

The Photographer

The photographer called, for the very first time, when Uma was at her cousin's unremarkable wedding. Her mother and her aunt sat head covered in the front benches of the little whitewashed church so small that it was sunlit everywhere. Uma had arrived from America that morning, and had no time to dress in a saree. It didn't seem to matter because there was no sense of gravity, although or perhaps because it was the day after Christmas. No one, including the bride and the groom, seemed to know why there should be something as final and unredeemable as the golden chain that was shaken over their heads with the much awaited giggle-inspiring song, "VaaniInnorumakudam..." (A crown descends from heaven...). That was exactly when her mobile phone rang. For a moment she thought it was her boyfriend from Mexico. "Jake, calling from Goa. The photographer." Uma stopped for a moment, "I'm at a wedding," she whispered, hurrying out of the church. "I'm glad I got you out of that", he said. I'm arriving on the 28th."

Uma was woken up on that day from the haunting dreams of jet lag sleep by her friend Karthyayani, Keerti for short. "He is here," she said. "He is bald. I had a bad argument with him. Come over as soon as you can." The Institute for Development Research shared a large leafy campus with huge black ravens and wandering snakes whom students took an interest in preserving. Jake was in the hostel for academic guests. "These British! It was so hard to drive them away, and now they're back again," Karthyayani walked Uma over to the hostel room.

Inside was the unexpected figure of the photographer who had gained a name in the niche field of third world development still photography. He was an emaciated, shining bald, and had long agitated fingers and bare feet with nervous toes. He wore a short ragged shirt and long worn out pants. There was no greeting smile. His eyes were completely empty. The table was littered with a silver laptop, a pro-end Nikon digital SLR, and various accessories that curled around them like creepers. Without preliminaries Karthyayani and he began arguing as if they had been at it all night long. Karthyayani defended the language she used in the video, "Look at the way the Marxists here popularized the complex theoretical concept of capital.." Jake listened to her without hearing a word. His eyes were vacant, but his expressive fingers veered between contempt and anger. "I'm asking for access. For everyone. Do you remember how Senilov used the pool table metaphor to describe the origin of stars? A ninth grader could figure it out. Don't tell me you can't break it down." Uma stepped out to the balcony to smoke, and to get over her shock. This was hardly what she expected when she was informed that a British photographer would land up to shoot stills for the CD she was to write the text for. When she returned there was a temporary truce for lunch.

But war was the theme. Keerti quit – or rather, she told Uma that she found Jake overbearing, arrogant, deaf, and even if he was none of those, she still couldn't work with him. That was how Uma ended up going with Jake to shoot the footage for the video. At that point it was hard for her to acknowledge how desperate she was for this new experience that merged her passion for writing with visualization. Secretly, she even thought that a whole new career was beginning for her as a way out of a four-course teaching schedule, and out of the cold white world of Massachusetts. Jake held the key to that, and there was no way she wanted out, whoever he was, whatever he represented.

So, for a touchstone, she called her research assistant, Gargi, who was twenty-five, effervescent and had no shadow between impulse and speech.

“Saayippanelumsatyamparnjalkekkanam. Keerti’s language is way too academic.” Uma agreed again, because she felt as if she were part of a film crew, one of her fantasies. In fact, as she didn’t even admit to herself, she wanted to impress Jake, although he was white and she had a secret racist hatred of all whites. She used silence strategically to project a dark rich interiority that was possibly non-existent and a philosophical autonomy that she definitely did not possess.

Jake had a hungry camera. It was searching for reality. Reality as in National Geographic, muttered Uma, after seeing the stills of other projects where poor, sad women appeared in dark narratives that framed economic deprivation as the sole determinant of their lives. “How do we get him out of the third world development photography mode?” Uma asked Gargi. “We just need to get photos of the other class.” Gargi said playfully. So they began the morning with a trip to Kanakakkunnu, the old summer palace of the king, where the city’s new found energies were concentrated in new age activities, such as jogging and spiritual energizing. After spending an hour photographing joggers in uninspiring sweat, they hit upon a group greeting the rising sun. “Positive, positive”, lilted the instructor, leading a group of middle-aged men and women into a crescendo in which they lifted their arms toward the sun that had lost patience and was now blazing bright. “I can use this,” Jake said.

Keerti put in her bit. “You have to capture the middle class instinct – for example, a jewelry store.” “Fingers of women fondling jewelry,” the camera said. They drove to a mega-jewelry store where Kerala’s lust for gold outshone its other qualities. Oddly appropriate, almost all the jewelry stores were inside the old East Fort, housing the temple which gave the city its name and within which Anantha, the snake with no end or beginning, curled around Vishnu. “Thiruvananthapuram – means city of the endless snake,” Uma said, laughing with Gargi at her translation, “Or may be the infinite city!” Outside the jewelry store, however, was such a sight that the three of them were transfixed. It was a gigantic black monkey, a King Kong avatar, as tall as all two floors of the jewelry store, and half as wide. The black mountainous figure waved its arms mechanically up and down with a perpetual grin, as if mocking the ones who desired its visible opposite, the sunlight of gold. At its base stood the plastic figures of film stars Mohanlal and Suresh Gopi with chenda, beating the percussion as they would at a temple festival for the arrival of auspicious elephants. It was hard to figure out which was more frightening. It was hard to figure out which was more frightening, the King Kong avatar or the rosy pink plastic film idols. “Capitalism,” said Jake. “Patriarchy,” said Gargi. “The soul of Kerala,” said Uma.

Inside the glittering walls, Uma expected resistance to filming. But if there was any it melted away with Jake’s presence. “Whiteness at work,” Uma muttered to Gargi. Jake had no luck, though, in his search for fingers. The models whose butter skins advertised the deliciously rich gems set off against the metal that gave value to desire were missing. Their slender necks that amorously kissed their adornments, their exquisite long fingers that caressed the heavy studded chains, were absent. Gold shone naked, and around its orbit were women and men of various shapes and colors and sizes, eyes glazed, with mocking numbers dancing around their heads. “The ads are better,” the camera ruled. “At least you have the images that are not exactly development clichés,” argued Uma, backed by Gargi. Jake seemed amused, and Uma began thinking that Keerti needn’t always be right.

That evening, Jake dropped Uma home. He spotted an old school picture: Uma in her first saree, a black and red batikwork with her three other inseparable friends. They were united by the tight

bond of sexual discovery shared through the stories of the latest Malayalam films during the all-too-short lunch break. In the photo, Uma had tried to reform her face by pursing her lower lip for the last two years of school, a modification that, in her view, compensated for her imperfect features. Jake looked over her mother's head at Uma. "Like it," he said.

Perhaps that was the first thing that threw Uma off balance: the lightning speed of communication between them that didn't need recoding or repeating. She had really not quite known what the photographer symbolized. Perhaps something to arouse her boyfriend's forgotten passion? Perhaps something that was a whole new start of a life that she was hungry for, of cinema? Something between an intuition and a desire had now sprung to life, and the strange thing was that Jake was living out her script.

And curiously, that was exactly when he began to be repulsive. It began when they moved away from the city spaces to the undefined outlying areas, where poorer women lived and worked. On their way to a special economic zone, Jake spotted a woman who was breaking huge stones into smaller pieces that would be used in the endless work of constructing the city. There she was, a short thin dark woman with a cheerful smile larger than her body, wearing the working class female costume of a dhoti and a shirt, and a headtowel, just like the male. She was on the outskirts of a large property dotted with coconut and mango trees. Uma got down from the taxi, wondering how to interrupt her, but the woman had already stopped to watch the foreigner. "Chechi, sayippinoru photo venam," Uma mediated with the quick friendliness she had learned to generate through years of anthropological fieldwork. Nearby was a small teashop where the event caused a buzz among the men who had gathered to grunt over the morning news. As the woman began to hammer at the stones, Jake got into his element. He twisted, turned, elongated himself, bent, knelt, wrapping his camera with short gunclicks around the woman. For the first time Uma understood that shooting could be shooting. It was a strange sight; a white man now back, as Keerti had said, this time to gather not material wealth but the life wealth of the colony. The American in Uma, watching, had to reach for her purse. This, she began thinking, is capital. You have to pay for it. But Jake made no move. There was a broad white smile, and thank you. Thank you.

The day continued with Jake asking for photographs of all kinds of working women. There were women working on the railroad tracks, women walking to the special economic zone, women sweeping the street, women beating coconut husks, women spinning rope, women... and without even realizing what she was doing, Uma had begun to talk women into photos, at least, that was her job, as Jake wanted it to be. It went on until the street sweeper refused to have her photo taken. "I only want a photo of her feet," he said. "Only your feet," Uma said. "No," the woman said firmly. Uma turned away, but she saw that Jake had taken the photo any way, while she was just asking. "She said no, didn't you hear?" Jake smiled. "It's her feet." A sliver of dislike shot through Uma.

Somewhere that time, Jake began talking. Mostly about the things he hated. He hated all governments. He hated big corporations (and downloaded an illegal copy of the documentary, Corporation, into Uma's computer). He hated Manmohan Singh. He hated men who make noises while eating. He hated George Bush. He hated people who made huge carbon footprints by flying everywhere, like his girlfriend did. He hated cell phone companies, particularly Vodaphone. He hated wireless network owners in India because they charged roaming. He hated Indians who tried to cheat him, and who all incidentally turned out to be lower class men. He hated billboards of gigantic

male Malayalam actors (“looks like he has an erection”). He hated a Muslim doctor who had made a pass at the girl he was dating. (“I bashed his head in”). He hated mining companies (particularly Vedanta). He hated development (although he had a bike). He hated the stray dogs on Goa’s beaches (where he lived in a friend’s shack). He hated Vogue magazine (because they ran ads based on poverty chic). He hated Delhi. He hated pollution (“the fucking traffic”). He hated crows cawing in the morning. The only incident he remembered vividly from Planet Earth was the one in which the virus pushed every ant to commit suicide. Since the world was empty of hope, he had a bunker somewhere in Scotland where he was storing stuff and water to survive when everything was over. “Do you hate everything?” Gargi asked. “Yes, but I am a good lover,” he said, silencing them.

Uma subdued her unease, until the next day, when Gargi suddenly noticed the Kudumbashree waste collection van in front of their taxi. The Kudumbashree was one of the self-help womens’ groups that had come out of the imagination of the state; where women could organize to do work that was otherwise underpaid or undone. With the uniform green sarees floating in the breeze, the auto sped ahead. “Follow it,” Gargi ordered and they reached the nodal point of waste collection and transfer. Here the residues of the city-building had reached their climactic phase, where they would be loaded on to trucks, and taken to be buried in the unsuspecting earth burrowed near unsuspecting people who lived near the land and believed in the city. Uma and Gargi got out, trying not to cover their noses, but Jake was unaffected. He sprung around the women, two of whom were in the auto, lifting up and handing waste over to the two standing in the lorry. With amazing agility, he leapt up to the lorry and stood, one foot on the lorry, one on the edge of the auto, switching perspectives between the women who were handing over the imperishable refuse of eaten history. This is a picture of the new empire, Uma muttered to Gargi, feeling increasingly detached: the bald white seven-foot tall photographer with his elaborate machine, standing in an impossible position with feet in two vehicles, looming over the dark, short, women who were hurrying to get the oozing, fetid, fermenting, kinetic energy of the city’s bowels out of their hands. “Not so new,” said Gargi.

Jake wanted more photos, and they followed the women, now radiating free chatter, into side-streets where they washed the huge plastic containers of waste. “I want them lined up next to the plastic”, Jake told Uma. “No,” Uma said impulsively, staring at him. Suddenly it had occurred to her that he was the real waste, the real refuse. Jake looked at her, not understanding why, and went on to gesticulate at the women, who were now throwing out playful questions. “Why is he bald?” “Isn’t he married?” “Will he take us to England?” He got them to pose near the plastic bins, laughing merrily. It was a shared sisterhood of which Uma had had no clue: “We became such good friends this way. We’re all there for each other,” Gargi had got talking to the women. Jake came back to Uma, as if to say sorry. Uma cut off the interpersonal contact, although once again the quickness of communication threw her off. “We can go inside and talk,” he said, pointing to a house under construction. Uma pretended not to hear, she busily took out money to give the women. Jake watched silently, but exploded over lunch. “I don’t get paid enough to do what you do,” he said. “I can sell maybe one of hundreds of photographs.” Uma looked at him again, and now, instead of the empire, she saw a beggar, a beggar of images from the life of the third world. It wasn’t the women who needed anything from him, he needed them. “You earn from them. At least buy lunch,” she asserted. “I do, not directly,” he retorted. “I support an adivasi boy. All my extra money goes into the fight against the bauxite mining in Orissa. Do you know how I learnt photography? I came to Delhi with nothing. I stayed in the slums with Jagdish, a drug addict, and took photos of him. I nursed him through everything. I didn’t sell a single one of those photographs, even after he died.” Gargi’s eyes

silently guided Uma to the tip Jake had left for the waiter. Uma made her point once again, this time adding another note to the tip.

However, her self-righteousness was moderated by Gargi. "Aren't we doing the same thing? We also go to women to ask for their life stories, to know their world, to get them to share their life experiences." "That's why I fought at the first meeting for payment for all interviews," Uma shot back. "And that's enough?" asked Gargi.

The unspoken guilt, though made Uma more sympathetic when Jake called early in the morning. "I am sick as a dog," he wheezed. "Can you get me some medicine?" Keerti was already with him when Uma got in, with hot rasam, "It's a tamarind pepper lentil soup, it's medicinal." Jake was talking about his childhood. His mother had abandoned him to his stepfather, who had ferociously trained him into being a perpetual outcast. Keerti and Uma stared at each other in a common effort to feel pity. It only took them a minute to lose it. Jake, still talkative, showed the photos of his favourite French composer, a paedophile who had abused his own daughter. Uma got a strange feeling of encountering a sort of being that she had never known or met. Someone, who was living not by puzzling and judging and learning and worrying about things, like Uma did, but by sensing things physically, like light, or color, or music or violence and devouring them without discernment. Jake was still talking. It was about his girlfriend. They had met while Jake was on a shooting assignment in Nicaragua. Then Jennifer came down to Goa, where they spent two wonderful weeks on the beach, after which she returned to Harvard to study global development. "The sex was terrific. She is beautiful. And she calls all the time. But I feel I want an older woman. Someone who understands me better." He looked at them with sick feverish eyes. Keerti commented, "saaypinenthengilumpattiyalo?" "Pranthupidicho?" Uma responded. "Should I get a doctor?" She asked Jake. He was now exhausted, talking, his face sweating. He rambled about Indians who were cheats: the taxi driver who had driven him from the airport, the autowallahs in Delhi, two guys in a bike who drove too close to him and whom he beat up, a yoga teacher who touched his woman friend's thighs and whom he wanted to kill. Uma wished she could run away and do something else. It was the thirty-first of December and she hadn't planned to be there at all, stuck with a potentially violent, definitely criminal personality with visible psychological disorders. That was it, she said to herself. There's something really violent about him. It was now obvious.

Jake was falling asleep. "One of us should be around," said Keerti, "and I have to pick up my kids." Uma had no choice. Keerti got the next door guest room opened so that Uma could have an afternoon nap that rice meals make so inevitable. Unexpectedly, she fell into the deep jet lag sleep, staying underwater for hours with dreams of searching for old houses, all in hooks and alleys, folded into the invisible layers of the city that was unexpectedly growing huge apartment complexes. When she awoke it was dark and it seemed that her being in India was a dream. There was a knock. "I heard you move around," Jake stood outside. It was night already, past seven. He was feeling much better. Keerti was going to get him dinner. Jake wanted to show her the photographs from yesterday. There it was, the woman breaking stones in unbelievable white light, the women laborers waiting as the train passed them by mid-afternoon, the women throwing the garbage, the women walking into the special economic zone. Uma was stunned. They were remarkable. It was the light, or rather, it was the time of the light. Somehow the photographs had been taken exactly at the time when the sun had deigned to recognize its secret identity with each and every being on earth, animate and inanimate. Not by lighting them up, but by revealing their inner darkness, the absence

of the inner sun. So the photos stood, darkened, in a world where light had ceased to bless its objects. It was a series of black holes, where the camera had sucked out the tropical gift of sunlight and transformed everything it saw into the absence of light.

Uma sat very still. Jake's flametip was burning hash. He made a joint carefully and gave it to her. She was taken aback although she appeared cool. How did he know? "Keep it for new year's eve," he said. "Thanks," she said. "You better go home," Jake said. "It's dark."

"They're brilliant," she told Keerthi. "In style. But don't you think this is what development photography does, cast the poor into dark fairy tales?" Keerthi seemed only half convinced. "Anyway, he's leaving tomorrow." "Finally," said Uma, as if she meant it. But she missed it all badly: those lightbound days where they chased the morning sun and made evenings longer than they ever could be. "I don't care who it is," she told Gargi. "This is what I want to do for a living."

But nothing changed: Uma went back to teaching until spring came by and then summer arrived hurriedly with unpacked bags. Uma came back to her hometown, and got a call early morning while she was up with jet lag. "I just got out of the Delhi airport. I'm coming down day after, to finish the shoot." Uma panicked. "I can't do this," she told Keerthi. "I don't mind if it's someone else, who works differently." Keerthi found a solution. She had a close friend, a film-maker. Perhaps he would oblige, for a couple of days. So it was that Manav became part of the team. He had a genius for identifying locations. That was when things came to a breakdown.

Manav found a brick kiln. It was an amazing place for a photo shoot. There were two coral colored structures, both two storeys high, set in what looked a wide rain-soaking green paddy field. One was half closed with rich red bricks. The women had carried in bricks, and one woman sat on top of the bricks, arranging thousands of bricks like a crimson-carpet staircase that filled up a whole room two floors high. She sat on top, and the women who carried half a dozen bricks would take careful, delicate steps to come up to her, balancing their heavy load, and she would lay them out methodically, building the staircase that would make it more difficult for them to climb up with the next load. Jake sprung up on top of the bricks, taking photos as the woman with the brick load ascended the steps she had made, brick by brick. "I want a photo of her alone," he said. He wanted it in the empty patient structure next to this, which waited for the innumerable head loads. Uma was silent. Manav mediated and asked the woman if she would pose. "They want to go for lunch," she told Jake. "Okay," he said, "I can give them lunch money." Manav translated, the women agreed. Jake wanted her to stand against the wall of the empty kiln. She stood there. "I want her to hold her load," he said. "He wants you to hold the bricks," Uma said, hating herself. Around the woman was the huge emptiness of the three reddish crude brick walls that opened out into the photographer who held his camera like a weapon. Uma noticed that the woman was sweating and that her neck was squat with the thousands of bricks she had carried. She wore a short blouse and a blue and white checked dhoti that she had half tied. She made a move to straighten her dhoti. "Ask her not to move," he said. "Please don't move," said Manav. Jake loomed over her as if he was pinning her to the wall. He knelt, he looped around her as if he was draining her soul out. The woman stood still, bricked in. "Take a photograph," Uma told Manav angrily. So Manav took a photo of Jake take a photo, contouring around the woman in the empty huge brick kiln. "How much did he give?" Uma asked the woman, following her. "Fifty rupees."

“I’ve had enough,” she told Manav. Freezing polite, she arranged a taxi for Jake. “I think you have enough photos,” she said. “Yes, I’m pretty pleased,” he said, gauging her immediately. The next morning she got a call. “I checked in at the hotel next to the airport. I ordered tea, and guess what they asked: there are some nice ladies also, sir, would you like a lady?”

And that was the last she heard from him

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Until a year later, Keerti and she were running to catch the connecting plane to Kathmandu at Delhi airport to the workshop that would preview the CD when Jake suddenly appeared at the bottom of the flight of stairs to the waiting area. “Hey girls,” he said, holding out an arm each. “Onward to Kathmandu!”

Nirmala was at the workshop held at the Nepali’s king’s retreat turned into a five-star. She was a thin tall dark girl in jeans who was research assistant in the Nepali team. She had a taste for unusual colors and wore eye-catching tops and scarves that Uma recognized as the best of Thamel, the heart of Kathmandu’s tourist centres. Where other girls of her age may have let city logics run wild in their heads, Nirmala balanced the city and Kagbeni, her home village in the Himalayas, with a delicacy and sophistication that revealed a high intelligence in ways of living. She respected the city in you without taking it seriously, and then gave you her home without conditions. She was westernized just enough to deal with the subjectivities of those trapped in that form of being and yet would switch to a natural self which opened out like a flower to the world with soft, fragrant warmth. She calculated without being calculating. She respected privacy without being private. She followed etiquette while always offering alternatives beyond it. She weighed rational practicalities with seeming gravity even as she was ready to abandon them in a second for nothing. She was aware of the walls and boundaries of the city self even as she suggested interdependence and interconnections as the path of growth. Her looks first seemed nondescript, but when you took a moment longer, she became beautiful. She had a uniquely sculpted face that was between oval and round, like the orbit of an undiscovered planet. Her eyes were slanting and her lips were large, open to smiles.

Jake took only half an hour to find her. From then on, Uma noticed that they were together all the time since they were not bound by the academic chains of the workshop. In the mornings, they could be found in the abandoned huge outdoor lounge looking for the promised eighteen mountain peaks that could be seen from the Kathmandu Valley before it became Kathmandu city. During long research presentations, the two smiled over photos in his computer. During networking lunch breaks, they watched videos where Jake, in Uma’s suspicious vision, indoctrinated her in anti – corporate ideology. During intermissions, Jake brought coffee for Nirmala, and Nirmala waited with his laptop while he went to the restroom. The sense that is younger than bodies or minds would send them searching for each other and surely find each other in any anonymous assemblies of the workshop.

By the third day, Nirmala had gained a vulnerability that a city – dweller could go an entire lifetime without experiencing. They were at Thamel’s famous Nepali Chulo restaurant for a final get-together. Everyone sat on the floor around low tables attended by a regal woman who looked as if she had spent her life hunting on horseback and who could pour raksi into a tiny mud glass from

At the airport they clicked a photograph together, rain still falling as if it would fill even the SwetaGandaki, the invisible silver river that joins the Kali Gandaki at Kagbeni village in the Annapurna Himalayas.

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