Diane Arbus
A young Brooklyn family going for a Sunday outing, N.Y.C. 1966

By Liz Jobey

The fictions we make about photographs are as unreliable as they are unavoidable. Not for the first time have I thought, looking at some of Diane Arbus’s photographs, including this one, that they have their parallels in another art form, in literature, and particularly in the stories of Raymond Carver, about ordinary people whose lives, through some weakness, some internal flaw or force of circumstance, begin to fall apart, or are altered beyond all expectation. When you look at this young Brooklyn family about to set out on a Sunday outing, you can’t help wondering what will become of them. Are they victims of some tragedy waiting to happen? Will they fight, separate, divorce, marry other people? Will they die an early death? Or will they live out the clichéd, doomed existence of a blue-collar couple in a Bruce Springsteen song? But first, more pertinently, why do we assume they are victims at all?

We pity them partly, with hindsight, for their compliancy. Why did they agree to be photographed in the first place? But we also think of them as victims because of the way they look. For all their apparent willingness to stand before the camera, the family looks benighted. The young man, protectively holding the hand of his little boy as if worried the camera might hurt him, looks shyly, politely towards the photographer, not smiling but watchful, nervous, as if he already realises he has gambled on her apparent friendliness and lost. His whole physical presence is tentative, a lightly poised figure in shades of grey compared to the solid, voluptuous presence of his wife, all black and white contrasts, with an armoury of self-protection clutched in front of her: the leopard-skin coat, the leatherette handbag, the camera case with the strap wound round her fingers crossing out her wedding ring, her bland white baby. She looks, in her make-up and her dress, as if she is beginning to preserve the style of her prime, which is already passing. But unlike her husband’s, her gaze is directed into the middle distance, refusing to engage with the photographer. Hers is a bleak, faintly defiant, almost trance-like expression, as if she has emptied her
mind for the purpose of the process in hand. Her son, probably under orders to stop wriggling, is plainly in distress, looking round wildly and clutching his groin (a gesture echoed by his mother’s hold on the baby), as if he understands that something odd is going on but isn’t quite sure what. Only the baby, as is its prerogative, gazes out into the future, unperturbed.

In posing for the traditional family shot, they have unwittingly undermined all the positive values that formation represents. Instead they have handed the photographer something much more important, a contemporary metaphor: the unhappy family snapshot. Forced to look straight ahead, forbidden to smile, the pose encourages separation rather than cohesion, and it tempts us to translate appearance into character: his weakness; her frustration. The overriding emotion is one of disappointment. They look, or their marriage looks, already exhausted. It was this, presumably, that prompted Arbus’s recollection of them, in a comment that has always seemed almost as memorable as the portrait itself: ‘They were undeniably close in a painful sort of way.’

She wrote this two years later, when the photograph was about to be published in Britain, in a special ‘Family Issue’ of the Sunday Times colour magazine. The feature was titled: ‘Two American families’. (The second portrait was of an affluent Westchester couple sunbathing on their lawn.) Both photographs were by Arbus, and the short text that went with them was also credited to her. In fact it had been put together from the contents of a letter Arbus had written to Peter Crookston, the magazine’s deputy editor. ‘They live in the Bronx. I think he was a garage mechanic. Their first child was born when she was sixteen ... They were undeniably close in a painful sort of way.’

It’s that word ‘undeniably’. If you remove it, the phrase loses its sting. But ‘undeniably’ has a patronizing air, as if, in her judgement, under the circumstances, genuine closeness between the couple was impossible. Why? Because they are overstretched by the demands of an early marriage, straight out of high school, with a retarded child and a baby to care for? Because they had argued the night before and hadn’t made it up? Because they were nervous in front of the camera and Arbus had mistaken this for some intrinsic problem within their marriage? Were they ashamed of their boy, or how he might look? We will never know. We have no evidence of how they behaved, or how they really felt about each other; no other information except that attractively phrased snap judgement made by a stranger. But once they had given themselves up to the camera, there they were, pinned to the wall and labelled forever: ‘undeniably close in a painful sort of way’.
There are some facts. Their names are Richard and Marylin Dauria. Richard is an Italian immigrant and works as a car mechanic. They met in high school and were married when Marylin was sixteen. She is now twenty-three. They have three children; the two pictured here are Richard Jnr, who is mentally retarded, and the baby, Dawn. Marylin is often told she looks like Elizabeth Taylor. She dyes her hair black to make herself seem Irish, which she is not. (We don’t learn why she wants to be thought Irish, but perhaps it’s because the combination of blue/grey eyes and jet-black hair, is typically Irish, and also typically Tayloresque.) Crookston left out the bit about their first child being born when she was sixteen, which suggested a hasty marriage soon before or even afterwards. But more interestingly he modified Arbus’s comment about their closeness. In the magazine, his version read: ‘Richard Jnr is mentally retarded and the family is undeniably close in a painful, heartrending sort of way’. The feeling of pain has been shifted from the couple to the photographer. Which was correct? Did Arbus accurately detect a painful closeness between them, or was it she who felt the pain, observing them together? (Afterwards she wrote to Crookston to complain about the text: ‘next time let me write it so it makes more sense’.)

By 1968, when the Brooklyn picture was published in Britain, Arbus had gone from relative anonymity to relative fame. In February 1967 thirty-two of her photographs had been included in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, along with those of two of her contemporaries, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand (each was given a space of their own). All three worked as street photographers, but as John Szarkowski, head of the department of photography at MoMA, explained in his introduction to the show:

In the past decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach to more personal ends. Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy – almost an affection – for the imperfections and the frailties of society ... What they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at ... The portraits of Diane Arbus show that all of us – the most ordinary and the most exotic of us – are on closer scrutiny remarkable.

The photographs that first marked Arbus out for attention in the early 1960s were portraits of the people she referred to as ‘freaks’, men and women living on the margins of society because of their physical or mental
or sexual difference. They included midgets and giants, circus performers and drag queens, faith healers and mystics, each of whom she sought out and persuaded to pose for a photograph. But although they were all in some sense extraordinary and ‘different’, it wasn’t this that made her photographs disturbing, it was the way she photographed them; it was the way they engaged. Mostly they were single portraits, and some couples – twins, lovers, friends. She shot them as three-quarter figures, with little surrounding detail, and in every one the person photographed looked straight back into the camera, with a direct gaze that was unsettling in both its passivity and its wilful surrender to the act of being photographed. Their very deliberate full-frontal stance suggested an unusual complicity between the photographer and her subject. It raised questions, not often raised so worriedly in photography, about the nature of the encounter, and the motivation of the person behind it.

Arbus employed the approach of the street photographer (an approach that, partly because of her photographs and the copycat stylists it engendered, is almost impossible today); that is, she walked the streets with her camera at the ready, searching for people whose appearance and attitude drew her to them. But her purpose was not philanthropic in the conventional sense. Something in her own psychological make-up made her seek these people out and proposition them. She thought she saw a quality, a difference, worth recording. ‘It’s what I’ve never seen before that I recognize’, she said. ‘I really believe there are things nobody would see if I didn’t photograph them.’ For one of her first published magazine features she sought out and photographed five eccentric New Yorkers (they included Jack Dracula, the tattooed man, Miss Cora Pratt, ‘the counterfeit lady’ and William Mack ‘the sage of the wilderness’); they were, she explained, ‘five singular people who appear like metaphors, somewhere further out than we do … so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whoever we may be.’

The 1967 MoMA exhibition brought her welcome public recognition, but it also brought problems. According to Szarkowski, she worried it came too early: ‘what she was doing was quite different from what other photographers were doing, and she wanted a chance to complete it … before getting it out in public’. She also wanted to make sure that her pictures were made public in the right way, so that they didn’t appear to be ‘in violation of her personal, moral commitment’. She needed the permission of her subjects to publish and exhibit them, and it was not always easy to get. In 1966 she sought legal advice, ‘because my photographs are becoming more and more questionable’.
This balancing act, between pursuing the kind of subject matter that most engaged her, and making a living from her pictures, continued throughout her working life. She was always keen to find magazine editors who would commission her to cover subjects that fed into her own personal agenda. When she heard of the *Sunday Times* special issue, she had other candidates. The first was ‘perhaps too exotic … I know a Jewish giant who lives in Washington Heights or the Bronx with his little parents. He is tragic with a curious bitter somewhat stupid wit. The parents are orthodox and repressive and classic and disapprove of his carnival career … They are a truly metaphorical family.’ The second provided the companion picture to the Brooklyn family portrait:

there is a woman I stopped in a Bookstore who lives in Westchester which is Upper Suburbia. She is about thirty-four with terribly blonde hair and enormously eyelashed and booted and probably married to a dress manufacturer or restaurateur and I said I wanted to photograph her with her husband and children so she suggested I wait till warm weather so I can do it round the pool!

And, she added, ‘I think all families are creepy in a way.’

The distrust of the family facade was based in personal experience. Her own family, she explained in a radio interview she gave to the oral historian Studs Terkel in 1968, was ‘classic, upper middle-class Jewish, you know, second-generation American. My father was sort of self-made. He was something of a phoney. He could always appear to be richer than he was.’ Her family owned Russek’s, a fur retailers that in the 1920s expanded into a department store. She remembered ‘the special agony of walking down that center aisle, feeling like the princess of Russek’s: simultaneously privileged and doomed’. She had grown up feeling ‘immune and exempt from circumstance. One of the things I suffered from was that I never felt adversity. I was confirmed in a sense of unreality … The outside world was so far from us, one didn’t expect to encounter it. The doors were shut, as if there were some kind of contagion out there.’ Later, she indicated that photography had been a means of escape: ‘I think my favourite thing about photography … [was] I always thought it was a naughty thing to do … When I first did it, it was very perverse … suddenly it was a kind of license … [to] do exactly what I wanted to do.’

This idea, that photography allowed her to enter worlds forbidden to nicely brought-up Jewish girls, has caused speculation about her motives. Susan Sontag, who first wrote about Arbus in the mid-1970s, thought she
used the camera as a ‘way of procuring experience, and thereby acquiring a sense of reality’. Her fascination with ‘freaks’, in Sontag’s view, ‘expresses a desire to violate her own innocence, to undermine her sense of being privileged, so [sic] vent her frustration at being safe’. Szarkowski thought otherwise. ‘Her pictures’, he wrote, ‘are concerned with private, rather than social realities, with psychological rather than visual coherence, with the prototypical and mythic rather than the topical and temporal. Her real subject is no less than the unique interior lives of those she photographed.’

What is clear when you look at her pictures is that the ‘freaks’ seem better able to hold their own in front of the camera than the ordinary people. They were used to their differences; in many cases, like the giant, or the midget, they made a living out of them. What makes the photograph of the Brooklyn family so unsettling is the sense that the photographer is exploiting a much more private area, somewhere between doubt and defiance, between the feeling that it would be better to have refused her request and the feeling that, in fact, they deserved to be photographed. This area of slippage, this awkwardness, was what Arbus recognised the camera could capture.

Everybody has that thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that’s what people observe. You see someone on the street and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw. It’s just extraordinary that we should have been given these peculiarities. And, not content with what we were given, we create a whole other set. Our whole guise is like giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way but there’s a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can’t help people knowing about you. And that has to do with what I’ve always called the gap between intention and effect.

What is disturbing, looking at the photograph of the Brooklyn family, is the feeling that the couple have been trapped, whether by politeness, or by their own vanity, into agreeing to something that is out of their control. Perhaps Marylin Dauria, with her carefully orchestrated ‘look’, dreamed of some kind of fame; believed she might be ‘spotted’, and photographed, and, despite her husband and three children, her life would change forever. But in the picture, her appearance (and her idea that she looks like a movie star) seems absurd, almost pathetic, whilst at the same time it presents a
compelling example of personal style. What we fear is that the Daurias have agreed to be photographed by Arbus but aren’t up to the experience.

Each of Arbus’s pictures was the result of a deliberately engineered encounter between herself and another human being, and the direct connection between herself and her subjects makes them appear complicit in the resulting image. We assume they have entered into the exchange freely; yet at the same time we know (because we, too, have been photographed), that to think you can predict how a picture will make you look is foolish, a guarantee almost that you will be betrayed. Maybe the Daurais thought that in the hands of a professional, they would look better, rather than worse than they hoped. But Arbus understood that the camera was a dispassionate, uncivilised instrument; it made no allowances for the flaws and weaknesses it encountered, recording them faithfully, even if the result was disturbing, or upsetting, or just wrong.

Throughout her career Arbus sought out people who lived under the bar of success, celebrity and social ease. There were always people who, for whatever reason, were willing to stand before her camera, and so often in that moment they repaid her with a glimmer of human frailty; they fell victim to the uncertainty that assails us all at crucial moments of exposure. All photographs are historical documents, and as Sontag pointed out, a photograph confers importance on whatever is photographed. An Arbus photograph, though, is more than a record of a person at a certain time in a certain place; it is, more often than not, a record of a moment of personal anxiety, of a sudden identity crisis awakened and then captured by the camera. Whether or not what it shows is a true reflection of the subject’s character is, from that point, irrelevant. The camera has made it so. ‘The process itself has a kind of exactitude, a kind of scrutiny’, Arbus wrote, ‘that we’re not normally subject to. I mean we don’t subject each other to. We’re nicer to each other than the interrogation of the camera is going to make us. It’s a little bit cold, a little bit harsh.’ And, as if she was finally admitting to something she had known all along: ‘I think it does, a little, hurt to be photographed.’

In the thirty-four years since her death, no photographer has achieved the same peculiar intensity of response that she drew from her subjects. ‘If I were just curious’, she said:

it would be very hard to say to someone, ‘I want to come to your house and have you talk to me and tell me the story of your life.’ I mean, people are going to say, ‘You’re crazy’. Plus they’re going to keep mighty guarded. But the camera is a kind of license.
A lot of people want to be paid that much attention and that’s a reasonable kind of attention to be paid.

But is it? Sontag charged Arbus’s photographs with a lack of compassion: ‘For what would be more correctly described as their dissociated point of view, the photographs have been praised for their candour and for an unsettling empathy with their subjects. What is actually their aggressiveness towards the public has been treated as moral accomplishment.’

I have always wondered what the Brooklyn family thought when they saw their portrait. Were they pleased or disappointed or hurt by the result? Maybe Marylin didn’t look as much like Elizabeth Taylor as she’d thought she did when she painted in her eyebrows that morning. Maybe Richard Snr felt as vulnerable as his expression suggests, though perhaps there is just the tiniest flicker of a smile in his eyes, as if he’s thinking: ‘At least this will be something to tell the guys about at work.’ We know from accounts given by her friends that Arbus was a very persuasive person, who spoke, as she wrote, quirkily and with great charm. She accused herself of being ‘kind of two-faced’, when photographing people. ‘I’m very ingratiating. It really kind of annoys me. I’m just a little too nice.’ So whatever misgivings they might have had, the two of them stood there, looking ahead with what they perhaps felt was as little expression as possible, except that their faces are so expressive, and each one has a different reaction and a different emotion. For Arbus, a multiple portrait was rare, and in this case it was a rich reward. This was not only a picture about individuals and the gap between how they intended to look and how they looked, it was a picture about the family, about the distance between the ideal and the reality.

Though they have their place in photographic history, in what is one of Arbus’s best-known photographs, I can’t help wondering where Richard and Marylin Dauria are now. They would be in their early sixties. Their children would, perhaps, have children of their own. When they remember the day Diane Arbus took their picture, do they think: ‘What did she see in us? What did she want?’

After Arbus’s suicide in 1971, it was left to her daughters, particularly her elder daughter, Doon, to look after her mother’s estate, which she has done, keeping a tight control over the use of images and the release of any archive material. It was only in 2003, with Revelations, a major retrospective of Arbus’s work organised by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, that an enormous amount of archive material relating to Arbus’s personal life was released for the first time. It took the form of a biographical timeline, compiled by Doon Arbus and the curator Elisabeth Sussman,
made up from extracts from her letters, her diaries and work books, her postcards to friends, snapshots, newspaper cuttings, letters from editors, curators, grant-giving bodies, even her autopsy report of 29 July 1971.

This chronology contributed to a greater understanding of the way Arbus worked. To any assumption that her subjects were principally one-time encounters, people she never saw again, Revelations issued a corrective. There were plenty of instances where she returned to photograph them again. Whether this was the case with the Brooklyn family, the chronology doesn’t say. But looking in it, among the entries for spring 1966, there is another photograph of Richard and Marylin Dauria and their children, dated 15 May (which was a Sunday), taken in their living room. (The location is given as ‘the Bronx home of a young Brooklyn family’, which solves the discrepancy between the portrait’s title and Arbus’s description of where they lived.) Judging from what they are wearing, it was taken on the same day as the more famous portrait, but whichever picture came first, Arbus must have asked, or been invited, to go inside.

The photograph is taken from a greater distance, which shows some of the details of the surrounding room. Richard and Marylin are sitting on a sofa of modern design, its cushions covered in a flowered print. A kidney-shaped coffee table is at their knees and a large wall clock in the shape of a daisy hangs above their heads. To their left, a set of wooden shelves is balanced precariously on a couple of cardboard boxes to lift them higher. The bottom shelf is half-filled with books and the title that faces the camera is Ideal Marriage. Marylin is in black ski-pants, the straps looped under the heels of her black stilettos. Richard sits to her left, with the baby on his lap. Richard Jr is sprawled across his mother’s knees, making a dive for the baby, who is watching calmly as her brother heads towards her, his legs kicking frantically in the air, causing a blur of movement on the image. Both adults are looking straight ahead, as if oblivious to what is going on between the two children below.

The room is sparsely furnished, everything is modern and insubstantial. It betrays no sense of history, no sense of permanence; they might have moved in yesterday, or be gone tomorrow. It is an extension of the impression given by the family in their portrait: they have been trapped by the camera, but they are also trapped in their time, in the uncertain present.

Arbus was part of a generation of liberal Americans that was casting doubt on post-war optimism, questioning ‘all-American’ values – which included the country’s political, military, racial and social policies. In protesting against Vietnam, in supporting civil rights, sexual liberation, feminism, pacifism, it amounted to a neurotic reassessment of America’s
confident self-image. This scepticism and pessimism was apparent from the mid-1950s, in the photographs of Robert Frank, and later in films such as Bob Rafelson’s *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), or in Joan Didion’s essays, collected in *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, published in 1968. Didion described the place she found herself in: ‘It was not a country in open revolution. It was not a country under enemy siege. It was the United States of America in the cold late spring of 1967 and the market was steady and the GNP high and a great many articulate people seemed to have a sense of high social purpose and it might have been a spring of brave hopes and national promise, but it was not.’

In place of optimism and confidence was a sense of alienation and rootlessness, a dislocation from the norm. Society was being scrutinised and the old orders were being challenged. In this new universe, losers could be heroes, freaks could be beautiful, ordinary people could be celebrities. If Arbus saw herself as an advocate for ‘freaks’, for people who were ‘different’, who were ‘further out’ than most of us are, she didn’t feel it was her mission to introduce them into the mainstream. She valued them precisely because they managed to survive outside it. She didn’t feel it her duty to provide Richard and Marylin Dauria with a photograph that reassured them they were just another happy American family. The last we know of them is that when Arbus had finished, ‘they piled into their car to go to visit one of their parents’. It was an ordinary Sunday afternoon like any other. But her portrait tells otherwise; its power comes from the ordinariness they refute.