

The Man with the Yellow Face

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 to the machine? What I am talking about is those instant photograph booths. It was on Platform One at York Station - four shots for £2. It's probably still there now if you want to go and look at it. I've never been back.

Anyway there I was with my auntie and uncle, waiting for the train to London, and we were twenty minutes early. I had two pound on me, which was all that was left of my pocket money. I could have bought some chocolate, a comic or even a puzzle book. I went with the photographs!

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.

We had had a long weekend in York - back in London my mum and dad were quietly and efficiently arranging their divorce which included my dad moving out into his own flat.

Uncle Peter and Auntie Anne had been drafted in to keep me diverted while it all happened and they'd chosen York. I was spoiled that weekend. We stayed in a hotel, not a bed and breakfast. Whatever I wanted I got.

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.

For a moment I stood outside the photo booth, wondering what I was going to do. One shot for the front of my school notebook. 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 PA system sprang to life.

I pulled back the curtain and went into the photo booth. There was a circular stool that you could adjust for height and a choice of backgrounds - a white curtain, a black curtain, or a blue wall. I sat down and looked at myself in the square black glass in front of me. This was where the camera was, but looking in the glass, I could only vaguely see my face. The reflection didn't look like me - a version of me, but not me.

Did I hesitate? Yes I did. I put in the coins.

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For a moment nothing happened and I thought the photo booth might be broken. But then deep inside the machine a red light glowed. A devil eye winking at me. The light went out and there was a flash.

The first picture had caught me unawares. I was just sitting there with my mouth half-open. All the pictures were taken in quick succession not really giving me a chance to compose myself.

The three minutes it took for the photos to be developed seemed to take an age. Time always slows down when you're waiting for something.

Suddenly and without warning the pictures began to appear. 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 the ugliest man I had ever seen. Just looking at him, holding him in my hand, sent a shiver all the way up my arm and around the back of my neck. The man had a yellow face. There was something terribly wrong with his skin, which seemed 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 gray and stringy, 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.

Who was he and how had he gotten into my photographs? I walked away from the machine, glad to be going back to where there were people, away from that deserted end of the platform.

My Uncle Peter asked where I had been and I showed him the photographs - he asked about the man with the yellow face. I explained it must have been a mistake. Then I began to wonder.

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

"A ghost!" Peter laughed again. He had an annoying laugh.

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

The train announcer's voice interrupted our discussions. He was announcing the arrival of our train at platform one. It was then I felt like I shouldn't get on the train. I had an idea that the man with the yellow face was trying to tell me something.

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Uncle Peter gathered the bags.

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

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

Even now I wonder why I allowed myself to be pushed, or persuaded, into the train.. I could have turned around and ran away. I found myself on the train before I knew it. We were on our way to London.

But I didn't get back to London. Not for a 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. Then a strange sensation; 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 few seconds, but in my memory those seconds seem to stretch out forever. I remember the snapshots of the other passengers - I carry them with me.

Then silence. They always say there is silence after an accident.

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 further twenty-nine 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 car caught fire and I was badly burned before my uncle managed to drag me to safety.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I hadn't got on the train.

I sit here looking in the mirror.

The man with the yellow face looks back.