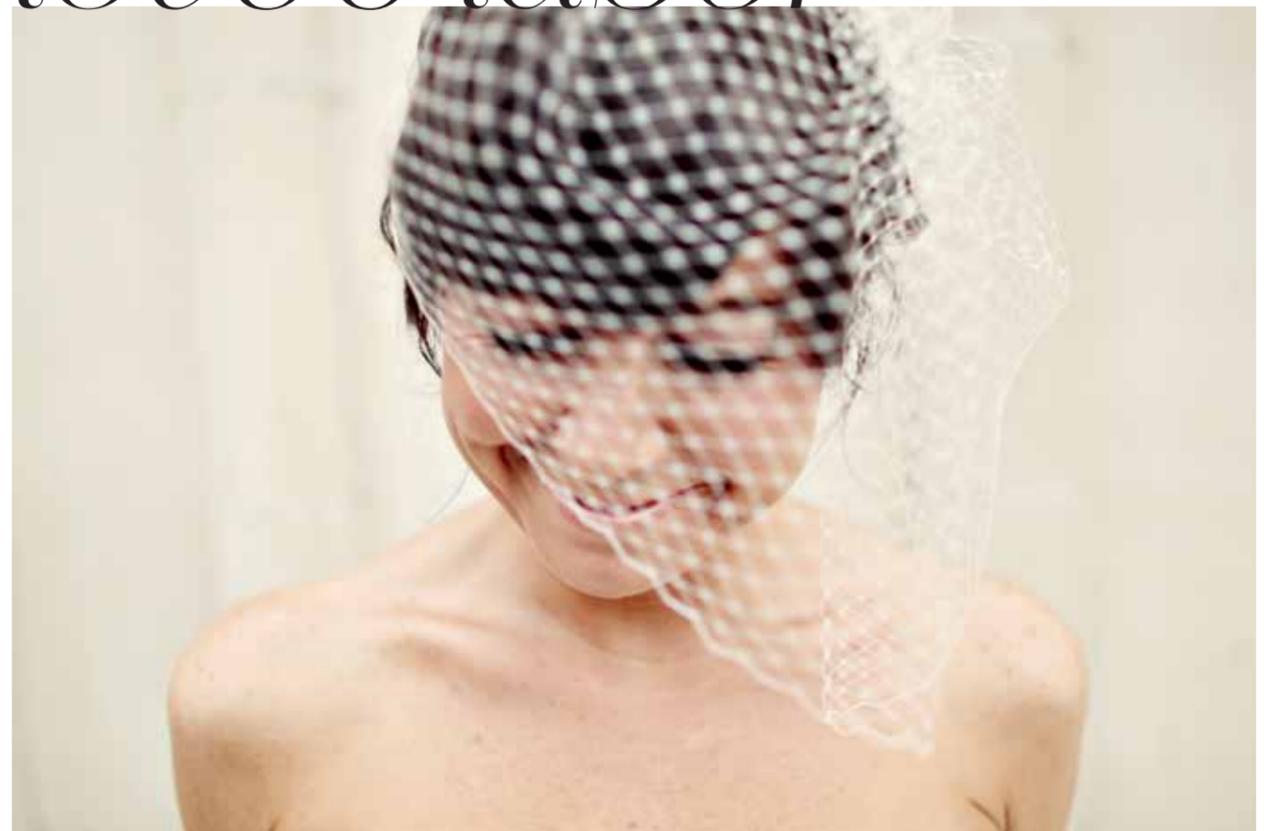




PHOTOGRAPHS & STORY BY ALISON CONKLIN

love's labor



The stark reality of losing my mother and the prospect of my children losing theirs awakened in me a new appreciation for my art and its power.

found

My mother and I sat in the kitchen together one late morning in the summer of 1994.

It was my first day working at the library and she was making me lunch before I left for my shift. She was an amazing cook — the kind of cook who baked homemade bread just to make it into croutons for the salad. I always loved that about her. She made every occasion special in this homemade goodness kind of way, whether it was for my dad and me or friends. She had so much purity and kindness in her heart for everyone.

This particular morning she was making antipasto, her Sicilian heritage in full swing as she whizzed around the kitchen chopping and prepping. She was standing by the sink when suddenly she looked over and said she didn't feel well. I looked up and in that moment she fell to the floor. I jumped to my feet, shouted her name, shouted it again. I held her head in my lap trying to remember the CPR I'd learned in a babysitting class that summer. In shock, I clumsily called my father at work and then 911.

I sat with my mother on the kitchen floor trying to revive her — begging her to wake up — for what felt like forever. That morning in July would be the last I ever spent with her.

Hours after an impossible trip in the ambulance, then being ushered into a private waiting room in the hospital, a doctor came in told us they'd done everything they could, but they could not revive her. I remember the silent drive home from the hospital with my father. What was there to say? It wasn't until we walked into the empty house and closed the door that the emotions hit. I watched my father, usually so stoic, slide down against the front door sobbing.

The days after my mother's death were filled with visits from family and friends. I was put in charge of composing the memory wall of photographs for the memorial service. I was handed boxes and boxes of photographs and contact sheets. I'd suddenly become the photographic editor of my mom's history. I started

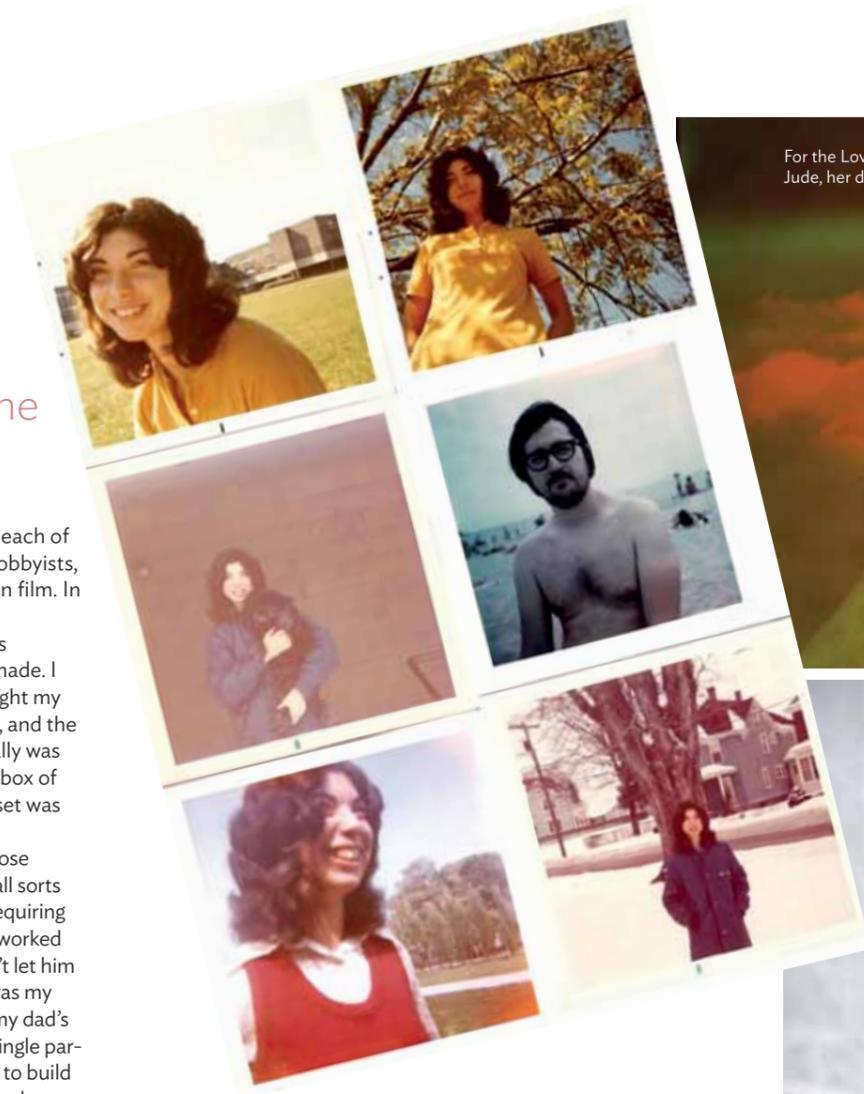
poring over the images, really studying each of them. My parents were photography hobbyists, and their lives had been immortalized in film. In that way, I was lucky.

In the days following the funeral I was obsessed with the proof sheets they'd made. I loved the outtakes, the images that caught my parents with their eyes closed, laughing, and the shots that narrated who my mom actually was everyday, who they were together. This box of photos that had sat in the back of a closet was now my most valued possession.

Over the next weeks, I couldn't get those photos out of my mind. I asked my dad all sorts of questions about his darkroom days, requiring in-depth explanations on how cameras worked and why they worked that way. I wouldn't let him get away with quick answers. Maybe it was my constant interrogation or maybe it was my dad's response to his abruptly becoming the single parent of a teenage girl, but he was inspired to build me a darkroom; he taught me how to develop film, how to enlarge photos. I fell in love with it.

I began to carry my camera everywhere and photographed everything. I'd run downstairs to the darkroom and develop it all. Watching an image come through the developer was like pure magic and I couldn't get enough of it. I didn't know it then, but in that summer that changed everything, I was using the art of photography to get me through mourning my mother.

I skated through high school, interested mostly in art and English literature. I photographed a handful of my classmates' senior portraits, along the way becoming co-editor of the yearbook. At the end of my senior year, I was hired to photograph a wedding. I'd never even been a guest at a wedding. I was terrified, but I agreed. It actually went really well; my four years of learning exposure and studying the light came together. There was something about documenting the lives of



For the Love of Family Photos: Alison's mom, Jude, her dad, John and Alison through the years.



Alison and her sons, Jonas and Moses.



others that I found so rewarding. Capturing this quintessential moment in time for my friends and first clients was a catalyst in the healing of my own heart.

I fell in love myself and got married at 20. At 23 I was divorced with a 9-month old son and another baby on the way. This new venture into single motherhood led me in the pursuit of a job that would allow me to be there for my boys and raise them like the mom I wanted to be. When my second son, Moses, was born, I started my career in photography full time. I poured my heart into it, again finding healing in documenting others' families, others' love.

A few years later I met the man I was supposed to marry. Geoff was funny and kind and most important, he loved my boys as if they were his own. We quickly tied the knot in a small, intimate wedding in Santa Barbara. Geoff also loved photography, although his practice was more newspaper-driven. A few years into our marriage we joined forces and started shooting weddings together. Our collaboration led us to photograph weddings in Mexico, Bermuda, Europe and the U.S. My photographs were being featured in every one of my favorite publications, and I felt validated in my work and in the life I had created for my family and myself.

And then, in October 2012, came another of those moments that change everything.

I sat with my knees pulled up to my chest. I knew the neurologist was talking to me, but I could only focus on the fact that now, suddenly, I had a neurologist. I was holding back tears. I remember glancing over at Geoff and two of my friends; they were watching the doctor and they looked completely horrified.

Or I should say I imagined they looked horrified. I couldn't actually see their faces. I had woken up on a Friday morning like any other, only this Friday morning I could not see. It was as if there was a gooey film blocking my vision. All I could make out were colors and large shapes.

I snapped out of my haze just in time to hear the neurologist — my neurologist — say she couldn't promise I would get my sight back once they removed the tumor, three centimeters in breadth, from my brain. And that they had to do the surgery now, as in immediately. I think I just sort of nodded at her.

She stepped out to give us time to process what we'd just been told. I had a tumor resting on my optic nerve. It needed to be removed right away. Even if the surgery was successful, my sight might not return. My mind was racing. I felt overwhelmed, terrified. Yes, blindsided. Besides being fearful for my life, I couldn't imagine life in a world



Alison's photography career includes weddings and portraiture clients, and has landed her work in publications such as Style Me Pretty, Brides and Glamour magazines.



Real moments caught from behind the camera give us an opportunity to reflect on what's truly valuable, truly important.

I couldn't see. Never again see my boys' faces? Never again see through the lens of my camera?

When my neurologist returned, I made her promise I would make it. I emphatically stated that I had to be here to see my children graduate from high school, that my mom was cheated of that opportunity, but I wanted it. I wanted to see my boys go to college and finish growing up. I wanted to spoil my grandchildren rotten. I realized of course that she couldn't promise me any of those things, but I needed to say it, needed to voice my greatest fears. The doctor squeezed

my hand and in the blink of an eye I was being prepped for brain surgery.

I was in shock as the nurses and an anesthesiologist worked around me. I gave my husband a kiss and said goodbye as I was wheeled through the doors of the operating room.

As I lay there before going under, I thought of my boys. Jonas and Moses were then 9 and 8; I'd had just under a decade with them. I was trying to stay positive, but I kept drifting to thoughts of what would happen to them if I didn't make it. I knew the pain of being a child and losing a par-

ent, and as much as I didn't want that for them, I hoped that through the pictures I'd taken of them to document their lives, they'd know how much I loved them.

Even if it came to pass that that their sense of me was only as the photographer behind the camera, I hoped they'd hear my voice shouting through the images and come to see how I'd seen them. They'd know that I was obsessed with them, that I loved them unconditionally, and that the fact that on some days they were laughing and on other days they were crying



Bath time with Alison's son Moses.

was irrelevant. I loved their goofy suds-covered faces, as well as their eyes that would swell with tears. I loved them and always would, whether or not we were together.

We know that photography gives us a way to visually capture a story. I believe it reveals as well how deeply the photographer understands her subject, and ultimately, her view of the world.

I know for me that the images of childhood are all the more powerful and certainly more telling because it was my mother who was taking the pictures. Through her photos of me, I saw how she felt about me. Through studying the images she left behind, I have gained a deeper understanding of her, of her style, of her view of the world.

I wanted no less for my boys.

And as I drifted off, I found a sense of calm in knowing my boys would be able to know me through my photography.

I woke up in a dark room. A sliver of light from the hallway illuminated the clock in the room and I just stared at it. I closed one eye then the other. I started to cry. I could actually see the numbers.

Only two people at a time were allowed to visit, so two by two my family came in to see me. Everyone's first question was "Can you see?" Being able to say "Yes!" was such a huge victory for me. "I can see" were the best three words ever!

For me, photography dramatically changed everything. Yes, life is a struggle, and yes, loss is a part of living. That's why it seems so vital to document our lives in photographs. Real moments caught from behind the camera give us an opportunity to reflect on what's truly valuable, truly important. The stark reality of losing my mother and the prospect of my children losing theirs awakened in me a new appreciation for my art and its power. ©



ALISON CONKLIN

Nationally acclaimed wedding and editorial photographer Alison Conklin's work has been featured in publications such as Philadelphia Wedding Magazine, Martha Stewart Weddings, Brides Magazine, The Knot and Glamour. Alison and her husband and business partner, Geoff, live in Emmaus, Pa. with her two children, Jonas, 12, and Moses, 11.