

The man with the yellow face
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I want to tell you how it happened. But it's not easy. It's all a long time ago now and even though I think about it often, there are still things I don't understand. Maybe I never did.

Why did I even go into the machine? What I'm talking about is one of those instant photograph booths. It was on Platform One at York station – four shots for £2.50. It's probably still there now if you want to go and look at it. I've never been back so I can't be sure.

Anyway, there I was with my uncle and aunt, waiting for the train to London and we were twenty minutes early and I had about three pounds on me, which was all that was left of my pocket money.

I could have gone back to the kiosk and bought a comic, another bar of chocolate, a puzzle book. I could have gone into the café and bought Cokes all round. I could have just hung on to it. But maybe you know the feeling when you've been on holiday and your mum has given you a certain amount to spend. You've just got to spend it. It's almost a challenge. It doesn't matter what you spend it on. You've just got to be sure it's all gone by the time you get home.

Why the photographs? I was thirteen years old then and I suppose I was what you'd call good-looking. Girls said so, anyway. Fair hair, blue eyes, not fat, not thin. It was important to me how I looked – the right jeans, the right trainers, that sort of thing. But it wasn't crucial to me. What I'm trying to say is, I didn't take the photographs to pin on the wall or to prove to anyone what a movie star I was.

I just took them.

I don't know why.

It was the end of a long weekend in York. I was with my uncle and aunt because, back in London, my mum and dad were quietly and efficiently arranging their divorce. It was something that had been coming for a long time and I wasn't bothered by it any more but even so they'd figured it would upset me to see the removal men come in.

My father was moving out of the house and into a flat and although my mother was keeping most of the furniture, there was still his piano, his books and pictures, his computer and the old wardrobe that he had inherited from his mother. Suddenly everything was his or hers. Before it had simply been ours.

Uncle Peter and Aunt Anne had been drafted in to keep me diverted while it all happened and they'd chosen York, I suppose, because it was far away and I'd never been there before. But if it was a diversion, it didn't really work. Because while I was in York Minster or walking around

the walks or being trundled through the darkness of the Viking Museum, all I could think about was my father and how different everything would be without him, without the smell of his cigarettes and the sound of the out-of-tune piano echoing up the stairs.

I was spoiled that weekend. Of course, that's something parents do. The guiltier they feel, the more they'll spend and a divorce, the complete upheaval of my life and theirs, was worth plenty. I had twenty pounds to spend. We stayed in a hotel, not a bed and breakfast. Whatever I wanted, I got.

Even four useless photographs of myself from the photo booth on Platform One.

Was there something strange about that photo booth? It's easy enough to think that now but maybe even then I was a little ... scared. If you've been to York you'll know that it's got a proper, old station with a soaring roof, steel girders and solid red brickwork. The platforms are long and curve round, following the rails. When you stand there you almost imagine that a steam train will pull in. A ghost train, perhaps. York is both a medieval and a Victorian city; enough ghosts for everyone. But the photo booth was modern. It was an ugly metal box with its bright light glowing behind the plastic facings. It looked out-of-place on the platform – almost as if it had landed there from outer space. It was in a strange position too, quite a long way from the entrance and the benches where my uncle and aunt were sitting. You wouldn't have thought that many people would have come to this part of the platform. As I approached it, I was suddenly alone. And maybe I imagined it but it seemed that a sudden wind had sprung up, as if blown my way by an approaching train. I felt the wind, cold against my face. But there was no train.

For a moment I stood outside the photo booth, wondering what I was going to do. One shot for the front of my exercise book. A shot for my father – he'd be seeing more of it now than he would of me. A silly, cross-eyed shot for the fridge ... Somewhere behind me, the tannoy system sprang to life.

'The train now approaching Platform Two is the ten forty-five to Glasgow calling at Darlington, Durham, Newcastle ...'

The voice sounded far away. Not even in the station. It was like a rumble coming out of the sky.

I pulled back the curtain and went into the photo booth.

There was a circular stool which you could adjust for height and a choice of backgrounds – a white curtain, a black curtain, or a blue wall. The people who designed these things were certainly imaginative. I sat down and looked at myself in the square of black glass in front of me. This was where the camera was, but looking in the glass I could only vaguely see

my face. I could make out an outline; my hair falling down over one eye, my shoulders, the open neck of my shirt. But my reflection was shadowy and, like the voice on the tannoy, distant. It didn't look like me.

It looked more like my ghost.

Did I hesitate then, before I put the money in? I think I did.

I didn't want those photographs. I was wasting my money. But at the same time I was here now and I might as well do it. I felt hemmed in, inside the photo booth, even though there was only one flimsy curtain separating me from the platform. Also, I was nervous that I was going to miss the train even though there were still fifteen minutes until it arrived. Suddenly I wanted to get it over with.

I put in the coins.

For a moment nothing happened and I thought the photo booth might be broken. But then a red light glowed somewhere behind the glass, deep inside the machine. A devil eye, winking at me. The light went out and there was a flash accompanied by a soft, popping sound that went right through my head.

The first picture had caught me unawares. I was just sitting there with my mouth half-open. Before the machine flashed again

I quickly adjusted the stool and twisted my features into the most stupid face I could make. The red eye blinked, followed by the flash.

That one would be for the fridge. For the third picture, I whipped the black curtain across, leant back and smiled. The picture was for my father and I wanted it to be good. The fourth picture was a complete disaster. I was pulling back the curtain, adjusting the stool and trying to think of something to do when the flash went off and I realised I'd taken a picture of my left shoulder with my face – annoyed and surprised – peering over the top.

That was it. Those were the four pictures I took.

I went outside the photo booth and stood there on my own, waiting for the pictures to develop. Three minutes according to the advert on the side. Nobody came anywhere near and once again

I wondered why they had put the machine so far from the station entrance. Further up the platform, the station clock ticked to 10.47.

The minute hand was so big that I could actually see it moving, sliding over the Roman numerals. Doors slammed on the other side of a train.

There was the blast of a whistle. The 10.45 to Glasgow shuddered out of the station, a couple of minutes late.

The three minutes took an age to pass. Time always slows down when you're waiting for something. I watched the minute hand of the clock make two more complete circles. Another train, without any carriages, chugged backwards along a line on the far side of the station. And meanwhile the photo booth did ... nothing. Maybe there were wheels

turning inside, chemicals splashing, spools of paper unfolding. But from where I was standing it just looked dead.

Then, with no warning at all, there was a whirr and a strip of white paper was spat out of a slot in the side. My photographs.

I waited until a fan had blown the paper dry, and then prised it out of its metal cage. Being careful not to get my fingers on the pictures themselves, I turned them over in my hand.

Four pictures.

The first. Me looking stupid.

The second. Me out of focus.

The fourth. Me from behind.

But the third picture, in the middle of the strip, wasn't a picture of me at all.

It was a picture of a man, and one of the ugliest men I had ever seen.

Just looking at him, holding him in my hand, sent a shiver all the way up my arm and round the back of my neck. The man had a yellow face.

There was something terribly wrong with his skin which seemed to be crumpled up around his neck and chin, like an old paper bag. He had

blue eyes but they had sunk back, hiding in the dark shadows of his eye sockets. His hair was grey and string-like, hanging lifelessly over his

forehead. The skin here was damaged too, as if someone had drawn a map on it and then rubbed it out, leaving just faint traces. The man was

leaning back against the black curtain and maybe he was smiling. His lips were certainly stretched in something like a smile but there was no

humour there at all. He was staring at me, staring up from the palm of my hand. And I would have said his face was filled with raw horror.

I almost crumpled up the photographs then and there. There was something so shocking about the man that I couldn't bear to look at him.

I tried to look at the three images of myself but each time my eyes were drawn down or up so that they settled only on him.

I closed my fingers, bending them over his face, trying to blot him out.

But it was too late. Even when I wasn't looking at him I could still see him. I could still feel him looking at me.

But who was he and how had he got there? I walked away from the machine, glad to be going back to where there were people, away from

that deserted end of the platform. Obviously the photo booth *had* been broken. It must have muddled up my photographs with those of whoever

had visited it just before me. At least, that's what I tried to tell myself.

My Uncle Peter was waiting for me at the bench. He seemed relieved to see me.

'I thought we were going to miss the train,' he said. He ground out the Gauloise he'd been smoking. He was as bad as my father when it came

to cigarettes. High-tar French. Not just damaging your health. Destroying it.

'So let's see them,' Aunt Anne said. She was a pretty, rather nervous woman who always managed to sound enthusiastic about everything.

'How did they come out?'

'The machine was broken,' I said.

'The camera probably cracked when it saw your face.' Peter gave one of his throaty laughs. 'Let's see ...'

I held out the strip of film. They took it.

'Who's this?' Anne tried to sound cheerful but I could see that the man with the yellow face had disturbed her. I wasn't surprised.

He'd disturbed me.

'He wasn't there,' I said. 'I mean, I didn't see him. All the photographs were of me – but when they were developed, he was there.'

'It must have been broken,' Peter said. 'This must be the last person who was in there.'

Which was exactly what I had thought. Only now I wasn't so sure.

Because it had occurred to me that if there was something wrong with the machine and everyone was getting photographs of someone else, then surely the man with the yellow face would have appeared at the very top of the row: one photograph of him followed by three of me.

Then whoever went in next would get one picture of me followed by three of them. And so on.

And there was something else.

Now that I'd thought about it, the man was sitting in exactly the same position that I'd taken inside the photo booth. I'd pulled the black curtain across for the third photograph and there it was now. I'd been leaning back and so was he. It was almost as if the man had somehow got into the machine and sat in a deliberate parody of me.

And maybe there was something in that smile of his that was mocking and ugly. It was as if he were trying to tell me something. But I didn't want to know.

'I think he's a ghost,' I said.

'A ghost?' Peter laughed again. He had an annoying laugh. It was loud and jagged, like machine-gun fire. 'A ghost in a platform photo booth?'

'Peter ...!' Anne was disapproving. She was worried about me.

She'd been worried about me since the start of the divorce.

'I feel I know him,' I said. 'I can't explain it. But I've seen him somewhere before.'

'Where?' Anne asked.

'I don't know.'

'In a nightmare?' Peter suggested. 'His face does look a bit of a nightmare.'

I looked at the picture again even though I didn't want to. It was true. He did look familiar. But at the same time I knew that despite what I'd just said, it was a face I'd never seen before.

'The train now arriving at Platform One ...'

It was the train announcer's voice again and sure enough there was our train, looking huge and somehow menacing as it slid round the curve of the track. And it was at that very moment, as I reached out to take the photographs, that I had the idea that I shouldn't get on the train because the man with the yellow face was going to be on it, that somehow he was dangerous to me and that the machine had sent me his picture to warn me.

My uncle and aunt gathered up our weekend bags.

'Why don't we wait?' I said.

'What?' My uncle was already halfway through the door.

'Can't we stay a little longer? In York? We could take the train this afternoon ...'

'We've got to get back,' my aunt said. As always, hers was the voice of reason. 'Your mother's going to be waiting for us at the station and anyway, we've got reserved seats.'

'Come on!' Uncle Peter was caught between the platform and the train and with people milling around us, trying to get in, this obviously wasn't the best time or place for an argument.

Even now I wonder why I allowed myself to be pushed, or persuaded, into the train. I could have turned round and run away.

I could have sat on the platform and refused to move. Maybe if it had been my mother and father there, I would have done but then, of course, if my mother and father had only managed to stay together in the first place none of it would have happened. Do I blame them?

Yes. Sometimes I do.

I found myself on the train before I knew it. We had seats quite near the front and that also played a part in what happened. While

Uncle Peter stowed the cases up on the rack and Aunt Anne fished in her shopping bag for magazines, drinks and sandwiches, I took the seat next to the window, miserable and afraid without knowing why. The man with the yellow face. Who was he? A psychopath perhaps, released from a mental hospital, travelling to London with a knife in his raincoat pocket. Or a terrorist with a bomb, one of those suicide bombers you read about in the Middle East. Or a child killer.

Or some sort of monster ...

I was so certain I was going to meet him that I barely even noticed as the train jerked forward and began to move out of the station. The photographs were still clasped in my hand and I kept on looking from the

yellow face to the other passengers in the carriage, expecting at any moment to see him coming towards me.

'What's the matter with you?' my uncle asked. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

I was expecting to. I said nothing.

'Is it that photograph?' Anne asked. 'Really, Simon, I don't know why it's upset you so much.'

And then the ticket collector came. Not a yellow face at all but a black one, smiling. Everything was normal. We were on a train heading for London and I had allowed myself to get flustered about nothing. I took the strip of photographs and bent it so that the yellow face disappeared behind the folds. When I got back to London, I'd cut it out. When I got back to London.

But I didn't get back to London. Not for a long, long time.

I didn't even know anything was wrong until it had happened.

We were travelling fast, whizzing through green fields and clumps of woodland when I felt a slight lurch as if invisible arms had reached down and pulled me out of my seat. That was all there was at first, a sort of mechanical hiccup. But then I had the strange sensation that the train was flying. It was like a plane at the end of the runway, the front of the train separating from the ground. It could only have lasted a couple of seconds but in my memory those seconds seem to stretch out for ever. I remember my uncle's head turning, the question forming itself on his face. And my aunt, perhaps realising what was happening before we did, opening her mouth to scream. I remember the other passengers; I carry snapshots of them in my head.

A mother with two small daughters, both with ribbons in their hair.

A man with a moustache, his pen hovering over the *Times* crossword.

A boy of about my own age, listening to a Walkman. The train was almost full. There was hardly an empty seat in sight.

And then the smash of the impact, the world spinning upside down, windows shattering, coats and suitcases tumbling down, sheets of paper whipping into my face, thousands of tiny fragments of glass swarming into me, the deafening scream of tearing metal, the sparks and the smoke and the flames leaping up, cold air rushing in and then the horrible rolling and shuddering that was like the very worst sort of fairground ride only this time the terror wasn't going to stop, this time it was all for real.

Silence.

They always say there's silence after an accident and they're right. I was on my back with something pressing down on me. I could only see out of one eye. Something dripped on to my face. Blood.

Then the screams began.

It turned out that some kids – maniacs – had dropped a concrete pile off a bridge outside Grantham. The train hit it and derailed. Nine people were killed in the crash and a further twentynine were seriously injured. I was one of the worst of them. I don't remember anything more of what happened, which is just as well as my carriage caught fire and I was badly burned before my uncle managed to drag me to safety. He was hardly hurt in the accident, apart from a few cuts and bruises. Aunt Anne broke her arm.

I spent many weeks in hospital and I don't remember much of that either. All in all, it was six months before I was better but 'better' in my case was never what I had been before.

This all happened thirty years ago.

And now?

I suppose I can't complain. After all, I wasn't killed and despite my injuries, I enjoy my life. But the injuries are still there. The plastic surgeons did what they could but I'd suffered third-degree burns over much of my body and there wasn't a whole lot they could do. My hair grew back but it's always been grey and rather lifeless. My eyes are sunken. And then there's my skin.

I sit here looking in the mirror.

And the man with the yellow face looks back.