

Likeness

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The rain has been on the roof since Tuesday, and the woman in my doorway is holding her phone out to me the way people hold out a burn.

“Did you take this?”

I know the photograph before I know her. The painted balcony that never existed, the brass lamp I still have, a groom as stiff as a cupboard in a borrowed suit. The bride’s hands are folded on a cream sari with a gold border. Where her face should be there is steam. Not a blur, exactly. A soft grey bloom, as if someone had breathed on the glass from the inside.

“February 1988,” I say. “She wanted the lamp moved and I would not move it.”

The woman lets out a breath she has been holding since the bus. “Then you have the negative.”

“Come in out of the wet.”

Jubilee Studio has been in the same room off Bazaar Road in Mat-tancherry since my father hung the sign in 1961. He photographed the spice merchants and their sons. I photographed their weddings, their passports, their dead. In 2018 the water came up to the second step and I carried thirty one years of negatives upstairs in one night, tin by tin,

while my wife held the torch and told me I was a fool. She was right. I would do it again.

The young people call it the steam because it looks like a bathroom mirror after a hot shower, and because nobody can wipe it.

It is Section 12 of the Personal Likeness Act, if you want the name. Any adult in India may withdraw their appearance. You go to an Akshaya centre, you look into the camera for thirty seconds, you answer questions to show that you are in your right mind, you press your thumb. Thirty days later your face is gone from every certified screen in the country. Every phone, every cloud, every frame, every photograph ever taken of you by anybody, including the one in your own daughter's pocket. A device that wants a licence to be sold here must honour the registry, and they all want the licence.

Paper is not a screen. Film is not a screen.

So for six years, old men with darkrooms have been receiving visitors.

Her name is Neethu Kurian. Forty four, she tells me, as if it were an apology. She works from home, and then she corrects herself: she worked from home. She sits on the stool where forty years of brides have sat and keeps her phone face down on her knee, and every so often turns it over, as if the grey might have lifted while she was not looking.

"My mother is Thressiamma Kurian."

I wait.

"Thressia of the bus stand," she says, a little impatient with me, and then I have it. Forty years outside the Ernakulam bus stand with a board of Kerala lottery tickets clipped like washing on a line. A voice you could hear from the ferry. She called every man under thirty "son" in a tone that made it an insult, and she never sold a winning ticket and never bought one, and she told people so, and they bought from her anyway because she looked at them while she did it. She looked at you as if you were the only person getting off that bus.

“Ask Thressia,” Neethu says. “That was the channel. You might have seen it.”

I have not seen it. Abin, my grandson, has seen it. Later he shows me: an old woman in a plastic chair by a window, telling a young man his haircut looks like a coconut that has been in a fight. Telling a girl from Bengaluru, who has typed a question, that the boy she is asking about will not change, because men do not change, they only move house. Three point one million people follow her. In the comments they call her Ammachi, Grandma, Queen.

“She was sharp,” Neethu says. “She’s still sharp, some mornings. The doctors said keep her talking, it’s good for her. So I kept her talking, and I filmed it, and people loved her. She loved that they loved her. At first.” She turns the phone over. Steam. “It paid for Bindu. The nurse. Eight to eight, six days. Do you know what that costs?”

I say I can imagine.

“Six weeks ago she had a good morning. She got up before me, she dressed herself, she took the seven forty bus to the Akshaya centre in Thoppumpady on her own, first time in a year. She answered every question. She knew the date. She knew the Chief Minister. She knew my name.” Neethu laughs, and it is not a laugh. “They told me afterwards. She was very charming, they said. She made the boy at the desk blush.”

“And then she forgot.”

“And then she forgot. Thirty days later I woke up and the frame in the hall had gone grey. Every video. Two thousand videos. The channel is three million people watching a cloud talk.” She holds up the phone again, the wedding photograph, the bride with no face. “And she stands in front of that frame and asks me who has rubbed her out.”

“She can withdraw the withdrawal.”

“With the same test. She fails it now. The lawyer says a guardian cannot reverse it for her, because a face is not property, it is personal. Personal.”

She says the word as if it were a fish bone. "I am her daughter. Who is more personal than me?"

The rain changes key on the roof. I know what she is going to ask, and I think she knows what I am going to say.

"I have a rule," I tell her. "Since the Act. I print a withdrawn face for the person in it. Nobody else."

There are others in Mattancherry who print for anyone. Two thousand rupees, no questions, and a nice frame for five hundred more. I do not judge them out loud. Some of the people who come are widows who cannot remember their husbands' faces without help, and I do not know what I would do if I were a widow.

"She is the person in it," Neethu says. "She is asking. She just cannot sign."

I go on the Thursday. Abin drives me in the van because my hip is still not right after April, and I sit with the tin of 1988 on my knees like a cake.

The flat is in Palluruthy, third floor, a balcony full of basil in paint tins. Bindu, the nurse, lets us in. She is young and tired and kind in the way that has stopped expecting thanks. In the hall is the frame, a good one, the size of a window, cycling slowly through a life: a girl on a bicycle, a bride, a woman with a baby on her hip, an old woman at a bus stand with a board of tickets. Every face of the woman is steam. The other faces, the bus conductors, the baby, the groom, are perfectly clear. It is the clarity that is terrible. Everybody is there except the person the photographs are of.

Thressiamma is in the plastic chair by the window, the chair from the videos. Her blouse is hooked one hook wrong all the way down, so that the whole front sits a little crooked, like a picture on a wall. Neethu kneels and starts to redo it and her mother bats her hand away without looking.

“Who’s this?”

“Varghese, Amma. From Jubilee Studio. He took your wedding photograph.”

She looks at me. It is the bus stand look, and forty years fall off me like a coat. “Jubilee,” she says. “You made me hold my chin up like a goat at the market.”

“You had a good chin. You were hiding it.”

“I was hiding my teeth.” She shows them to me now, what is left of them, and laughs. “He wouldn’t move the lamp. I told my husband, this man thinks the lamp is the bride.”

Then her eyes slide past me to the hall, and her face changes. I have seen it change like that in the darkroom, when a print goes too long in the developer and the whites start to grey.

“Somebody’s rubbed me out,” she says. Quietly, as if it is a secret. “Look. I’m not there. Who would do that?”

Neethu has her phone up. I do not think she knows she has done it. When her mother says something, her hand rises, the way mine rises to a light meter. On her screen her mother is a grey cloud in a plastic chair, saying who would do that, and the little red dot is counting.

“For the lawyers,” Neethu says, when she sees me see it.

Abin is quiet on the drive back. He is twenty four. He does the passport photographs and the visa photographs and keeps the studio’s accounts on a screen, and he has a girlfriend in Kakkanad who has withdrawn her face, so that in all his photographs of her she is steam, and he says he doesn’t mind, he says it is like being the only person who knows what she looks like. I don’t fully believe him. I don’t fully disbelieve him either.

At the studio he goes into the back without taking his helmet off and comes out with the order book.

“Appachan,” he says. “You were in Lakeshore with the hip. In April.”

“I know where I was.”

He opens it at a page in his handwriting. Under the third week of April:

T. Kurian. One sitting, film, the Hasselblad. One print, ten by eight, fibre paper. Paid cash. Hold for collection, by herself, or when the daughter comes.

“She made me promise not to tell you,” he says. “She said you would argue. She said you always argue.”

“I don’t always argue.”

He looks at me.

“Where is it?”

He has kept it in the drawer under the enlarger, in a brown envelope with the studio’s name stamped on it, and on the envelope in a careful, slanted ballpoint: *THRESSIAMMA. OPEN IT.* The capitals lean to the right as if they are walking into a wind.

“She came in a good morning?” I say.

“She came in a very good morning. She came on the bus. She sat where the brides sit. She asked for the old camera, the one with the cloth, because she said she wanted to be photographed by something that would not tell anybody.” He rubs his face. “I asked her where she wanted me to put the light, and she told me. She knew more about it than me.”

“She watched me for twenty minutes in 1988.”

“She held her chin up,” he says. “She said you would understand.”

I do not open it. It is not mine to open.

We go back on the Saturday. The rain has stopped and the whole of Palluruthy is steaming like a pot, children in the puddles, a man selling umbrellas at half price because nobody believes in umbrellas the day after. Neethu meets us at the door with her eyes swollen. She has been

fighting with somebody on the phone, Bindu tells me in a whisper. The agency. Bindu goes down to four mornings a week from next month. The channel has stopped paying for anything.

“Did you bring the wedding?” Neethu asks.

“I brought something else. It’s hers.”

Thressiamma is in the plastic chair. I give her the envelope. She reads her own name on the front and frowns at it, the way you frown at a bill.

“That’s my writing,” she says.

“Open it, Amma.”

She does it badly, tearing the corner, and Neethu reaches to help, and again the hand bats her away. Inside is the print. Ten by eight, fibre paper, the paper I would have used myself. Abin did it well. He did it better than I would have, perhaps, because he did not know her and so did not try to make her look like anyone.

It is an old woman. Seventy nine. Grey hair oiled flat, the small gold cross, the chin held up a little too high, on purpose, so that it is a joke. And the eyes looking straight into the lens. Straight into you. The bus stand look.

Thressiamma holds it in both hands. For a long moment I think she does not know who it is.

“Clever face,” she says. “Who’s this?”

Then she turns it over, because there is writing on the back, and she has always read the back of things, tickets, bus timetables, the small print. She reads it slowly, moving her lips. Then she reads it again, out loud, in her bus stand voice, so that I can hear every word.

“Thressia. This is you. You did it yourself, on a good morning. Look at it as much as you want. Nobody else has to.”

Her mouth opens. She turns the print back over, and I watch the face on the paper arrive in her, the way an image arrives in the tray: first the darks, then the shapes, then all at once.

“Oh,” she says. “It’s me.”

She laughs. A real one. She slaps the arm of the chair. “Look at the chin,” she says to me. “Jubilee. You see the chin?”

“I see it.”

“I was always cleverer in the mornings.”

Neethu is standing by the frame in the hall. In the frame the bride and the girl on the bicycle and the woman with the baby are cycling by, every one of them steam. She looks from the frame to her mother. Her face is doing something complicated.

“There’s more,” Thressiamma says. “Under.” Her finger finds it on the back of the print, a second line, smaller, the capitals more tired. She hands it to her daughter without looking up. “Read it. My eyes.”

Neethu reads it to herself first. I see her read it twice. Then she reads it out, because her mother is waiting.

“Neethu mol. I am not angry. For forty years I looked at people and they looked back. On the phone they look and I cannot see them. Put it down and I will look at you.”

Nobody says anything. Bindu, in the kitchen doorway, has a tea towel pressed to her mouth. Abin is studying his shoes.

“Why did I write that?” Thressiamma asks. Not upset. Curious. “Were you filming me?”

Neethu does not answer for a while.

“Yes, Amma.”

“A lot?”

“Every day.”

The old woman considers this, the way she used to consider a young man holding out his money for a ticket. Then she nods. "Good girl," she says. "We needed the money." And she goes back to her photograph.

Neethu walks us down to the van. Three flights, slowly, for my hip. At the bottom she stops in the stairwell where the light comes through a pattern of concrete holes and lays coins of sun on all of us.

"She won't remember it tomorrow," she says.

"No."

"So every morning I'll give it to her. And she'll read the back. And she'll find out every morning that she did this to me. That she chose it." She presses the heels of her hands into her eyes. "Three million people are writing to ask if she is dead. What do I tell them?"

"That she's busy."

She almost laughs. Then she says what I have been waiting for since Tuesday. "Print me the wedding. Please. For me. When she's gone, there won't be one face of my mother anywhere I can see. Not one. You understand that? I'll have the cloud and a voice."

I have thought about my answer for four days. It is still not a good one.

"When she's gone," I say, "the print is yours. She wrote 'when the daughter comes.' I think she meant both things."

"That's one photograph."

"It's the one she chose."

"She chose it because I filmed her," Neethu says. "She chose it because of me. It's my fault there's only one."

I do not tell her that it isn't her fault. I am seventy seven and I have spent my life deciding where to put the light, and I have learned that you can light a face so that the shadow falls where it is kind, but you cannot make the shadow go away. It was partly her fault. It was also

money, and love, and three million strangers who liked an old woman better than they liked anyone in their own house. All of it was true at once. A good negative holds all of it.

“Come to the studio,” I say, “some evening. Without the phone. I’ll show you the negative on the light box. You can look at it as long as you like.”

“But not take it.”

“Not take it.”

She looks at me for a long moment. Then she nods, slowly, the way her mother nodded about the money.

She came on a Wednesday, in the evening, when the street was full of the smell of cardamom from the warehouses and the bats were coming out over the ferry jetty. She had left her phone at home. She told me so twice, as if confessing to a sickness, and both times her hand went to her empty pocket.

I put the 1988 negative on the light box. On a negative the dark is light and the light is dark, so a bride is a ghost in a black sari with silver teeth, and her face, which is the darkest thing in the frame, is the brightest. I gave Neethu the loupe and showed her how to hold it.

She bent over the light box for a long time. I sat on the bride’s stool and did not speak. Upstairs, in the tins, are fifty eight years of faces, and I have stopped counting how many of them are steam now on every screen in the country, and how many will be, and I do not know what Abin will do with the tins when I am gone, and I have decided not to leave him any instructions. He knows where to put the light. He proved that in April.

“She’s backwards,” Neethu said at last.

“She is.”

“Everything’s backwards. But it’s her.” She did not lift her eye from the loupe. “She’s looking at you. Over the camera. You can see where she’s looking.”

I had forgotten that. I remember it now. Thressiamma, twenty two, in the cream sari, refusing to look at the lens because the lens could not look back, looking over the top of it at the man underneath the cloth, as if he were the only person getting off the bus.

When Neethu stood up, there was a ring around her eye from the loupe, and she was smiling.

At the door she turned, and she had her hand halfway up before she remembered her pocket was empty. She looked at her hand as if it belonged to someone else. Then she put it down and simply looked at me, in the doorway of my father’s studio, in the last of the light.

I have never let anybody take my photograph. It does not seem right, for a man who stands behind the camera, to go and stand in front of it. But I stood there, under the sign, and let her take it the old way, the slow way, the way the woman at the bus stand took everybody who ever bought a ticket from her.

It is the only portrait of me that exists. I don’t know where she keeps it. I haven’t asked.

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