

**Illegible**  
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*The application of biometric technology requires a particular kind of normalized body that may be at odds with the bodies of living people, which constantly adjust, change, or get mutilated over the course of harsh and complicated lives...*

*The life of the unreadable and unverifiable body is, indeed, a life that, albeit filled with experiences that are real, represents nothing in the biometric system.*

*(Jacobsen and Rao 2018: 38)<sup>1</sup>*

WHAT could be done with me, what should be done with me? These were the same question. The possibilities were limited.

On the night that we first heard the news, my family came together to discuss my options. Even my sister got involved. With their heads bent over the kitchen table, they looked like a Renaissance painting, the kind that's supposed to be an allegory for something else.

There was a name for people like me: illegible. We had just been told that we had one year to report to the local police station and turn ourselves in. They said it was just to collect more data so that they could improve the algorithm. But the rumors said different. People whispered that illegibles were being forced to undergo a procedure, some kind of surgery that would reconstruct our faces into something that was machine-readable. It was easier, I guess, than getting the algorithm to work 100% of the time.

"It works for 98.8% of people," my father said. "So, if you think about it, you're actually the one percent," he added, wryly.

My father was the type that hung around Zuccotti Park in the early 2000s. These days, he belted his pants and tucked in his polo shirt before going to work. He knew, better than most, that ideological purity was a luxury that only the truly wealthy could afford. Dad was a pragmatist. For him, the answer was simple: "It'll be easier for everyone if you just get the surgery."

My mother sucked her teeth in disapproval. She was certain that plastic surgery was *haram*. She prayed for a miracle instead. Over the next few months, I would often catch her sitting alone in her bedroom or the kitchen, muttering *duas* under her breath.

My sister knew someone who knew someone who'd brought home a whole suitcase full of *Fair & Lovely* from their last trip to Jakarta. The cream contained a bleaching ingredient that was illegal here in the States. If my skin were lighter, she figured, maybe cameras would be able to detect me better<sup>2</sup>. She had always put a lot of stock in appearances.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobsen, Elida K. U., and Ursula Rao. 2018. "The Truth of the Error: Making Identity and Security through Biometric Discrimination." In *Bodies as Evidence: Security, Knowledge, and Power*, edited by Mark Maguire, Ursula Rao, and Nils Zurawski, 24–42. Global Insecurities. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Buolamwini, Joy, and Timnit Gebru. 2018. "Gender Shades: Intersectional Accuracy Disparities in Commercial Gender Classification." *Conference on Fairness, Accountability and Transparency*, 77–91.

Ninety-eight-point-eight percent sounded pretty good, if you were used to thinking in terms of statistics. But with a population of 350 million, that meant more than four million illegibles, those of us who were constantly getting misidentified or who couldn't be identified at all. Even so, I wasn't sure I wanted to volunteer to make the algorithm better. From where I stood, inclusion wasn't necessarily the same thing as justice.

No two faces are exactly alike, but for the most part they're consistent. I never did figure out what set mine apart. Unable to sleep at night, I would trace my sister's face with my fingertips. Her eyelids, her nostrils, the corners of her mouth. What was it that she had that I did not?

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It was a dream of my mother's that I would be the first in our family to go to college in America. I wasn't the best student, but it was important to me to keep her happy, so I downloaded an SAT prep app and studied on the weekends. On the day of the exam, I left the house early to take the train uptown, a bouquet of No. 2 pencils clutched in my fist.

The test was being proctored in a red-brick private school that smelled of Lysol and other people's ambition. From the moment I walked through its archways, I felt small and out of place, my armpits damp underneath my sweater.

The stairwell was full of people. I wondered if anyone felt as nervous as I did. Most of them just looked bored, staring down at their phones. A girl with curly blonde hair waved and gestured for me to come over. She smiled awkwardly as I got closer. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I thought you were somebody else."

Outside of the testing room was a station that scanned each student's face<sup>3</sup>. "Why are we doing this?" I heard someone ask.

"Too many cheaters," explained the aggrieved woman behind the computer. "We need to make sure that the person that's registered is the one that's actually taking the test." She turned to me. "You could pay some kid in India \$10,000 and they'd take it for you." *My family isn't even from India*, I thought. But I didn't say anything.

When it was my turn to step in front of the camera, I could see my own pixelated face looking back at me on the screen. I blinked at the dark shadows underneath my eyes, my limp ponytail.

I stood there for several minutes. I hadn't taken this long for anyone in front of me. "Is it working? How long is it supposed to take?" I asked.

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<sup>3</sup> Patil, Anushka, and Jonah Engel Bromwich. 2020. "How It Feels When Software Watches You Take Tests." *The New York Times*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/style/testing-schools-proctorio.html>.  
Feathers, Todd, and Janus Rose. 2020.

“You don’t match any of the photos on the attendance list. I can’t let you in if you’re not registered,” the woman replied.<sup>4</sup>

“I’m definitely registered. Look, I have the confirmation email on my phone. Can’t I just show you my driver’s license? I have it right here.” I tried to rearrange my face into an earnest expression.

“Face ID only. Contact the College Board if you have questions.” I looked at her blankly.

She jerked her head towards the door. “Come on, you’re holding up the line.” I didn’t know what to say, so I just turned and walked away.

If I had known how things would turn out, would I have reacted differently? I like to imagine that I would have tried harder to stand up for myself. But here’s the thing you have to understand: the computer was just confirming what I already knew to be true. I didn’t belong there.

Sure, there had been other times when I realized that some scanner couldn’t read my face. Like it would always say << *No Face Detected* >> whenever I tried to use one of those camera filters that makes it look like you have puppy ears or you’re wearing a flower crown. But that was just a party trick that I’d show off to strangers, an attempt to make myself seem more interesting and mysterious.

I really didn’t mind it, not at first. In the beginning, it was mostly just inconvenient. On some level, I guess I believed that not being recognized kept me out of trouble. I preferred not to call attention to myself. Sometimes it was better when people didn’t realize you were there.

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I was too young to really remember the pandemic, but I guess that’s when it all started. People were too afraid to touch each other and face ID was contactless<sup>5</sup>. Some cities started using it to make sure that people were keeping quarantine<sup>6</sup>. Epidemiologists said that we could limit the spread by identifying everyone that an infected patient had been in contact with. And once all those cameras and checkpoints were in place, they kept finding new ways to use them. By the time I started school, it all seemed so normal.

Our elementary school was a 3-story building that took up an entire city block. On Fridays after school, we would crowd into Happy Deli Grocery and buy whatever snacks we could afford with the coins in our pockets. My friend Aisha and I would always try to sneak a candy bar whenever

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<sup>4</sup> Feathers, Todd, and Janus Rose. 2020. “Students Are Rebellious Against Eye-Tracking Exam Surveillance Tools.” *VICE*, September 24, 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7wxvd/students-are-rebelling-against-eye-tracking-exam-surveillance-tools>.

<sup>5</sup> Wagner, John. 2020. Twitter. March 14, 2020. <https://twitter.com/OFODEAC/status/1238866399524724736>.

<sup>6</sup> Zhu, Melissa. 2020. “Why Facial Recognition Use Is Growing amid the Covid-19 Pandemic.” *South China Morning Post*, November 18, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/policy/article/3108742/what-facial-recognition-and-why-more-relevant-ever-during-covid-19>.

Mr. Halim turned his back to grab something from behind the counter. We would walk home, giddy, our bellies full of purloined sugar. The weekend ahead seemed full of possibility.

As a child, I was an accomplished liar. I never meant any harm, you see, it's just that the truth was always less interesting than whatever was going on in my own head. Most of the time, I got away with it. People rarely noticed me, so they never suspected a thing. I suppose my face was unremarkable. It helped that I was a year younger and a head shorter than most of my classmates.

Aisha wasn't so lucky. We were in the fifth grade – or maybe it was sixth – when one day she got called to the principal's office. It turns out the bodega had a security camera that was recording us the whole time. The owner had turned in the footage and the photo on Aisha's student ID matched the face of a shoplifter caught on film<sup>7</sup>.

She wasn't the only one in trouble. A lot of our friends had their faces ID'ed. They all had to work off their debt, coming in on the weekends to unpack boxes and clean out the storage room in the back. Mr. Halim kept a close eye on them after that, so it became my job to lift the candy while Aisha kept him distracted. It didn't occur to me to wonder why I was the only one who never got caught.

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I can remember the moment when things really started to go wrong. I had been working for three months at a Zara in Midtown. It was a good job. The customers were mostly tourists, plus I got a 15% employee discount.

It was a busy Saturday when my manager pulled me aside and told me they were going to have to let me go. Corporate was using facial recognition to make sure that employees were coming in on time<sup>8</sup>. According to the system, I wasn't showing up for any of my shifts.

“What are you even talking about?! We work the same days. You know I've been here!” Without meaning to, I had started to shout. I could see a customer looking over her shoulder in surprise. I had never raised my voice at work before, but I simply couldn't believe it! It was the first time I felt certain, beyond a doubt, that some injustice had been done. And I wasn't seventeen anymore; I'd stopped biting my tongue just so that other people would feel more comfortable.

The thing is, my manager agreed with me, that it must be some glitch in the system. But there was nothing she could do, or at least that's what she said. There were dozens of people willing to work for \$12 an hour and it wasn't worth her time to stand up for me.

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<sup>7</sup> Chivers, Tom. 2019. “Facial Recognition... Coming to a Supermarket near You.” *The Guardian*, August 4, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/aug/04/facial-recognition-supermarket-facewatch-ai-artificial-intelligence-civil-liberties>.

<sup>8</sup> Mathawan, Rohan. 2020. “Here's Why Your Office Needs a Face Recognition Based Attendance System.” *TechStory* (blog). October 14, 2020. <https://techstory.in/heres-why-your-office-needs-a-face-recognition-based-attendance-system/>.

“You’ll be alright,” she assured me, distractedly. Her eyes were already looking past me, assessing the coil of people lining up to pay at the cash registers. None of this was her fault, I knew that. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, really. That was the whole problem.

I tried getting a new job, but it seemed that every place I applied required your faceprint to get hired. I even got rejected by Uber and Postmates, and they accepted practically everyone. But apparently now they were using facial recognition to match your face to your driver’s license, and I couldn’t get past that step<sup>9</sup>.

Unemployed and listless, I spent a lot of time alone with my thoughts. I avoided mirrors. There were stretches where I wouldn’t leave bed for days at a time and soon I lost track of what month we were in. Everything felt surreal and slow, like I was underwater.

Once in a while, I would meet up with a friend, but I would quickly run out of things to say. It was around this time that my iPhone stopped working. I couldn’t even replace it because all of the newer phone models required a face ID to unlock. My mom gave me one of those old indestructible Nokia phones but, really, who even sent texts anymore? Gradually, I stopped hearing from friends. It was just too hard to reach me.

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When my father died, I hadn’t spoken to my sister for more than a year, not since she moved to the suburbs. She invited everyone we knew to come over for the *tahlilan*, after dad’s burial. It was the first and only time I ever visited her in that large house with its dark green shutters.

*What kind of person needs space for three cars*, I wondered, as my mother and I walked up the long driveway. I knocked on the door and then knocked again when no one came to answer. I could see my sister through the front window. She was whispering in her husband’s ear, a small, content smile tucked in the corner of her mouth. They seemed happy.

Eventually she looked up and our eyes met through the clear windowpane. When she saw me looking back at her, the joy on her face collapsed like an old house. She rushed outside and wrapped her arms around me. We clung together so tightly that for a moment it felt like we were sisters again.

“Come in, come in,” she said impatiently. She motioned for me to take off my shoes and place them at the end of the neat row by the door. “I didn’t hear you knock. The doorbell usually just announces when someone is here<sup>10</sup>, but, well, I guess it didn’t see you... You should have let mom stand in front.”

“You should’ve been paying more attention!” I sniped back, already annoyed.

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<sup>9</sup> Sottile, Chiara. 2020. “Uber to Use Facial Recognition Tech to Determine If Drivers Are Wearing Masks.” NBC News. May 14, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/live-blog/2020-05-13-coronavirus-news-n1205916>

<sup>10</sup> Cox, Kate. 2020. “Leaked Pics from Amazon Ring Show Potential New Surveillance Features.” Ars Technica, April 22, 2020. <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2020/04/ring-cameras-may-someday-scan-license-plates-and-faces-leak-shows/>.

She thinned her lips and shook her head in disapproval. Her eyes darted back to where my mother was kneeling behind me to unlace her boots. “Sorry,” I muttered. I let my sister guide me over to where her husband was standing.

Her husband was, predictably, white and he had a harmless, affable look about him. He had gone to grad school “in Connecticut”, which was his way of saying Yale. It wouldn’t be long before I had nieces and nephews.

My mother was getting older, too. It was getting harder for her to manage the stairs in our apartment. Without dad’s pension, she wasn’t sure how she would pay the rent.

My sister offered her their guest room. “Stay as long as you need,” she said.

Neither of them said anything, but I understood that the invitation did not include me. Everything in my sister’s life was perfectly curated and I was this odd, unexplainable thing. I suspected that she secretly resented me because I was too close a reminder of how narrowly she had escaped the working class. I knew she loved me, in her own way, but I didn’t want to beg her to take me in. I gathered my pride and wrapped myself up in it.

“And you’re sure you can stay with Aisha?” my mother asked, anxiously, for the third time.

“I’m sure,” I lied. I had no intention of asking Aisha, or anyone else, for a favor, but my mother didn’t need to know that. I reassured them both, repeatedly, that everything was going to be fine until eventually even I started to believe it was true. That night I got back on the train and went back to the city, alone.

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On our block there was a building that had been scheduled for demolition. They were going to tear it down and put up a tower of luxury condos in its place. On the ground floor, there was an empty storefront that faced onto the street. The front door had been boarded over, but whoever had done it hadn’t done a very good job. I crawled in easily. It seemed as good of a place to live as any. A nest of blankets and a few crushed Miller Lite cans in the corner told me that I wasn’t the first to come here, but I never actually saw anyone else inside.

The thing about being illegible was that it robbed you of choices. Any type of aid came with conditions. Sleeping rough wasn’t much of a choice, but it was one that I made freely. There were shelters, of course, places where you could get a bed for the night. But I didn’t want my every move to be monitored, or worse, to be sent away with the rest of the illegibles. I was better off on my own. It was kind of eerie to sleep in an empty husk of a building, but it amused me to pretend I was a ghost that was haunting the place. My sense of humor had grown very dark.

When my sister and I were younger, our mother would tell us stories of *kuntilanak*, vengeful female spirits with a grudge against the world. I couldn’t help but admire that single-minded sense of purpose. I was far too tired to even think about plotting revenge on anyone. My own life didn’t seem to have much meaning anymore.

By then, I had been out of work for more than two years. I couldn't get unemployment either. You needed to show your face for that. It was easy enough for me to get food, even without any money. No one worked the counters at the grocery stores anymore<sup>11</sup>. There were cameras and weight sensors in each shopping cart that could figure out what you were buying. Your face was linked to your credit card, so you were automatically charged at the exit<sup>12</sup>.

I would just walk in, take what I wanted and walk out. The trick was acting like you suddenly remembered something you forgot at home. I would leave through the front door in a hurry, abandoning my cart in the aisle. That way I didn't flag any of the algorithms that detected suspicious behavior on CCTV<sup>13</sup>. I tried to do it with a certain degree of irony. That way it felt like I was playing a role, which felt better than living my actual life.

With my mother gone from the city, I hardly saw anyone. Who do we become after there is no one left to recognize us, to see us as we see ourselves?

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It was just after sunrise when they came. I was still half asleep when I heard the workmen setting something up outside. The windows were fogged with condensation and I couldn't see through them.

“Should we check if there's anyone one in there?”

“Nah, we don't have time. There's a face detector at the front door<sup>14</sup>. Nobody's been here for months.”

It happened in seconds; the roof just fell out of the sky. I'd never heard anything so loud.

Nobody, I thought. Am I nobody?

Perhaps in Heaven I'll look like an angel. Or perhaps the angels will look like me. What a surprise that will be, for everyone else! It's something to look forward to.

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<sup>11</sup> Statt, Nick. 2020. “Amazon's New Smart Shopping Cart Lets You Check out without a Cashier.” *The Verge*. July 14, 2020. <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/14/21323421/amazon-dash-cart-smart-grocery-shopping-woodland-hills-store-cashierless>.

<sup>12</sup> Dean, Sam. 2020. “Forget Credit Cards — Now You Can Pay with Your Face. Creepy or Cool?” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2020.. <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2020-08-14/facial-recognition-payment-technology>.

<sup>13</sup> Revell, Timothy. 2020. “Computer Vision Algorithms Pick out Petty Crime in CCTV Footage.” *New Scientist*, January 4, 2017. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2116970-computer-vision-algorithms-pick-out-petty-crime-in-cctv-footage/>.

<sup>14</sup> Fadulu, Lola. 2019. “Facial Recognition Technology in Public Housing Prompts Backlash.” *The New York Times*, September 24, 2019.. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/24/us/politics/facial-recognition-technology-housing.html>.