



Deanna

Dikeman

Leaving

and

Waving

Text by Jacob Charles Wilson



For the past year I, along with most other people in England, have lived under some form of social isolation. I have remained at home, seeing friends and family only rarely and always briefly. I have come to treasure moments that I had previously taken for granted; a chance encounter in the street or a brief doorstep chat, even if we had nothing in particular to talk about. I imagine this story will be familiar to many across the world, as our social lives have become increasingly restricted in the face of the present pandemic.



By coincidence, it was this time last year that I first came across Deanna Dikeman's *Leaving And Waving*, now collected together in a book published by Chose Commune (2021). Though essentially a private family photo album, over time I felt its mundane yet distinctly personal images manifesting in my own life. And as the initial weeks of isolation turned into months and spring progressed to winter, I found myself repeatedly returning to this work.

In July 1991, Dikeman visited her elderly parents, who the previous year had sold their family home in Sioux City, Iowa, USA, and moved to a bungalow across town. By then, Dikeman was in her thirties and well-aware of the diminishing time they would have together. As usual, at the end of her visit, her mother and father stood on the driveway to wave her off. But on this occasion, Dikeman took the opportunity to snap a photograph from her car window.

The scene is one of a suburban idyll, illuminated by the bright sun of a balmy summer day. Dikeman's mother stands directly in front of the camera, with a tuft of white, curled hair. Her father can be seen taking shelter under the shade of a tree some distance away, wearing the uniform of a retiree; high-waisted slacks and a crisp, white shirt. Standing on the driveway of their red ranch-style home, and smiling, with arms raised, they give a cheery farewell to their beloved daughter.

Time and time again, as Dikeman's regular visits drew to a close, she would pack the car and prepare the camera for another photograph. Taken from *Leaving and Waving*, she states, "it seemed natural to keep the camera busy". Over 27 years, this small act became something of a ritual grounded in the inherent sadness of saying goodbye. Despite her parent's polite embarrassment and gentle protestations, Dikeman didn't stop. Through the birth of her son, her father's death, and her mother's final years in care, the act remained the same, even as life around it changed.

It's rare to find photographers returning, again and again, over such a length of time to photograph such a specific subject. They may indeed make many images of the same event or same subject, but more often than not they will publish only one. Among the exceptions are series such as Nicholas Nixon's *The Brown Sisters* which every year, for over forty years, has seen the artist photograph his wife and three sisters-in-law; and Tehching Hsieh's *Clock Piece* in which Hsieh attempted to photograph himself on the hour, every hour, for one whole year.

There are similarities to be drawn between these projects and *Leaving and Waving*. Like *The Brown Sisters* and *Clock Piece*, *Leaving and Waving* eschews the trend seen in many contemporary photobooks for fragmentary, disjointed assemblages of disparate images, presenting instead a simple chronology: the first image first, the last last, with each dated to the month and year—each image was made at most just a few months apart. But where Hsieh and Nixon's projects place demands on the photographers to return, in the case of *Leaving and Waving* the return of the photographer seems to be promised in the pictures themselves. Dikeman could have photographed any moment of the day (indeed, she did), but she shows only the moment of departure.

Everything about the images seems calculated to draw you back. The camera interposes itself between Dikeman and her parents, the apparent casualness of the resulting point-of-view snapshot eases you into the image, inducing the feeling of not only being seen by the subject but also addressed. Her parents wave to the camera—and you wave back. Once you're there, you're obliged to return. It helps that I know the scene: I see it when saying goodbye to my grandma or my parents; after the hugs, we stand and wave, sometimes they come down on to the road to stretch out the goodbyes for a just few more precious seconds.





Relatability, however, is not a condition of enjoyment. True enjoyment comes from what isn't shown when I am encouraged to exercise my imagination. Once there, in the car, the mind wanders to the visit that's taken place, the conversations, the small talk, and then afterwards the subdued journey home. I notice some photographs appear deliberately cropped; her parents are framed by the car door, while the camera lens is caught in the reflection of a wing mirror. Hints of a complex world outside the image, and yet one which is never quite revealed or resolved.

Why should I enjoy these images now? There is something approaching pleasure to be found in the rhythm and predictability of events as you see them unfolding, fulfilling the desire for stability in a time of such uncertainty. Piecing together a fictional 'normality' from the patterns that I can discern: How Dikeman holds the camera and composes the scene; her mother's preference for blue and fuchsia clothes; her father's seasonal movement between summer shirts and padded winter coats; the fact that in Sioux City it never seems to rain.

There is only one possible ending, to which, like a memento mori, all signs point: skin puckers, hair thins, and spines bend. They wear oversized winter clothing that serves to emphasise the increasing fragility of their bodies. The frequency of Dikeman's visits increase as each parent in turn becomes frailer. In August 2009, Dikeman's father can be seen holding a cane for the first time. Suddenly, he's gone. Her mother still waves, but rarely smiles. By 2017 her mother is in an assisted-living facility. The last few photographs are taken at her bedroom door—she died later that year.

There is no precedent for the last image of the series: Dikeman simply pictures the empty driveway—the doors are shut, the garage is locked—it is stark in its finality. I think, though the images do not capture it, that there must have been a moment where they began to prepare for death. I come to think of the little behaviours they would have developed. After a while, they must have expected the camera and come to pose for it. How would they have appeared here?

I am brought back to the present, reminded of the images that appeared in the early stages of the pandemic and which recurred across newspapers and timelines, where empty streets and closed shops announced the seriousness of the event and the coming of a changing world. Few other events in recent history have focussed attention on mortality like the pandemic. While we've had little to do, we've had plenty of time for thoughts to be drawn to those moments of last contact. Of the lasting images we make, and of how we will be remembered.