



# Dreamscaping

*Reflections on a new medium in grief recovery: therapeutic photomontage*

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**W**alking up the stairs, it's the first thing you see. A family photo of a place – no, really, nine places – spanning across time and space in a single picture. The two Fitzgerald children were snapped on Halloween in Islip, New York, but a year apart. The linebacker sprinting up Cinderella's castle is their dad Dennis 25 years ago, playing for the Commack Spartans. The craggy rocks and vegetation are pure Maui, where Desiree and Dennis mugged for the camera in motorcycle helmets on their honeymoon. And there they are a second time, two years before they tied the knot, clutching their hats in Cancun.

Now look in the distance. There framed against the clouds is Grandma Maria and Grandpa Jim, in their 20s, straight out of *Great Gatsby*. Yet this is neither Hawaii, Cancun or the North Shore: it's the Beyond. Though Maria and Jim have passed

away years ago, their daughter-in-law wanted to give them center billing so that from where they stood, they'd be able to see everything that's going on in the family.

### Healing Dreamscapes

Healing dreamscapes (as I call these photomontages that feel like a snapshot from a dream) are a new breed of valentine. Requested by loving wives or by sons and daughters who themselves are aging, these commissions come frequently around the holidays when families hold one chair empty (literally and figuratively). What they all crave is an idealized memory: a moment in time when not a single member of

the family fidgets, gets cranky, old, or dies.

Throughout, Desiree was my co-creator. Her vision was of a valentine that showed exactly "where Dennis came from, and who he is now." It was up to me to balance the tug of family politics with composition and symbolism. Using my digital lasso, I extracted people, landscapes (even architecture like Café Mickey in Disneyland), taking each image for a little walk around the dreamscape until I found their spot for life.

There was, though, one small snag. Last year Grandpa Jim died; a shy shell of a man after his wife's death 18 years earlier. We wanted to stand Grandpa Jim in his happy place with Marie by his side, looking out on his flock, but Desiree's sister-in-law Jeanne held the cherry: a photo of her in-laws newly married in their 20s. And Jeanne was very skeptical about the project. "I love my parents," she told Desiree, "but putting them in a Valentine is going to look just strange and weird." Once we showed her Dennis's parents "there in the hills, from out in the beyond," Jeanne was blown away.

It reminded me of a similar story: a dreamscape commissioned by

an adult son for his mother. In that photomontage, Michael's baby daughter Sydney is being cradled by her great-grandfather Simon, as he chows down on a giant turkey leg outside a Hell's Angel bar. An impossibility, of course, because Simon died before Sydney was



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ever born! But when Michael gave his mom her valentine, his mother's voice got quiet and she said, I just want to crawl under the blanket and curl up with my picture. Time-traveling has that effect on you. You cry at the possibilities, but you cry out of joy.

So there they are, angels lit up by the soul of a place that doesn't technically exist. The story goes, Dennis would always tease little Maria that her beauty marks, "were kisses from the angels." Now when she climbs the stairs, she points to Grandma and Grandpa and to her beauty marks as if to say, you see, mystery solved.

Daniel Kriesberg, a teacher, wrote in *Book Links* magazine that "young children ... understand what most of us have forgotten, that there is no natural world and human world. It is all one." If this is true, dreamscapes sound very much like that third world, populated by truth and tall tales. With families flung everywhere the breadwinners lay down their hats, what could be healthier than relocating three generations to a single dreamscape?

As for the grown-up Fitzgeralds, every time they pass their

dreamscape, they can't help noticing something new. "You know how photos get old like furniture?" says Desiree. "You stop seeing them. But here there's always something magical going on." Desiree thinks Dennis looks like a trophy on the ultimate pedestal: Magic Kingdom. Anthony believes he's sitting on the perch above Maria because he's protecting her. Dennis can't get over how suave and relaxed Dad looks; is it because of that rakishly dangling cigarette in his free hand?

Then of course, there's something magical about a family who says they'll go to Disneyland every two years until it stops feeling magical.

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