

# Memento Mori

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Sara Davis

Miranda had always been a pretty girl, and had always wanted to get her picture taken. Today was the day. Her hair was curled, her clothes were neatly pressed, and she had a bouquet of white lilies. Mother had gone to the three studios in town to see what their accommodations were before selecting the perfect one.

Thomas, her little brother, was not excited. Mother and Father had wanted him to be in the picture with Miranda, but he would have refused. Miranda didn't mind, of course, she had always loved being in the spotlight. When she was small, Father used to take her to the department store on Main Street to pick out new fabric for Mother to sew her dresses. She always picked red. Bold, brass, beautiful. Perfect for Miranda.

Today though, Miranda wore white; white, to match her lilies. Mother had carefully put soft pink ribbons in her hair, to match the soft, muted color of her lips. She was an angelic picture of perfection. They arrived at the studio just a bit early, and needed to wait for another family to finish with their portraits. Father held Miranda close, touching her hand. Mother ran her fingers through Miranda's curls, which Miranda always loved. Thomas sat in the stool nearest the door, a frown on his face.

The photographer approached them as soon as the other family left. He greeted them politely and asked if they were ready. Yes, Father said. Miranda was ready. Mother and Father both helped with the posing; they wanted this picture to be perfect. Miranda was always very particular about the way she looked. The flowers were arranged in front of her chest and Miranda looking down, as though they were the most beautiful flowers in the world. And with Miranda, they were. The photographer told them the exposure would take five minutes. That wasn't a problem for Miranda.

Mother and Father watched, silently, still. Father put his arm around Mother's shoulder. Thomas stayed on the stool, only now he was turned with his back to Miranda, looking out the window at a white coach moving slowly towards the studio. After extending the accordion of the camera body, the photographer ducked behind the drape, to

check the focus. Then, taking the lens-cap in his hand, he began the exposure, careful to not bump the camera and make the photograph blur. He knew a photograph was an important vestige.

Miranda—her expressionless gaze fixed on the flowers, golden tresses falling around her relaxed shoulders, thin mouth unmoving—had never been more beautiful. Nor would she ever be again. Mother knew that when the long exposure was finished, the moment would be gone. Passed on and lost to time. Although she knew Miranda's face would be forever preserved on delicate silver nitrate, she tried to commit each detail, the curtains, the lilies, the curls, all to memory. A photograph was a special thing, a sacred thing. The light that reflected off of Miranda's soft, pale skin touched the exposure plate, creating the image, and in this way, the photograph was part of her. Mother selfishly wished she could be standing there with her daughter, but a portrait was very expensive. They only had enough money for one sitting fee.

The photographer carefully replaced the lens-cap and let Father know they were finished. A single tear escaped Father's eye as he assisted the photographer in dismantling the body rest that helped Miranda sit straight through the long exposure. Thomas turned from the window, where the white coach waited. Mother couldn't hold it in any longer, and threw herself down on her daughter's lap. Miranda, still and silent, her gaze fixed on the flowers, had gotten her very first, and her very last photograph.