Fashion in the face of adversity

Key words: adversity / disguise / social presentability / family portrait / Victorian virtue

Abstract

Regardless of social status or location, fashion has played a pivotal role in the history of the family unit: how it wishes it was, and how it wants to be publicly perceived. A cleanly dressed and manicured family presents a public image of unthreatening respectability; an anonymous, seamless blend with the rest of the community. Alongside its outward celebration of "family", it can also hide a multitude of closeted secrets: poverty, violence, sadness and depression.

The tradition of 'portrait' is one that has moved across all social boundaries with the advent of photography. No longer only within reach of the wealthy and powerful, photography permitted the capturing of likeness regardless of status. Anyone could choose to disguise their reality and elevate their status through a carefully composed photograph. A poor working class miner can bedeck a hand-me-down Sunday suit to be photographed beside his wife whose torn and dirty hem is disguised by the addition of a cheap piece of lace. Never would they present an image of their true circumstance to be captured forever, to be pitied by, or humiliate future generations.

Through the analysis of archived family portraits from the 1870s to the 1950s this paper aims to reveal the use of fashion as public disguise: a means of acceptance, denial and a stoic resistance to personal circumstance.

Fashion in the face of adversity

Since its inception in 1839 photography has played a pivotal role in the documentation of time: people, objects, locations and fashion are sealed within two dimensional time capsules, readily disclosing intimate and detailed information decades beyond their creation. Where once only the moneyed classes could afford the vanity of portraiture, photography eventually permitted all levels of society a means of forever securing their image. The sober reality of photography with its ability to capture truth and likeness challenged the idealised charms of painted portraiture. However, it too became equally capable of creating absolute fantasy: a carefully constructed frame of body, clothing and props creating delusional images of self that capture forever a desired persona in preference to a harsher reality scarred by domestic trauma, violence, depression and grief.

In her monologue *"Dickens' Women"* the English actress Miriam Margolyes exposes the treatment of a wife so abhorrent it served for many in her audience to re-assess the celebrity of the author they had so revered.[1] Charles Dickens did indeed treat his wife Catherine appallingly. After twenty-two years of marriage, the birth of ten children and an unfaltering devotion to his genius, Charles insisted Catherine be debunked for the much younger Ellen Ternan, a woman the same age as his eldest daughter, and shifted the maternal duties of child-raising to his sister-in-law, Georgina. A series of options were delivered to Catherine, the most offensive being the removal of her to the upper floors of their house where she would remain, quietly unseen until society visits required her to return under the pretence of a holistic and functioning marriage. Catherine refused and in 1858 she was decamped to another London house, with a minimum allowance and only her eldest son for company. She was refused contact with her remaining children. Even invitations to their weddings were deliberately not forthcoming by decree of their father.

Catherine and Charles were married in 1836, a year prior to Victoria's ascension to the throne. For all intents and purposes, they were the quintessential Victorian couple. Charles became wealthy not by inheritance, but intellectual skill, a destiny made possible in the "radical new order of this capitalist, urbanised world."[2] Catherine was a 'good catch', born of respectable parents and a picture of Victorian virtue and grace. Indeed, the only person to look more like the divinely anointed Queen Victoria was Queen Victoria herself.

Charles Dickens celebrity coincided with the burgeoning photographic industry of the mid-Nineteenth Century. We are all familiar with the portraits of him since so many photographers jostled to capture the likenesses of leading figures of the day to boost their own respectability and trade.

But, what of Catherine? She too was photographed, as befitted her status within the upper middle class, who heartily embraced this new, exclusive and expensive technology. Until the advent of photography, portraiture was only within the reach of the powerful and the super rich;[3] those who could afford to sit for the likes of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough. Photography permitted the middle class to capture its likeness and rising status with a process then still out of reach of the lower orders. The decision of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to

become patrons to the newly established “Photographic Society of London” in 1853 only served to assert the desirability of the new art to the establishment and the nouveau riche.

The photographs of Catherine depict a woman of means aligned to the example presented by her monarch. Her dress is layered and complex, denying her access to any physical labour; “power in general wears more clothes than service.”[4] Her face and hands are the only visible flesh, reinforcing the sobriety of her Victorian virtue. The voluminous and ruffled dress would have blended well within the draped and abundantly decorated parlour of her home, in which corners and planes were conspicuously absent under layers of fabric and bric-a-brac. She was the epitome of modern taste: “that is the capacity not to be vulgar.”[5]

Apparent nowhere in the image is the reality of her life: the progressive collapse of her marriage in an era that decreed its sanctity higher than any other domestic institution; the death of an infant at eight months of age; and the dismissal by her husband because she dared to age, and he thought her dull compared to his own intellectual capacity. If Catherine, like her sister Mary, the model for all Dickensian virgins, had died at 17 with her youth and virtue still intact, perhaps Charles would have liked her much better.

The slight sadness in her eyes provides a glimpse of reality, but this is a familiar quality evident in many portraits of its age. Her emotional state is probably less to blame for her look than the lengthy exposure times required to secure the photograph. The sitter had to sit unflinchingly still, at times secured at the head by iron clamps, and not even permitted the facial movement of a smile.[6] This appearance was looked upon less as an unfortunate side-effect of the process, and more as a “reflection of the enduring belief in character and morality.”[7]

The adversity of Catherine’s situation is well hidden in the photographs. Core to her well disguised secret is her clothing: her outward presentation that all is well and as it should be. Unlike the rest of her life, controlled by a dismissive and cruel husband, she could still control the intimacy of her clothes, and therefore her social presentability. This, combined with a new process acclaimed for its ability to capture truth as much as likeness, meant Catherine’s shame and heartache was well hidden from her social circuit. It is only her position as first wife to a famous author that her sadness is documented; a sadness that would otherwise have gone to the grave with her, leaving only the imagined reality of the portraits as her legacy.

Remove her celebrity connection and Catherine's portrait is really just one of thousands of images captured by the photographic process of her time. It is as aesthetically unremarkable as any collection of domestic ancestral photographs. Its true value is probably little more than a recorded slither of social history: a documentation of Victorian apparel. But, the pain well hidden within makes the portrait infinitely more compelling.

For many of us collections of ancestral photographs from the end of the Nineteenth Century to the present form the basis of a familial identity: a sense of belonging, worth and survival. A lack of celebrity connection makes them no less important. Regardless of social status or location, portrait photography and the fashion within it have played a pivotal role in the history of the family unit: how it wishes it was, and how it wants to be publicly perceived. A cleanly dressed and manicured family presents a public image of unthreatening respectability; an anonymous, seamless blend with the rest of the community. Alongside its outward celebration of 'family', it can also hide a multitude of closeted secrets: poverty, violence, sadness and depression.

A perilous journey

Oscar Wilde once warned that "they who go beneath the surface … who read the symbols, do so at their peril."[8] At the risk of defying one of the greatest minds of any age, a perilous journey is to be undertaken: unearthing the truth beneath the reality disguised in the ancestral portrait photograph.

The following photographs are a random collection dating from the late Nineteenth Century to the middle of the Twentieth Century. They are ordinary images of unremarkable people. Their stories are deeply personal but largely inconsequential; of no more importance than those collections of anonymous photographs that occasionally surface in second hand stores or opportunity shops that no one remembers or cares enough for to keep. Within each photograph though, lies a richer narrative, and like that of Catherine Dickens, is disguised within the clothes they are depicted in.

Figure 1. Nellie and William
Black and white photograph, ca. 1921, photographer unknown
(Part of author's own collection)

The aging couple in figure 1 appear to look no different to any other aging couple of their day. The fact that they had reached such an age at all is probably their only distinguishing feature. Their ethnicity is indistinguishable, their situation only hinted at and their location could be any number of towns in any number of countries. The reality of their situation is infinitely more interesting, some may say tragic, than the image eludes to.

By the late Nineteenth Century the advance of photography had become so much a part of western culture it no longer remained in the clutches of the middle and upper classes. "One way to cope with a new invention is to tame it, to domesticate its marvels until it becomes a familiar tool, used day by day to ease familiar tasks."[9] By now all levels of society were being captured by the process; at its most base was the cataloguing of criminal mugshots.

The couple pictured are Nellie and William, Cornish migrants indentured to work in the desolate and desperately hot gold mines of Ravenswood, Queensland: not quite convicts, but not exactly free settlers either. While the photograph suggests no great difference in age, Nellie is 14 years younger than her husband. William is 69, making the withered Nellie only 55. This apparent gentle recollection of graceful old age is already beginning to sour. The dress too suggests they have been photographed at the tail end of the Nineteenth Century, when in fact the photograph dates from around 1921.

Nellie and William had led a difficult life; one distinguished only by its hardships, poverty and isolation in an unfamiliar and hostile environment that they had no choice but to call "home". The arrival of each of their nine children only added to the desperateness of their situation. As with

most women of her status, Nellie only ever had one good dress, the one she was married in thirty-eight years prior in 1883, now dyed black to mourn the children she had already outlived. Women's suffrage and the dawn of the flapper meant little to Nellie as she sits trussed in her Victorian shroud of unhappiness. Beside her William sits in his only set of good clothes, now a dishevelled and unkempt layer of garments, and, like Nellie's, surely far too stifling to be worn in a dusty, hot Queensland mining town.

William's clothes however suggest he has perhaps embraced with his lot in life more easily than Nellie. His demeanour is more relaxed and reinforced by his open jacket and loose and somewhat askew tie. Men have a history of referencing their qualities through the open suit: "…the opening of their garments show ease, a confident, sociable relaxation, a public abandonment of shields and guards."[10] His apparel is the antithesis of Nellie's stiff, drastically dated dress, yet both serve a greater purpose: a skin of respectability donned to deliberately disguise their reality. Never would they present an image of their true circumstance to be captured forever, to be pitied by, or humiliate future generations.

Sons and lovers

The man featured in figure 2 is John, sixth son of Nellie and William. His children were photographed at the same sitting. His wife is conspicuous by her absence. In "Showing and Hiding: Equivocation in the Relations of Body and Dress" John Harvey expands upon Mary Douglas' argument that we have "two bodies", the physical body and the social body: "One function of dress is precisely to conjure for us different bodies that suit different occasions in different worlds."[11]

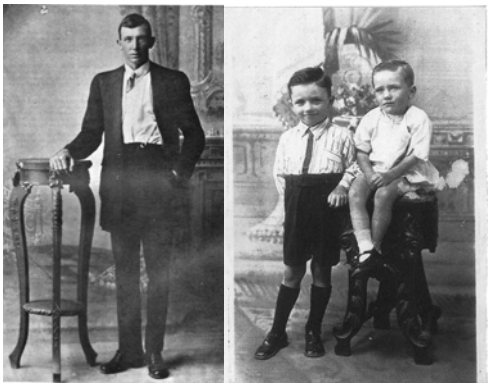

Figure 2. John and his children
Black and white photograph, ca. 1925, photographer unknown
(Part of author's own collection)

John's clothes, his social body, were carefully chosen for the only portrait he ever sat for and suggest a world vastly different to his own: a conjuring trick even more accomplished than that of his parent's image. In 1918 he was married at twenty-three to a child bride of fourteen and lived in a two-room shanty constructed of iron and hessian bags in the Queensland town of Giru. Of no profession or trade, he survived as an itinerant labourer. In less than a year from the portrait he would lay dead in his front yard, shot point blank in the chest by his best friend, and unknown to him, lover of his young wife.

Nothing of John's reality is in the least bit evident in either the photograph of him or his children. The refusal of his wife to be photographed at the same sitting may give some clue to the state of their marriage, but what is captured in the image could well be a man of substance and means. His suit is clean, well fitted and smart. "Smart clothes have various functions; they indicate success, distinction and style."[12] He poses at ease against a jardinière stand within an opulent interior of carved ornamentation, scrolling ironwork and heavy drapes. His environment is the photographer's prop: an artifice of painted canvas and aging furniture, behind which sprawls a harsh Australian landscape rather than a grand house of wealth and good fortune. "[Studios] borrowed liberally from the traditions of the painted portrait, and provided domestic props that implied affluence and underlined the client's status as an independently prosperous and socially significant individual;"[13] characteristics that could not be attributed to the unfortunate John.

His children too, are dressed in clothes otherwise unfamiliar to them. The transcript from the trial of his murderer (published in the *The North Queensland Register*, January 25, 1926) describes the children as "down in the scrub playing" at the time of the shooting. High-pitched pants, tie and long socks have no place in "the scrub". They are dressed in their own "smart clothes"; less a reflection on them but their parent's perceived ability to provide for a family within a disciplined and respectful Christian home. The reality could not be further from the truth. The advent of photography was hailed for its ability to capture reality with complete objectivity.[14] Its apparent bias towards the factual[15], however, was easily tampered with by both photographer and sitter. If neither wished it, the truth could be altered through an artificial backdrop and a careful selection of clothes. With the snap of a shutter, the desired reality is documented, and the brutal truth buried forever.

Figure 3. Mary
Black and white photograph, 1922, photographer unknown
(Part of author's own collection)

The young woman in figure 3 is Mary, photographed in 1922, far more a woman of her time than the prematurely aged and unfortunate Nellie. She represents the first generation of emancipated Australian women: able to vote, work independently, and dress outside the prudish expectations of her Victorian mother. She possesses no long, high-maintenance locks made famous by the Pears advertisements. Instead, her hair is short and pinned almost into the shape of the decade's infamous cloche hat. The single strand of pearls is understated, but infers a degree of wealth. Her dress, while modest, reveals an ample amount of feminine fleshiness. Seductively wedged into the soft flesh of her upper arms are two gold bands. All this emerging out of the photographer's smoky haze like the ethereal Siren. Careful lighting softened the effect on the skin as she appears and disappears from the surface of the photograph.

Mary lived her life in service. Her youth was spent in kitchens and laundries, not ballrooms and theatres. By the time of this photograph she had two illegitimate children to two different fathers, each child covertly hidden in obliging but different families.

The pearls were borrowed, the dress was cheap, and the gold armbands probably made her contemporaries think 'Jezabel' rather than 'Siren'. Even the smoky haze is a cheap photographer trick of "dodging" the exposure.

But, beyond her desire to present a personal fantasy of affluence and leisure well above her station, there is truth in Mary's portrait: her reality as a sexual being. Her gaze is straight and forthright, not a girlish virginal tilt. Her sexiness oozes above and below the tourniquet of her armbands, pulsing through the slight swelling of soft flesh as opposed to masculine muscle. She

is a woman whose "identity has been swayed by male desires,"[16] and in reality was probably cursed by them as well. Men, while willing participants in a woman's undoing, were often the first to denounce her virtue as well.

Figure 4. Jack
Black and white photograph, ca. 1925, photographer unknown
(Part of author's own collection)

Jack in figure 4 is the father of Mary's second child: a wealthy landowner whose grand homestead housed the kitchen in which Mary worked as scullery maid. His portrait accurately depicts his status: moneyed, confident and powerful. His suit is tailored, not handed down. Its inner layers are buttoned and structured, but the coat open to suggest a degree of ease and social engagement. His tie is straight and properly knotted, suggesting a degree of familiarity with the item. The suit is powerful, a symbol of "mental shrewdness, foresight and authority."[17]

Is this then an accurate representation of status through fashion and photography, without some element of preconceived concealment? Jack, aware that his liaison with Mary resulted in a child did not marry her (as the period would demand), or prevent her from concealing the infant in another's home. Marriage to scullery maids and illegitimate children did little for ones ascension up the social ladder. Is this then the reality hidden within the photograph: one man's power to dismiss a mother and child whose unfortunate situation he had so readily contributed to? 'Cad' and 'bounder' were probably the worst criticisms levelled at him, but I suspect delivered with a charming nudge and a wink. His Gatsby-like demeanour remained safely intact.

Brides and debutants

> She was dressed in rich materials – satins and lace, and silks all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependant from her hair, but her hair was

> white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses less splendid than the dress she wore, and half packed trunks were scattered about. She had not quite finished dressing for she had but one shoe on – the other was on the table near her hand – her veil was but half arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with those trinkets and with her handkerchief and glove, and some flowers and a prayer book, all confusedly heaped about the looking glass.[18]

Such is the description of one English literature's most infamous bridal outfits, that of Miss Havisham, in Charles Dicken's *Great Expectations*. Miss Havisham's situation is well documented in the novel: a bride jilted on her wedding day at precisely "twenty minutes to nine o'clock"[19] at which point she continued to breath but ceased to live. She is a macabre and withered embodiment of anger, pity, cunning and revenge. Yet, she sits at her decaying wedding breakfast adorned in the quintessential well-heeled bridal attire that has remained largely unchanged for more than a century.

Figure 5. a progression of bridal portraits from 1877 to 1950
From left to right; *Jennie H. Power on her wedding day*, 1877;
Wedding day of Mr and Mrs J. Ruffles of Chermside, 1900;
James and Minnie McGinn, 1901;
George Marshall and his bride Ellen Hilder, 1910;
Bride and groom, ca. 1923;
Alexander Mellers and his bride, Elsie Grenning, 1928.
(All images courtesy of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Queensland Digital Library viewed 2 January, 2008, http://enc.slq.qld.gov.au)
Hazel Mead, Charters Towers, Queensland, 1950
(Part of author's own collection)

Does the wedding dress, documented in the wedding portrait, conceal, as it did for Miss Havisham, emotions of the bride beyond joy and happiness?

The collection of wedding and bridal portraits in figure 5 demonstrates the resilience of the wedding dress, remaining largely unaltered for a hundred years. The hem rises in the 1920s but drops again, sweeping the floor in 1950 as it did in 1840 when Victoria set the trend for the white wedding dress when she married her cousin, Albert of Saxe-Coburg.

The dress "is an emblem of the purity and innocence of girlhood, and the unsullied heart she now yields to the chosen one."[20] Does the dress, as beautiful as it is, help conceal the young women's anxieties that stretch well beyond wedding-day nerves? These are women marrying in an era that pre-dates sexually active co-habitation. Their virginity so vehemently protected for so long, was now to be offered up as part of the marriage ritual. The notion of "yielding" reinforces the Victorian stereotype of female subservience; sex for men was a right, for their wives, a duty, devoid of desire and gratification. Despite the abundance of Victorian pornography that begs to question the prudishness of the era, women largely did enter into marriage with little or no sexual experience.

With sex came its consequence, pregnancy. It would have been common for these new brides to have witnessed the experiences of other married women, among the most tragic, the agony of childbirth and the loss of infants. Even royalty was not spared the tragedy of horrific childbirth. Most famously, the beloved Princess Charlotte of Wales bled to death in 1817 after an agonising fifty-hour labour to deliver a breached, still-born son. She had already suffered two miscarriages prior to this pregnancy. At the time of her death the princess was 21.

Despite medical advances beyond the beginning of the 1800s, childbirth was a dangerous, epidural-free experience well into the Twentieth Century. The death of infants and labouring mothers was not unfamiliar. In Australia, for every thousand babies born in 1901, over 100 would die before their first birthday.[21] Women had good reason to worry.

One cannot assume that the women pictured entered into loveless marriages. But, if so, they entered a union they could not easily escape without bringing shame and disgrace upon themselves. This was their expected destiny. The insidious tag of "spinster" was one to be avoided, and for those it described, one to be pitied. The exquisite dress disguises all their anxieties, presenting an outward symbol that all is good. "The good was also the beautiful, and woman the embodiment of beauty, was also the personification of morality, responsible for the moral dimension of family life."[22]

The wedding portrait provided a means of asserting respectability, success and the sanctity of marriage and family.[23] The dress alone emanated all the symbols of unblemished virtue, moral rigor and feminine beauty, but beneath its elegance lurked a combination of fear, trepidation, naivety and surrender.

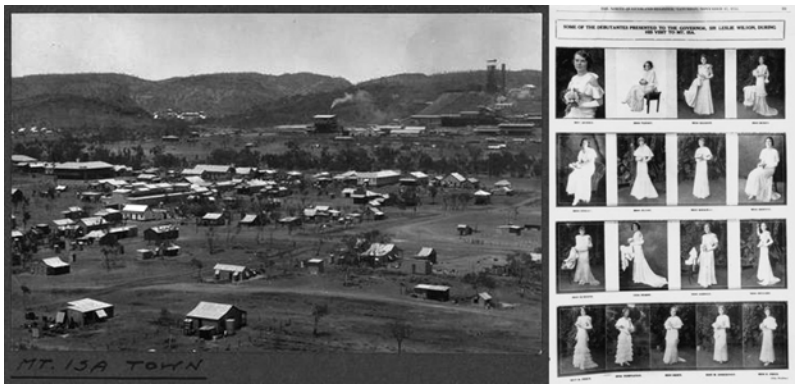

Figure 6. The mining town of Mount Isa, North West Queensland c, 1935, beside a page from the North Queensland Register from 17 November 1934, illustrating the towns latest debutants.
(John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, Queensland Digital Library, viewed 2 January, 2008, http://enc.slq.qld.gov.au)

The young women documented in figure 6 are the debutantes presented to the Governor of Queensland Sir Leslie Wilson, in 1934 in the mining town of Mount Isa, in North West Queensland. To their left is the image of the town into which they were coming out: an isolated, raw, new community clustered around a copper, lead and zinc mine only in existence since 1923.

The dresses and women they clothe defy the reality of their location. Even in winter the temperature in this part of the country would render such formality unnecessary, even impossible. As a new mining community there are no sealed roads, few permanent buildings, and a population dominated by men. The physicality of the town was dusty, hot and rough. Yet, here, amid the flies and dust of outback Queensland, these young women are being introduced to society, eligible for marriage, and capable of fulfilling their roles as partisans to the "new rural societies"[24] in which exist "positive ideas of home, of a nation and its language, of proper order, good behaviour and moral values."[25]

At the time the photograph was taken, society women in Great Britain were still being presented at court, a practice not ceased until the ascension of Elizabeth II. The ritual was one of exclusivity and privilege, and one adopted throughout the empire and protected via the proxy of governors and the well-to-do. The adversity of their location would not rob these women of their potential claims for crown and country as future dutiful wives and mothers to a grateful nation.

Memento Mori

The advent of photography led to what many now would consider a strange and disconcerting off-shoot to the trade: that of photographing the recently dead. Post mortem photography today has forensic need, but in the Nineteenth Century, it captured the likeness of family members that would otherwise never exist. While people of all ages were photographed posthumously, it is the images of children that tear at our contemporary sensibilities.

Despite the health reforms that coincided with the rise of the industrial revolution, infant mortality rates were staggeringly high. “Convulsions, tuberculosis, measles and whooping cough, lung diseases, diarrhoea [and] nutritional causes of death”[26] were some of the reasons children died. Others were simply unknown; even “teething” was listed as a cause of death in some rural Australian communities.[27]

While we may now look upon the practice of photographing dead children as macabre, distasteful and disturbing, for the Victorians, for whom infant mortality was a common reality, it was especially precious. “What a comfort it is to possess the image of those who are removed from our sight. We may raise an image of them in our minds, but that has not the tangibility of one we can see with our bodily eyes.”[28]

The infants are presented as though sleeping, photographed in their christening dresses to reflect their purity of soul: cherubic angels ascended to heaven. But, it is the image of the nursing mother, above all others, that presents the best example of the emotional veiling of reality through fashion. Without the prior knowledge of the situation, one would assume the child asleep at her mother’s breast. The horrible reality is quite different: The distress at having herself survived the labour, only to lose the child months later is carefully concealed in the portrait: in her dress, her hair and her jewellery. The young woman is depicted as her age expected: stoically sombre as opposed to distraught and emotionally gutted. Her hair neat and attended, her clothes, pristine and properly clasped with carefully selected jewellery. Her pain, the one we

all fear most, remains largely uncaptured, but we know it's there. "What persists of being human continues to be found embedded within, lurking behind, projected upon or subsiding beneath the human face, and the photographic representation of the face remains the principle tool…for delineating the ghost in the shell."[29]

Conclusion

Fashion depicted in the historical family portrait plays a key role in the outward presentation of respectability and the hiding of the untoward. "Dress is at once a prime form of "conspicuous consumption" – and of especially conspicuous concealment."[30] Concealed within the clothes is not only the body, but the social, emotional and physical reality to which it belongs.

Since the advent of photography, both subject and photographer have toyed with the notion of ideal resemblance; the capturing of a likeness in an artificial reality. The history of portrait photography can be acclaimed for its virtues: "the socially beneficial role it plays in defining beauty, safeguarding memory, and transmitting emotion across the boundaries of distance and even death"[31]. But, equally, it is responsible for blurring the edge between the real and the fantasy; the "is" and the "want to be"; the banal and the fascinating; the living and the dead. It presents a dichotomy of truth: a contradictory mix of ideal representation and sober reality, readily indulged by both photographer and subject.

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