

# **Memento Mori**

## **Macabre Collection**

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The first occasion I observed a corpse, I was beside the bed of my deceased father. Perfectly still, yet only seconds prior, he had been gripped by a hideous convulsion which threatened to break him in half. There, under the stained and bloody sheets, I looked for the final time upon the lifeless body of my progenitor. I was not frightened and I was not grief-stricken, for I felt that his body had been released from the terrible pain it had long endured. Amid the wailing sound of my mother's misery I gazed at his face and tried not to forget.

In the moments that passed, his body was covered with the soiled sheets, and taken away. As to where it was taken, I did not know, but I remained where I was and closed my eyes. I kept the image of him in my mind for as long as I could.

Memories are fleeting, some more than others, but none is eternally exact. We embellish and decorate our reminiscences with elegant mendacities where our wits fail to recall. This is humanity, and some may say, it is a failing in our creation.

The image of my father's body remained with me for as long as it took me to pass through puberty. After that, he was merely an indistinct figure, present only in my dreams.

A cologne bottle stands empty on my dresser, the last drops long since gone. The faintest of his scent still lingers on the stopper and reminds me of him. It won't be long before the trace is entirely departed; like the sound of his voice and the touch of his gruff, calloused hand, lamented so long ago.

This yearning for loss of memory led me to my current profession as a photographer. For many years I completed an apprenticeship under the experienced guidance of Mr. Saundersfoot, who apart from being a competent photographer, was a skilled teacher. His studio, modest by some standards, was always well used and popular, if not necessarily with the class of society he had hoped to attract.

Saundersfoot taught the basics of the craft, but his ambitions were, at least to me, infuriatingly humble.

„We must cater to the tastes of the masses now, Richard. Photography is not an art; It is merely a function which we use to help us remember.“ That function is exactly the reason why I adore this profession.

Saundersfoot passed, and without an heir, I took his studio as my own. Fashions change like the passage of the seasons and photography was no different. The stilted images of grim faced families sitting precisely on the posing couch were no longer in demand. My training under Saundersfoot, as comprehensive, as it had been, was deliberately conservative. It had focused entirely on capturing the grim faced stoicism of the common man and nothing more adventurous. As a result of this dogmatism, and whilst under my care, W.A. Saundersfoot (Photographer) almost became a financial ruin. I take my share of the blame for that but, had Saundersfoot been alive, the result would have been the same.

It was because this threat that I made the decision to widen the appeal of the studio. For some time I had admired the trick photography done by men far more skilled than I. A headless man with his face served on a salver was a particular favourite. It was with regret that I realised I was unable to produce such wonderful images.

So, for all his inflexibility, Saundersfoot's stoic resistance to change gave me the necessary training to become one of London's finest exponents in the art of *Memento Mori*. The taste for „Remember your mortality“ photography amongst the whole of society was almost an overnight phenomenon. It provided others with something I would never have; an exact recollection of their loved ones in death.

You may find this somewhat distasteful, and indeed, when my first assignment came I found it an arduous task. As they say though, money is money, and when that commodity is in short supply, it is sometimes necessary to do tasks against which your soul rebels.

My first assignment was a simple task. Yet, as it was my first, it forever remains with me. A girl of twenty years had been taken by consumption. In life, no doubt, she had been pretty with a ruddy complexion but in death, as one would expect, her features were wan. Since the death of my father, this was the first corpse I had seen. If it had not been for the weary look in their grief stricken eyes I am ashamed to say my revulsion would have been obvious. Nevertheless, I remained professional, and photograph her I did. There were three beating hearts and one stopped for eternity gathered in the little parlour of their home as I arranged my equipment.

Dressed in a black silken gown with a string of pearls hung around her neck, she was propped between her parents. Her eyes were closed as they had been in her dying moments and were left so; after all she was merely sleeping to them. Her mother grasped her daughter's stiffened hand and wailed briefly before her husband brushed away her tears. I cannot stand to think what this loss did to their lives and what became of them after the photograph was taken. In my mind I hope it provided a small amount of comfort. My wish was that they could look upon their daughter everyday, as I was not able to with my father.

I will not trivialise the matter with talk regarding the technical aspect of photography. Suffice it to say, it is nothing more than a gruesome scientific joke, that in memento mori the living becomes the ghost. The very tranquillity possessed by cadavers negates the lengthy exposure the image requires. In contrast, the living cannot be still for even a moment. The beat of our heart and the blood in our veins send silent messages to our nerves; like a shudder in the cold or a flinch from the debauched touch of a corpse's hand. It is in the instant that they move that their image becomes a ghostly blur on the copy.

It was not always the case that I was called to photograph the dead. I have, on many occasions, been called to record an image premortem. That is to say, in the moments where all hope is gone, I am called to record their image forever more. It has often been the case where I wait in the shadow of some darkened room until the priest has said his piece. Then, like the reaper himself, I come to take their soul. It is no different, for they say at the moment of death our souls can go anywhere they choose and why not the lens of my camera? It is I though, and not the reaper, who leave a living image behind and not some faded memory of what went before.

The images I leave behind record the moment perfectly. Unlike my brain which fails to recall much at all. So, with that in my mind, I will not attempt to recollect any more of the appointments I've been given. Besides, it may be considered in bad taste to reveal very much more.

This précis of my career brings me to this point and the story I now wish to tell. For, although I am well used to being in the company of the dead, and as you have heard, recording their image. My most recent assignment was unlike any other I had previously taken and left me disturbed.

I received a call at my studio one morning from a well presented, and clearly, affluent gentleman. His entrance, however, was far less elegant than his attire. Such was his haste that he tripped on the stoop as he entered, almost falling to the floor.

He removed his top hat. „Sir, I am Rowland Eldritch from Eldritch and Maypole, solicitors at law. You may have heard of us?“

„I’m afraid not Mr Eldritch. Fortunately I have had little use for legal matters thus far. What service may I be, sir?“

Eldritch assumed a distinct look of disappointment to his flabby face. It was clear his reputation was of great importance to him. „You are Saundersfoot I presume?“

„No sir, I am Richard...“ Eldritch held up his gloved hand. My name was obviously unimportant.

„I have come to request your services.“

I took up my ledger and made preparations to record the details. „And who are you acting on behalf of Mr Eldritch?“

„Acting for?“ He had momentarily been distracted by the display of my work.

I tapped my ledger. „Yes sir. Who shall I record as the client?“

He peered closely at a photograph of a poor deceased infant wrapped in her christening gown. „These photographs are particularly disturbing.“ He removed a white handkerchief and dabbed at his mouth. He clearly found the material distasteful.

„Sir?“ I enquired again.

„Yes?“ He turned away from the image with a look of disgust on his face. „The name? You do not need to know the name.“ He handed me a card adorned with an address. „My client does not wish to be named but you are requested at the address precisely at eight o’clock this evening.“

I took the card from him. „My rate sir is...“

Eldritch turned away as if the discussion of finance was as distasteful as the image of the infant. „I have been instructed to pay double your usual rate. I suggest you accept the offer.“

I need not think about such an offer, for although business was good, there was no telling when the boom would end. „Gladly I’ll accept it sir. You may tell your client I shall arrive promptly at eight.“

Eldritch said no more and walked from the studio as quickly as he could without running. Photography, I suspected, was not to his taste; particularly photography of the dead.

I turned the card over in my hand. It was simple yet with an elegance to the writing which suggested wealth. Indeed, being paid so handsomely for what was my usual business indicated a strong desire in addition to fortune. I put the excessive payment down to the urgent nature of the request and gave the matter no more thought.

I arrived at the address, as instructed, promptly at eight and gave the driver a penny to aid me with my equipment. I knew from the card that the address was on a fashionable and expensive avenue in Belgravia; and had Saundersfoot still been alive, he would have clapped both hands together at his good fortune. This

was the abode of a family of considerable wealth. I took the steps and the door and knocked three times. Attached to the door was wreath of laurel, tied with black ribbon. It warned of a death within.

A servant allowed me entrance and led me, in silence, along a gloomy corridor. In the flickering light of the spluttering gas lamps I spied portraits hung on the wall. As soon as the vague image of one faded away, so began the frame of another. I could not hope to count them all, for not a bare space of wall was to be found. The members of this family were all recorded on canvas in oil; but none was as exact as a photograph taken by me.

In the hall I was presented by a valet who, taking some of my equipment, led me in silence up the stairs to the second floor. The picture was no less gloomy for although the portraits had gone, they had been replaced by faded and tattered tapestries. In the passing of a loved one you may expect the mood to be black, yet flowers are often placed to brighten the tone. In this house no such attempt had been made. The chill atmosphere of the house was both literal and symbolic and a shiver danced swiftly along my spine.

The valet led me to the front of the house and into the drawing room. Immediately the mood changed. A fire had been lit and raged noisily in the hearth, sending crackling shadows all about the room. I was greeted by a tall gentleman of advanced years. He immediately took my hand. „Sir, I am glad you have come. Will you take a brandy before we begin?“ He indicated for the valet to wait.

„I should like that very much sir. How may I address you? Your man failed to introduce me.“ His frail hand gripped mine with a bony embrace. The man was gaunt, almost skeletal, and I suspected whatever expression he chose to wear would present an unpleasant visage. An oversized suit hung from his frame like a filthy coal sack.

„I am Matthew, simply Matthew.“

I looked about the room. Whatever decadence this room had seen in the past was now long forgotten. Ragged drapes clung to the windows; their threadbare filaments were like tangled webs.

„Would you sit for a moment?“ Matthew indicated a sofa beside the fire and the valet placed a crystal glass in my hand.

The sofa had been well used and whatever upholstery remained was like medieval torture instruments along my back.

Matthew took his position beside the fireplace and put his hand upon the lid of a black urn. „I expect you are wondering why I have paid you twice your usual amount to conduct this assignment.“

„Sir, it is not my place to wonder. I have come at short notice and that is enough for me.“

Matthew laughed; a cold and miserable sound. „Very good, but I shall tell you a little of the matter before us. I have seen your eyes upon my house; the signs of decay and loss are evident.“ He tapped the lid of the urn. „My wife is long gone but she would despair at what has become of us. As you can see we were a wealthy family but neither time nor fortune has been our friend. There have been... indiscretions which have taken considerable portions of that wealth and there have been more recent incidents which have taken my health. I know I am not long for this plane.“

Matthew, appeared ill, of that there was no doubt. If this was to be my assignment, then so be it, although it appeared somewhat premature.

„You have finished your brandy sir?“ Matthew asked and I handed the glass to the valet.

Matthew took the urn of his wife's ashes and walked towards the drawing room door. „Shall we begin then?“

The valet took my equipment and we both followed Matthew back out into the cold passage. Should one miscreant spark from the spluttering lamp land on the dusty old tapestries I had no doubt we would all be cremated in an instant. Matthew's pace was slow and deliberate, but considering his frame, this was unsurprising.

Eventually we reached a closed door. „Let us begin then.“ He pushed open the door and stepped inside.

As I have told before, I am well used to houses where death has a room of its own. Even with that experience, there was nothing which could prepare me for the foul, malevolent stench of decay which greeted my passage into that room. I swallowed the sour taste of brandy as it warmed my throat on the way back out of my gut.

On every surface there stood jugs of decaying lilies, their petals drooping and brown. Whatever perfume their delicacy once possessed was now absorbed in the reek of mortis. I was thankful no fire had been lit in the room, for although the biting chill of the air was uncomfortable, I had no doubt the heat would have amplified the reek.

A single high backed sofa was turned away to face the empty fireplace; there were no other items of furniture present. Above the hearth, an enormous elaborate mirror was hung and in the oppressive gloom I could see a gossamer veil had been draped upon it.

I could see no body; but the smell told my senses one was present. It was undoubtedly lying in the dark, hidden from view.

„My son lies there.“ Matthew's bony finger, like a diseased twig, pointed to the sofa.

With some dread I approached the settee; it was uncommon for a body to hold such a reek as this. At no other residence had I gone beyond a four day wake; I suspected this had been longer.

Lying full length on the settee was the body of a man. He was dressed, as was the custom, in an evening suit. Neither the valet nor Matthew had come any closer to the sofa and I now stood and alone in the gloom. It was impossible to see any further detail.

„I shall need more light sir; without that, I will be unable to photograph your son.“

„Bring more lamps!“ Matthew shouted at the valet in a voice which was unexpectedly harsh.

I fought back the urge to run out of the room and onto the street; the air was a poisonous fume.

Thankfully after only a few seconds the valet appeared with two more lamps. He was reluctant to bring them to me.

„Take them to him then you miserable wretch!“ Matthew ordered him again.

The valet walked quickly towards me and placed the lamps on the mantelpiece.

Immediately the horror of what lay before me was revealed in a ghostly glow. There was a body, as I had expected, but what lay above the collar and tie had long ceased to be a face.

My eyes grew wide in shock and I gasped for the foul air around me. There was nothing but tendons and sinew stretched over bone and muscle. Bulging eyes stared back at me with a lifeless gaze. „What is this?“ I uttered.

„Why sir, it is my son, Jonathan.“ Matthew spoke gently again. „Jonathan Lovett.“

The name Lovett was familiar to me, as I suspect it was to all of London, if not the world. He had slain a great many men, ripping their faces to make macabre masks for his own amusement. Now, here I was, about to take a photograph of his decomposed body. What ill deeds had I done to deserve this?

I could not take my eyes from the atrocity which lay before me; I was hypnotised by the rotting corpse.

„Sir, I do not think I can take this photograph; he is too far gone.“ A cloud of flies gathered over the festering remains of Jonathan Lovett's face. They had clearly been disturbed from another part of his rotting body.

I heard footsteps on the oak floor beside me, yet still I could not look away. „No, you have quite misunderstood my request. I must apologise for the misunderstanding.“ I noticed his voice was softer than it had been when ordering the valet. With relief I looked away and gazed upon Matthew Lovett. My relief was short lived.

Matthew Lovett's face had been skeletal and unpleasant, but that was nothing as to what it had become.

„My contacts at Scotland Yard assure me this was the mask my son was wearing when he was arrested.“ With the shrunken skin of a dozen men stretched over his face Matthew Lovett laughed.

„And now, you shall photograph me with the face of my son; the last of the Lovett men together on an everlasting image.“

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