

Machine Learning

By Sylvia Sensiper

Before getting ready for bed, Judith took one last look at the photo of the young woman that filled her computer screen. Gazing directly ahead, she was clearly engaged with the person on the other side of the camera, a pose seen in many prints from the early 1900s. She wore a large hat and had a hand on her hip, body language that conveyed assurance and was matched by her confident half-smile. Judith had just edited the photo and given the woman a husband, a young man whose image she had found in a portrait dated from a similar time period. Carefully, she had edged the editing tool around the male figure, selected copy, and then, after gently positioning the likeness in the frame close to the young woman, clicked paste. Tomorrow, Judith thought to herself, I will give them a child, a little boy she was sure she could find among the family portraits that had three or four children of around the same age.

Judith had many historic photographs scattered around her apartment, and there were more in the large files that were near the window. She had begun working with the images shortly after she moved and her niece Joy started bringing her old photos and cards that she found at garage sales. Judith had been a manager at a well-known publication during her career and when she showed interest in the prints, Joy continued the search, trying to please her aunt by going even farther afield to hunt down cabinet cards and cyanotypes in old bookstores, at auctions and among the various odds and ends at estate sales whose ads she found online.

Closing down the computer, Judith began fiddling with the settings on another machine, pushing buttons to ensure the cyclor would operate for the next ten hours. Then she sterilized the area around the catheter inserted in her belly where she would plug in before she lay down. Home dialysis allowed her to forego any trips to the center, a long trek she had made regularly after the initial diagnosis. She had tried to enjoy that time by developing camaraderie with her fellow patients, but over time, they had simply stopped coming. Then, when most of her old friends in the neighborhood passed on too, she had accepted Joy's suggestion to switch to a home machine and relocate to the retirement community so that someone could help monitor her situation.

At ten o'clock, the regularly agreed upon hour, Judith let in an attendant, her acquiescence to the institutional policy that someone check in on her before bed and again in the morning. Judith had resisted at first because she felt quite capable of taking care of herself, but after weeks of back and forth discussion, she had finally accepted the help and most evenings she welcomed the exchange of well wishes before turning in.

When she was awake at night and not caught up in her own thoughts, Judith allowed the sound of the machine into her body where she could feel it pulse with her breath or vibrate alongside the quiet visceral rhythms she always sensed when she was still. At many times she found the gentle hum comforting, a tonal accompaniment to the solution entering her abdomen, a

sensation she associated with cleanliness and continuity. Occasionally, when she was deep in sleep, the cyclor woke her up with its high-pitched sound, a warning that she had moved too much and had blocked the flow. But this didn't happen often and would stop when Judith turned carefully to her other side. Sometimes she mimicked aloud the hum of the machine and sometimes she found herself humming all day long.

But other nights, the hours seemed to linger, the hum offered no comfort at all, and Judith would lay awake as old remembrances and images compiled in her mind. Restlessly she would move about, unplug herself and make a trip to the bathroom, or get up to write something down. Too often she found herself caught in a fuzzy memory, floating into Raul's bedroom to wake him for his midnight nursing, feeling him cold to her touch, and then quickly scooping him up to bring him into the light. His lips were blue and her own shriek frightened her. She froze, paralyzed, until John grabbed her and rushed them both to the hospital. At other times she found herself to be a shadowy figure, tip-toeing slowly around the downstairs bedroom so as not to wake her husband, the curtains drawn, the only light a slash of morning brightness on the wooden floor. Or she might find herself kneeling in front of John and rubbing his feet. She remembered his grey face, his sunken eyes, the on-going conversations they murmured through the long drawn out hospice and their final embrace.

Overwhelmed during these moments, she tried to rearrange the images in her head and to drift away on the quiet rhythm of her breath.

When Joy brought in the first photographic treasures, Judith sat with her on the sofa and they pored over them together. There were men in suits and ties, and bowler hats, and women dressed in high collared shirtwaists and dark skirts, their hair pushed up in a chignon or streaming down their backs. The children too, were formally attired, their hair combed carefully and their dark shoes shined. These were deliberate images, traditional and balanced compositions, the prints sepia toned or just yellowed with age and generally not very well preserved.

Yet their formality had led Judith to a particular way of seeing and as her niece continued to bring in more and more work, she noticed the similarities of features among all the differences. *Look*, she had pointed out to Joy, *this could be this man's uncle and that could be his sister and this could be an elderly aunt*. And she had excitedly began to create collages, clumsy combinations of men, women and children she cut out from various photos and placed all together, creating small families for the solo portraits and producing extended larger assemblies when there were only a few in the frame.

When she showed them to Joy, her niece had immediately purchased a scanner and installed a photo editor on her aunt's computer. Then, over the next many months, Judith had learned how to digitally copy and then edit the images, turning her rough and very inelegant cut-outs, which had been met with aloof interest by the staff and residents in the community, into nuanced portraits. Now, everyone wanted to be her friend. Nikaya, her neighbor down the hall had asked her to create an extended family portrait with photos of relatives from the Ukraine whom she had never met, and Libby had requested a compilation photograph of all her grandchildren who lived in various states.

Judith liked helping others, but there was also simply a sheer delight in the artistry of her work, as she had developed the delicate skill of recognizing body positions with orientations that matched and noticing shadows that seemed to emanate from the same light source. Yet often she wished she could do more.

This morning, after an unusually calm night, Judith awoke to set about completing the portrait of the couple she had partnered just the day before. She spent quite a long time searching among her photographs for a child, finally selecting a dark-haired little boy wearing a shirt with a bow and black lace-up boots, then carefully copied the figure and placed it just in front of the woman and to the right side of the young man. It was one of her more astute compilations in terms of the expressions, the matching of period clothes, the light and general ambiance. Judith was entranced. She knew it was going to take quite a bit of work to blend the backgrounds and make the image seamless yet she felt a special kinship with this composition and even showed it to the attendant that night when she came in at ten. *They were meant to be together*, the woman agreed, before leaving for the evening.

Judith angled the computer so she could see the photo from her bed and after attaching the small tube that connected her to the cycler, she laid down, smoothing the sheets and tucking the blanket around her. As the screen faded to black, she took a deep breath that sunk all the way down into her belly, then paused and took another, continuing until she found herself flowing along with the hum to a far-off place, enveloped in a rush of noise that after some moments she recognized as the busy city street where she and John had their first apartment.

Once again Judith is gliding into Raul's room for a late-night feeding, but now he is crying and warm in his swaddling and she cradles him in her arms before sitting down on the nearby rocker and unbuttoning her shirt to nurse. The nightlight's yellowed glow expands as the baby ages and she watches proudly as he graduates from kindergarten and then looks on again as her teenager scrambles for a tennis ball barreling quickly towards his backhand in the west corner of the court. A grey haze of time voids her vision and Judith sleepily brushes her hand across her face until her focus clears and she sees a woman standing next to an older Raul while a violin sings and the light changes to gold and purple. She strains to hear the quiet voices, the sound of an organ, the rustle of satin, and takes note of the faint smell of roses.

Lost in the glow of the dream and the soft hues of sound and light, Judith's breathing is serene, her body calm. But then she turns, and turns again, setting off the cycler into a series of beeps until she finally awakens to adjust her position. Lulled back to sleep by the wistful images and the radiant scenes, she does not notice that a new hum has joined the cycler's whirr, and in her hazy state she simply takes it to be the first tentative notes of a band tuning up.

The evening is soft and warm and the hum increases as the computer blinks on. The sound of the spinning fan merges easily with the low purr of the cycler as the photograph of the couple and their child once again appears on the screen. Then the image slowly begins to shift and change.

The figures seem to resize themselves to ensure a harmony of balance, the background blends into a unified composition, and the skin tones adjust as the light moves to fall on the right side of the frame. The hum of the cypher mingles with the vibrations of the computer and the machine slows to match the pulsations of Judith's breath, then whines loudly for no apparent reason as she hasn't made a move.

Awakened by the sound, Judith struggles to prop herself up, bracing her elbows on the bed and placing her chin in her hands. The handsome pair looks forthrightly ahead, a joyous child by their side, their lineage secured. Then the image morphs once more. Firmly, but with the pace of slowed motion, the man's right arm adjusts so that it slides around the woman's waist and his left hand thoughtfully transforms to reach out and rest on the shoulder of the young boy.

Sylvia Sensiper is a writer and photographic artist. Her work has been published in *Intima* and *Next Avenue*, and she has also contributed to academic journals including *Current Psychology* and *Children and Youth Services Review*. Her photographs were featured in a solo show at the Else Gallery at Sacramento State University in California and in a number of group exhibitions.

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