

Imperfect Memory

The photograph had one good face. Mine.

My father was laughing before anyone else understood the joke. My mother had turned toward him, her eyes nearly closed. Between them, my hand was a blur, reaching for something outside the frame.

I was seven. I could no longer remember what I had wanted.

The restoration took less than a minute.

It sharpened the tablecloth, repaired a crease, and offered a version in which we all faced the camera. My mother's eyes were open. My father wore a small, even smile. My hand rested neatly beside my plate.

I enlarged it. The faces were convincing. Nothing looked wrong.

I sent the restored photograph to my mother.

She called instead of replying.

"Your father looks very polite," she said.

We looked at the two versions together. She remembered the tablecloth. I remembered the glass cupboard behind us. Neither of us could remember the joke.

"Do you know what I was reaching for?" I asked.

"The cake, probably."

There was no cake in the photograph.

"Or your father's glasses."

He was wearing them.

She laughed. "Then I don't know."

I had expected the clearer picture to give us something back. Instead, we had begun inventing answers for it.

I opened the restoration controls. There were separate switches for scratches, motion blur, and facial reconstruction.

I kept the repaired crease. I switched off the other two.

My mother turned away again. My father's mouth opened. My hand escaped its tidy place beside the plate.

The photograph did not tell us any more than it had before.

I saved it anyway.

Before we hung up, my mother asked me to send that version too.

A moment later, a message arrived.

"I still think it was cake."