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Passport to fame



Rarely does a passport photograph turn out to be anything other than embarrassing. *Charukesi Ramadurai* shares her remedy to avoid a session at the typical Mumbai photo studio. Cautionary notice: we tried our best to get photos of her, but failed — not for public consumption, she said. So a friend (ours) shared hers instead

When you look like your passport photo, it's time to go home, reads the title of Erma Bombeck's 1991 book. She could have written that for me. It is in fact this thought that often makes me stay at home these days.

For years and years, I had lived in this cozy photo heaven sniggering at other poor unfortunate souls who go into the photo studio looking normal and cheerful, and come out knackered and morose in the two-dimensional world of passport photos. It was not that I had perfected the art of getting my passport photo to resemble my face. It was simply like this.

By a stroke of pure and marvellous luck, I had got a decent passport size photograph clicked just after I left college.

That must have been a moment of absolute confidence and happiness, for the little white packet that was delivered to me contained numerous copies of a photograph that looked, gasp!, like me. And me, in a normal state of mind and health, and not the nervous wreck that I usually become in that situation.

Thinking as much as I do on it, I cannot understand this — what is it about passport photos that bring out simply the worst and most lifeless in our faces? Take me for instance. In every passport photo prior to that perfect one, my hair is waving wildly in different directions, as if in response to a call by anti-gravity activists. Or it is plastered so tightly on my head

that perfect strangers have felt compelled to comment on the shape of my skull. In short, the kind of hair that is never going to win me any Ms Gorgeous Hair contests.

And then my neck. Looking back, I can clearly see two different kinds of neck attitudes in my photographs — either lolling to one side like I have lost all control over my motor nerves — or so ramrod straight that it feels like I woke up that morning with a painful crick. In either case, the posture is enough to make people send telegrams and flowers wishing me a speedy recovery.

Given this knowledge and expecting the same to happen again, I went on wisely using the same photograph, getting it reprinted again and again over the years (the National Photo Archives have recently asked to borrow it, promising to proudly display it as the oldest photo negative in the history of the country). University admissions, visa applications, bank accounts, you name it, the same sunny face beamed up at the viewer. In fact, it had got to a stage where when looking at the mirror occasioned sorrow and depression, I fell into the habit of looking at this photograph — to see a bright-eyed pretty girl

with long hair smiling back at me confidently was to think that everything was alright in life.

Anyway, all that is neither here nor there.

Something happened last week that forced me to step once again into a studio, after years of ignoring them with a superior smile.

I was standing at this counter and I could see the puzzlement written large over the face of the person behind it — he kept looking at the photo, and then at me, looking from one to the other repeatedly and from various angles. That was when something told me it was time to get a new picture clicked. Perhaps it was the fact that he told me in a most polite voice, *madam, we need proof of your identity...* or perhaps it was pure feminine intuition.

So, it came about that I went into the photo studio, looking nervously behind my shoulder. The photographer took one look at my panicky face and took charge immediately. After insisting that I comb my hair and powder my face (I opened my mouth to meekly protest, and was quelled by his look that said — *your choice* — but then *don't hold me responsible for the result...*), the well-meaning photographer then proceeded to

help place my map in just the perfect position. *Move your chin left madam, NO, NO, left... now litttttle to the right*; and then proceeded to jerk the neck violently in the said directions. By that time, my neck had started to hurt, forcing me to contort my face into a ferocious grimace. My neatly combed short hair had begun dancing to a tune I could not hear, and the powder was melting and trickling down my nose in rivulets. *Hold it, smile, madam. Click. And that moment — and look — was captured for posterity.*

And this is how, I need to honestly admit, posterity will see me: looking somewhat desperately towards the ceiling, with a tight smile which suggests to the viewer that I have had a few quick ones just before stepping into the studio.

So, I say, show me an individual with a passport photo he can be proud of — viz. one that he can show in mixed company without having children burst into sudden frightened sobs and adults falling off their chairs and hurting their heads or pulling their more delicate stomach muscles in the ensuing mirth — and I will show you an overachiever.