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After life: the things she left behind

After her mother's death last winter, the photographer Pamela Hanson was compelled to capture the now empty family home. The resulting essay is a tender portrait of a parent and an exercise in how to process grief



When Pamela Hanson's mother, Brooks, died last winter, she left behind the family house in Geneva in which she had lived – and raised Hanson and her three siblings – for nearly 70 years. “We moved to this house when I was two,” recalls Hanson, a fashion photographer who now lives in New York. Life in Geneva brought together a unique society and experience. “My father worked for an American trading company,” she continues. “There was a large expat community there and my parents were right at the centre of it. My mother was a glamorous company wife. Our house was set in six acres of land and we were the first ones to have a pool, so it became a hub for everyone to come to. It was the '60s and there were lots of parties. It was a hedonistic time.”

“

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It was a history her mother revisited often during her final months, when Hanson was able to spend a lot of time with her. Yet, despite her preparedness for her mother's death, she was still struck by the force of emotion that hit her in the

days after, sitting in the empty house. “I had somehow assumed that it would be there forever,” Hanson says. “I was surprised how overwhelmed I was. So I started to record it.”

She describes the resulting pictures as capturing the “moment between life and death. For me to take these pictures was to hold onto her, like she was there. I feel her presence in every shot.” Her photographer’s instincts have delivered a touching and tender portrait. “When you know that something that represents your life is going to be gone, the only way I know how to hold onto something of it is to photograph it.”



“Mom in her bedroom, in her ‘relaxed outfit’ – black cashmere turtleneck and straight-leg pants,” says Pamela. “I love the way she’s sitting here”



© Pamela Hanson

“We still call this the ‘new room’, even though it was added in the ’60s. My mother fell asleep on this couch every night while watching TV. She did needlepoint and made all the cushions in the house. I’m keeping the bird on the left”



© Pamela Hanson

“Her Elnett hairspray; the smell is so specific. There is something so moving about the fact that it is right where she would put it”



“I selected this Chanel bag and pearls to take back to New York with me to give to my daughter-in-law”





© Pamela Hanson

“A small collection of Mom’s Belgian loafers and Pappagallos. I think she had worn those brands since the ’60s. She had small elegant feet”



© Pamela Hanson

“Mom kept her everyday jewellery in the top drawer: she lived in that Lalaounis bracelet. Her Hermès scarves are folded in a pile right next to it”



© Pamela Hanson

“I found these in a Chanel bag that I passed on to my daughter-in-law. She must have had five small Chanel bags in different colours. The laundered handkerchief says everything”



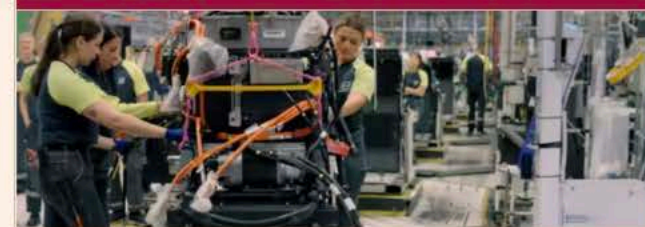
© Pamela Hanson

The bar cupboard in the living room. “Mom’s cocktail: a vodka gimlet. Cocktail hour was such a huge part of life – people coming for drinks, staying for dinner and then having after-dinner drinks was the norm”



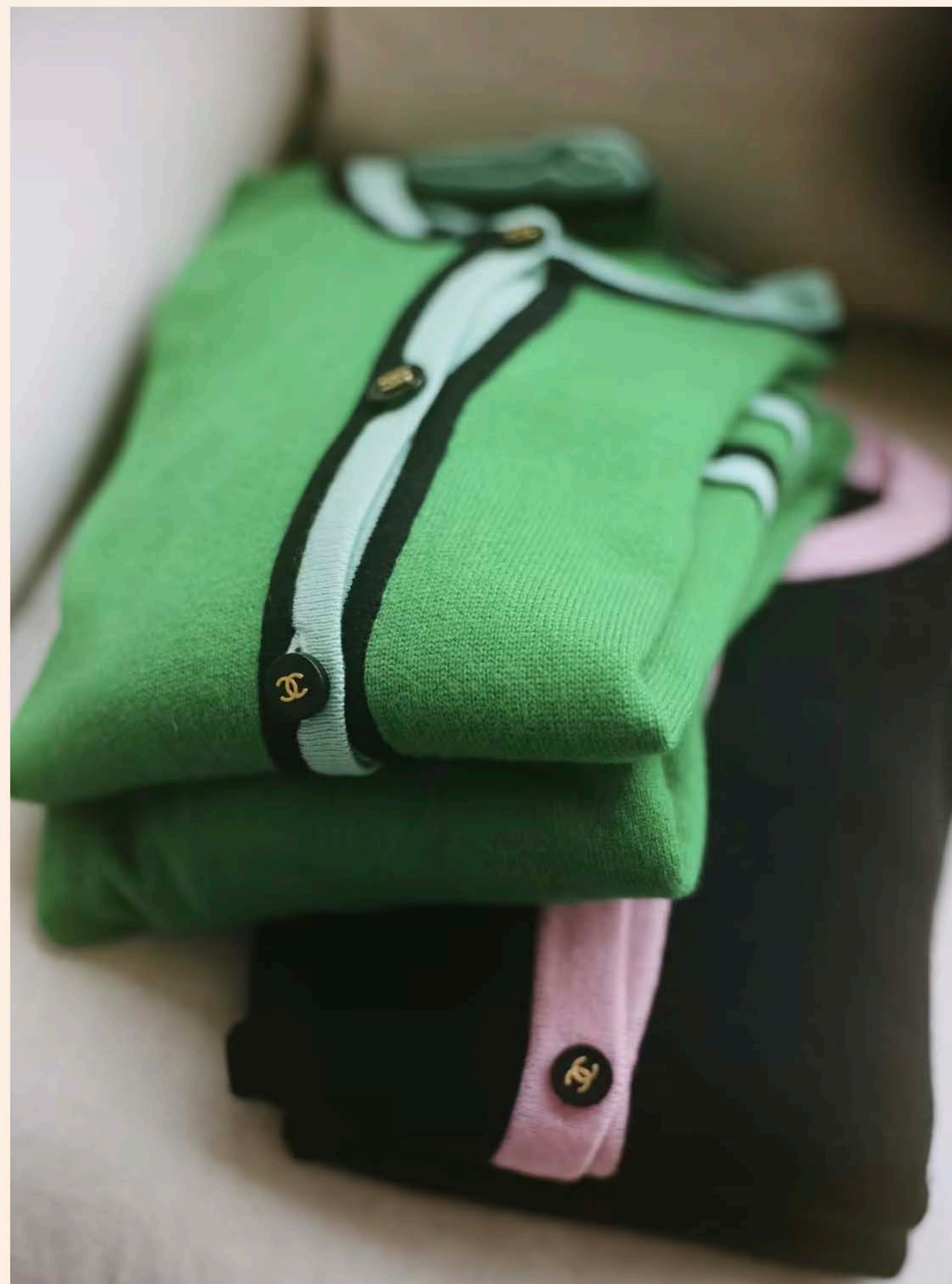
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“Mom at a cocktail party at the golf club, in the 1960s. She was always so chic. Notice the earrings!”



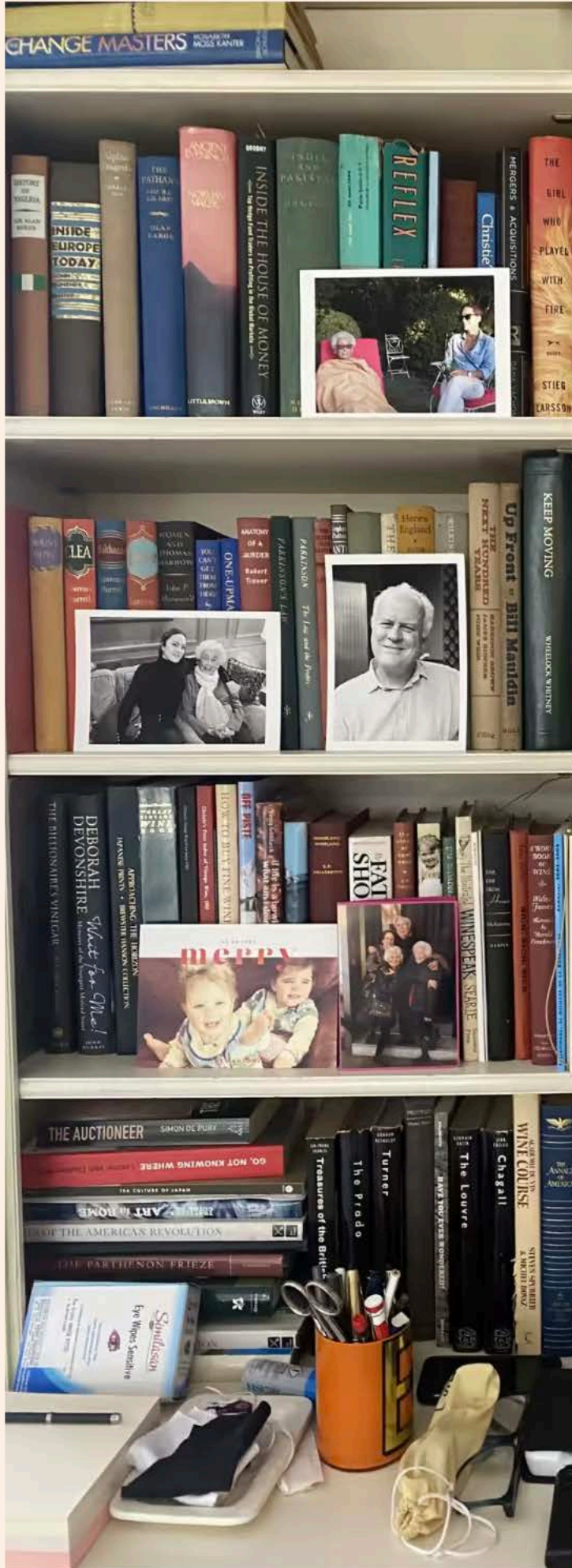
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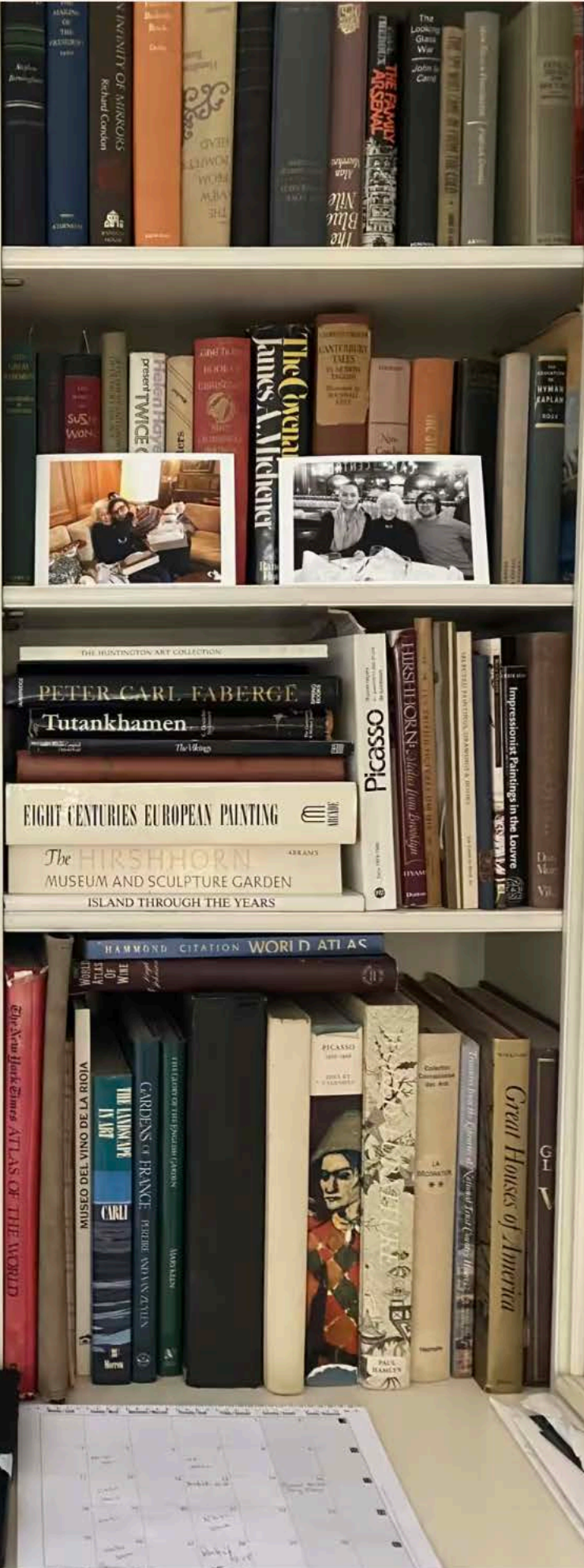
© Pamela Hanson

“Mom’s favourite Chanel twinsets. I kept the green one”



© Pamela Hanson

“Mom spent a lot of time at this desk in the last year of her life. To me, this picture sums up her last 10 years”



Dear Paula & Holley.
I am leaving my
jewelry to you to
divide up as you
see fit, including
Shawn, Megan, Cooper
& Charlotte

© Pamela Hanson

“We found this note with her jewellery after she died. Holley is my sister; Shawn, Megan, Cooper and Charlotte are her granddaughters. We had no idea the note was there. Seeing her handwriting was like hearing her voice”



© Pamela Hanson

“Mom died in November and there were still a few red roses clinging on. She loved gardening and so these really seemed poignant to me”



© Pamela Hanson

“We would only sit at the dining-room table if there was a large family gathering – which there often was. Mom was a fabulous hostess. She had the tablecloths made to fit the table, and napkins and plates to match. The last time we all came together at this table was in the days after she died”



© Pamela Hanson

“The pool was built very close to the house, which was unusual in those days in Europe,” says Hanson. “It was a reminder of California, where my mother came from”



© Pamela Hanson

“My mother’s favourite Chanel suit. It came out for every wedding or dress-up occasion”



© Pamela Hanson

“These Kambly cookies were her favourite. She cared about her weight and worked out with a Pilates teacher three days a week until the end. When I asked her if she had been eating properly, she always said, ‘Yes, lots of cookies.’ I ate a whole box of them when I last went to Geneva”



© Pamela Hanson

Lola, Mom’s rescue Labrador, is now living with her housekeeper, who looked after her. After Mom died, Lola would go and sit by the sofa where she would lie.”