

Captured

An ultrasound, the first time I was put on display. A sonogram, the first visual documentation of me.

The first photograph of me taken at St. Luke's hospital on Friday, July 9th, 2004, surrounded by my mom, Ann, My dad, David and two sisters, Netanya and Gabrielle. These pictures were taken on a digital camera. That year was the first that digital outsold film cameras.

The first memory I have of wanting to look good for the camera was in 2010, on a family trip to Hawaii. My sisters used words like hot, so I thought that's what I had to be. We took pictures of each other on the beach, I asked if I looked hot. My sisters asked for dozens of pictures, trying to get the perfect one. I posed, trying to do the same. Hand on my hip, a gaze into the camera. I was 6, I self-induced a pressure upon myself to look and act like my older sisters. I began to lose innocence, my loss of indifference in front of a camera.

By the time I was in high school pictures were always curated. I would take photos of myself for the sole purpose of posting them. Pictures taken by other people struck fear in me. Candid was something to be afraid of. Funhouse versions of me grew all around, each direction I looked I saw myself in different ways, none of which I liked.

This feeling amplified when I started modelling in college. I was no longer capturing my image for likes and comments. My image was being used by strangers. I was stripped of control. Every photoshoot was a weight I struggled to carry. A character I didn't know if I was playing well enough. I was put on the stage, but I didn't feel like my act was good enough. I became more detached.

When I stepped in front of the camera I wore a skin different than my own. American photographer Nan Goldin has a sentiment that “it is not a detachment to take a picture. That photography is a way of touching somebody—it’s a caress. You can give people access to their own soul.” Photos taken of me had the opposite effect.

I grew to hate being photographed. I would obsess over each photo and had a compulsive need to see all photos of me taken as soon as I could to pinpoint exactly what was wrong with how I looked, if it was worse than I imagined. Digital photographs allowed me to have that instant gratification of self-hatred.

Film cameras were coming back into popularity. In 2024 the film camera market reached 275.70million compared to 36million the year I was born. This was the year I met photographer Chris Suarez.

The first time I saw him I was stood outside the classroom he was leaving. I scanned him from his feet up to his curly head of hair covered by an orange beanie. Love at first sight isn’t real but I knew I wanted to see him again.

My first interaction with him was in an elevator packed with people. He asked me if I liked thrifting. I replied with a curt “Yes.” I tended to put up walls between me and whoever I was attracted to. This was a defense mechanism against getting my feelings hurt. I was insecure, I didn’t believe he would ever be attracted to me like I was to him. This turned into aggression towards him.

He had asked me to model for him once before. I declined, afraid of him having access to dissect me, not wanting to see myself through his lens.

Around that time, I was writing articles about local bookstores. I didn't have a car to get to my interviews. Chris offered to take me. This was the first time we were together, just us. He drove me to three bookstores. At one, he wandered around while I was talking with the owner. I found him standing in the photography section flipping through a book. The doorway framed him perfectly. He held a book; his tall slender body crammed into the small room. I smirked at him, love at second glance maybe. We went to the Farmers market. I followed him around looking for drinks, admiring him as he spoke in Spanish to an employee on a ladder.

We sat in his car and ordered food. I asked him where he wanted to eat. We decided on our school's hall. As we ate, a feeling arose in my stomach that had nothing to do with what I was eating.

Weeks later, I told him how I felt. How I thought he was cute and that I wanted to get to know him better. There were only a few days left of school. We went on our first date on May 30th, 2024. We stayed together until two in the morning. As we said goodbye for the summer, he placed his nose on top of mine, our faces seemed as if they were made to fit together. Third times the charm. I felt a glimmer of him being someone that would have a profound effect on my life. He walked me back to my place swinging our interlocked hands up and down.

I left Atlanta for the summer. During that summer, I studied acting in Lacoste France. When I arrived, I carried my heavy suitcase up a set of stairs to a room where I lived with three other girls. It was a quaint town with rocky pavement and a view I miss every day. It took 10 minutes to walk the entire town. Chris and I kept in contact, talking every day. He always made time for me.

For those eight weeks in Lacoste, I was always in front of a camera. I had to watch my scenes in a quiet classroom on a big screen in front of a dozen people. I shrunk down. I was in a test tube, stared at through the thin glass. I could only focus on how I looked, not how well or poor I was acting. I felt less than everyone around me, sick seeing my face that big, unedited, raw, in motion. I dreaded recording scenes.

Summer ended. I returned to Atlanta in September. I saw Chris almost immediately. We had both been waiting for this grand moment. I saw him walking towards me and my heart bounced in my chest. We happened to be wearing the same colors. Me in a black top and navy linen pants. Him in a black t-shirt with dark jeans. We headed up to my room. We laid down awkwardly in my bed. My head found its way onto his chest. He cradled my head as I wrapped around him

“Is this real” he asked.

We walked to get ramen, our grasped hands once again swinging in unison. We sat across from each other at a rectangular table next to the window. There was artwork on the walls that felt like it was left over from the restaurant that previously sat there. At the end of the meal, I went to the bathroom and came back to see that he had paid. We walked back and made out on my twin bed for hours. His phone rang a multitude of times, he ignored it. He made me feel important.

At the end of the month, on his birthday. He drove us to the park. We sat under the sun, a blanket between us and the grass.

I gave him a piece of red velvet cake. I struggled to light the candle. He placed his hand around the candle to shield it from the wind. I burned him as I tried to light the candle. He acted like it didn't hurt. I gave him a Minolta SLR with a blue and white strap that belonged to my

grandfather. We had only been seeing each other for a month but I knew we would stick around for each other. I knew exactly the kind of person he was.

I laid on my stomach and embroidered a red heart on the strap. I wanted him to carry my heart with him. He took his first picture of me on film that day. He told me I was beautiful. I shied away from the camera. I didn't like the idea of him seeing a photo of my face before I could. I couldn't look at it in that exact moment and decide if it was good enough. He would get it developed. I'd be the last to see.

I anxiously awaited to see the picture. It wasn't bad. I didn't dislike it. He started taking more and more pictures of me as we got closer. That year, I had bad bouts of sickness, he took me to urgent care, the staff asked who he was to me and I told them he was my friend. He stayed with me the whole time, waiting and taking care of me.

When we left urgent care, he questioned me referring to him as my friend. He became my boyfriend that day. He continued to take care of me until I was better. He did anything in his power to make sure I'd be okay.

The closer we got the more love I felt in the pictures he would take of me. I wrote poetry about him; he took photos of me. We said I love you for the first time in his warm house while it snowed outside.

I could express my love for him through my writing. He could do the same without words, with photos. I saw pictures in a new way. He never shot me in a studio. He always shot on film. He never wanted to control me. I felt more comfortable in front of his camera than any other. I couldn't see the picture immediately and get caught up in the details that fueled my insecurities.

He took a picture of me in my bedroom on May 14th, 2025. On October 9th, 2025, he told me he still remembers the exact moment he took that picture, how the sun was coming through the window and how he had to take it twice.

I love how he views photography. I feel his love for me in the photos he takes. I still struggle to feel love for myself. I feel out of control, despite his love and carefulness. I've tried to convince myself that he has fixed me. The truth is Chris' photos can't set me free. I feel trapped. No camera, no matter who's behind it could change that.

My internal monologue is louder than his words, faster than the shutter of his camera. My obsessive tendencies remain. I scrutinize the photos he takes of me. I know he doesn't see the flaws that I do. I wish my image didn't burden me. I wish he did have the magic cure for my insecurities in his cameras.

Early in life I was taught that a picture taken is a performance. I grew up in the age of social media. I started getting paid to sit pretty in front of a camera. Performance in a picture took on a whole new meaning.

I never felt good enough to be a model. I am an imposter. Why would anyone want me in front of their camera? I stare at myself and feel sick. I wonder what is wrong with me both mentally and physically. The funhouse reflections of me have not disappeared.

I can create a vision of him and us and our relationship through writing but the difference between my writing and his photography is that I can edit my words as they come out. I can make things sound beautiful that aren't. I can write conclusions that wrap everything up

perfectly. He finds beautiful things and captures them. I find ugly things and break them down, do my best to make them sound better.

Chris makes me feel loved. He makes images of me less scary; he caresses my soul. Film slows down his process. Film immortalizes the image of myself that I am so afraid of. The beauty and the hatred and the love and the conclusions all exist inside me. I still struggle to access my soul.