

Cradle

1.

This is absurd, Asha thinks, her hands shaking so badly she can barely apply the nail varnish. It's not like this is going to change my life. It's not like it will change anything. But nevertheless her heart is still pounding wildly. She has dressed as if for a job interview: trouser suit and high-heels, hair washed and oiled and left hanging loose, slightly garish make-up. God knows why, she thinks to herself. It's not like I have to impress anyone. And yet she knows that isn't true, much as it should be. She desperately wants to appear successful.

Otherwise what am I? She asks herself. I'm still the very thing that was rejected as a baby. No good to anyone.

The worst of it is that she's had too long to think. All that waiting around at check-in followed by a nine hour flight, sat there in front of a bad Hindi movie, unable to sleep. At one point, during the wake-up meal, the woman sitting next to her had leaned over and asked what she often got asked by Indians on long haul flights: "were your parents from Assam?"

She knows that she's supposed to fit a type: her eyes, cheekbones, nose; even her hair and the shape of her body. It appals her. "I don't know. I think so, maybe." End of conversation.

She brooded over that, as she always did, all the way through the rest of the flight, and the long wait at immigration. She had wanted to go straight to Palna but the admin staff would leave at five; there wasn't enough time. So she took a taxi to her hotel, watched the sun fall over the clutter and chaos of Old Delhi, ate out on the terrace listening to the chatter and the music and the motorcycle horns before facing another sleepless night, flicking backwards and forwards through the endless TV channels. She lay in her bed praying for sleep, remembering back over all the times she had imagined this, of being here now, on the verge of knowing. In her fantasies it had never been as banal as this: a musty hotel, hours of frustration and boredom; just like every other time she had been to Delhi.

All her life she's wondered. And now, maybe-

The room telephone rings and she jumps, snapping out of her reverie. Her taxi has arrived. She's ordered an Ambassador; tinted windows, air-con, everything. She can't show any weakness, any hint of failure. One last check over her appearance, smoothing down her hair, her suit, then with heart hammering at her ribcage she takes a final look at her room and leaves.

2.

It might be an Ambassador but it still stinks. The driver has probably spent too many nights sleeping in here, waiting for a call from one of the big hotels. Still, he has on a nearly fresh shirt, his moustache is carefully trimmed and his teeth are not stained red from chewing paan. She perches gingerly on the manky rug thrown over the back seat.

“Where to, ma’am?”

“Yamuna Marg, Civil Lines. A place called Palna.”

“Palna? In English, ma’am, means cradle.”

Cradle. She’s read all the literature. So much a part of her life, yet somewhere until now she’s always carefully avoided. The name is taken from an actual cradle that sits in an alcove outside the building. Children can be dropped anonymously into it, at which point a bell rings and one of the staff will open up a window, take hold of the child and bring it in. She feels her stomach clench with a sudden coldness.

“Yes, I know. I speak a little Hindi. I was born in India.”

“Oh. And now you are from which country? England?”

“Yes.”

“Nice place.”

“Thank you.”

The car chokes a bit, but he manages to get it started and pulls out into the day’s first traffic-jam, several lines of vehicles trying to squeeze through the Kashmir Gate. She settles back slightly reluctantly onto the rug and stares out of the window. A sea of people pushes past either side of the car, laden with bottles, metal pans and electrical goods. Through the press of bodies she can see old women squatting by doorways, selling clothes or vegetables piled on filthy scraps of tarpaulin; shop fronts that open up into grimy darkness, men arguing at their thresholds; women stringing washing across balconies overhead, gossiping, leaning languidly on railings and watching the world go by. This should feel like home, she thinks. It’s where I was born, after all. But it is too alien; it holds her out.

It takes them an age, but at last they get through the gate and onto Lothian Road. The sky is clouding over above them and she guesses there will be rain soon. They jostle and spar with the other lines of traffic. Gaps open as they reach the ring road and they pick up speed, cramped housing blocks slipping quickly past, giant billboard posters blotting her view. The taxi passes into the wide, leafy avenues of New Delhi, some of Lutyens’ bungalows visible through the trees; the homes of doctors and lawyers and legislators. Wherever I’m from, she thinks, it’s almost certainly not here.

The abandoned child her parents had taken in. They had made this journey all that time ago, wanting to adopt a child for reasons she still doesn’t understand. They had never talked about it. Unanswered questions fill her head. Why was I picked? Why not some other little girl or boy? How did the adoption panel decide: did I smile at them first; did I laugh or cry - what? It seemed so arbitrary.

Was arbitrary, she tells herself. She knew their choice wouldn’t have been logical. Just like her desire to come back also wasn’t, like her clothes, her hair, the lacquered nails. These decisions are not rational, she thinks. They’re just dumb statements of human need. And that’s why I’m here, trying to find the woman who gave me away, all that time ago.

My real mother. Maybe she wakes up every morning like I do, wondering.

With a noise that makes her jump, a massive rain drop splatters across the car windscreen, followed rapidly by more. As the driver switches the wipers on a sheet of filthy grey rain crashes down, drumming on the roof of the Ambassador like the fists of a hundred children, clamouring to be let in.

White cracks of lightning refract through the rain and thunder growls on the horizon. Groups of labourers shelter under a half-built flyover, commuters crowd the bus stops, cyclists dismount and wait under snack shop awnings. Other people just crouch under whatever feeble shelter they can find and hope it will soon pass. A fine spray rises several inches above the asphalt, such is the rain's force, rivers running down the road and hot metal surfaces steaming.

They pass a sign for Civil Lines. She realises that she's gripping the door handle. This is where I began, she tells herself.

3.

"Palna, ma'am."

The taxi pulls to stop. Rain still batters down on everything. Heart pounding in her chest, she takes a long deep breath that she hopes the taxi driver doesn't see.

He rolls down the window. "Arre bhai! Chaataa laiye!" The uniformed guard, who had been lounging inside his box watching the Ambassador, hurries out, unfurling a huge black umbrella before opening the car door. "Please ma'am. Welcome." She climbs out of the car with a wave to the driver and follows the guard through the gate, briefly glimpsing the cradle as she does so, nestling in its brick alcove. She doesn't have the time to stop and look; doesn't want to. He leaves her with the umbrella, standing in the driveway staring.

So this is it. Despite the sticky heat and the rain she hugs herself, feeling sick. She looks over at the set of low, colonial-style bungalows that make up Palna, brick-built with tiled roofs and wide verandas, surrounded by a large garden and a high wall. She shivers, following the water as it runs in little streams along the concrete driveway.

She doesn't remember a thing about it.

A door has opened and a neat middle-aged woman, grey-haired and sari-clad, is beckoning her in. She walks over, trying to stop herself from trembling. They shake hands.

"Please come in," the woman says. "I'm Indrani Gupta."

"Asha Lakhani. Was it you I talked to on the phone?"

"That's right."

She is taken through into the office, where someone takes her jacket and the umbrella. The other women in the room say hello and then discreetly make their way out, leaving Asha alone with Mrs Gupta.

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"I couldn't, thanks. I know it must seem stupid, but I'm just so nervous..."

"That's okay." Mrs Gupta smiles. "We found your file." She pats a large bundle of notes bound in a buff folder.

"I didn't expect there to be so much of it."

"Oh, there are doctors' reports, weight and height charts, outcomes of the interviews with your adoptive parents, all sorts."

"Do you get many of the - of the children coming back?"

"Some. Most often the ones who went abroad, like yourself."

"And do you approve of it?"

“I think it’s only natural for some people.”

“And how many are disappointed by what they’re told?”

Mrs Gupta gives her a careful look. “You’ve got to remember that there are different ways children come to be here. Some are given away by their parents because they just can’t cope, some we find wandering about on the streets of Delhi, and some are left as infants in the cradle. You’ve got to remember that it’s usually only in the first instance where we know who the parents are.”

Asha feels she is suffocating, staring straight into Mrs Gupta’s hazel eyes. *What are you trying to say to me?*

“And even where we do know, the mother often doesn’t want contact with the child. Not long back we had a girl from Italy come over - a lot of our girls go to Italy, especially - and we managed to trace her mother, but she didn’t want to talk. The girl was heartbroken. I don’t think she expected that, despite all we had told her.”

“It sounds like you’re preparing me for the worst.”

“It’s just often difficult, that’s all. I’d be failing you if I didn’t warn you of that.”

That poor girl. The dumb stupidity of it, the dumb pain. Asha feels the tears welling up inside her. She manages to blink them back but Mrs Gupta, watching keenly, has noticed.

“Perhaps you need more time? I could take you for a look around. The children always love a visitor, and I don’t imagine you remember it.”

“You’re right; I don’t. It - it might be nice.” She wipes her eyes rapidly.

Mrs Gupta carefully places the buff folder in a drawer. They leave the office.

The different bungalows are arranged rather haphazardly around a central square, once a swimming pool but now converted into a playground. Rain streams off the stretched plastic sunscreen hanging overhead, the noise of its falling filling the square. Most of the children are inside their dormitories, the girls all with the same topknot of hair, ranging in age from about three years to six or seven. Asha squats down to talk to them in her bad Hindi. Most of them look at her as if she’s completely mad; some run away, some smile shyly and one or two answer back.

Miss Gupta watches her. “You’re good with them. Do you have any of your own?”

“No.”

“Husband?”

Asha shakes her head.

“Would you want children? That’s often when people come back here.”

“I don’t know. Considering where I’ve come from,” she looks around, smiling, “I often worry that I’d be a bad mother.”

“I don’t think you can presume the worst.”

“Maybe not.”

Asha thinks of her adoptive parents as she plays with the bolder of the children. Is this what they had done too? One of the girls in front of her, doing a little dance and laughing, has the most beautiful smile, and when eventually Asha gets up, she finds it difficult to leave her behind. They pass on into the sick room, where nurses with face masks feed small, fragile looking children. Then last of all they enter the babies’ dormitory, removing their shoes before they enter.

Asha finds herself in a long, fairly dim room. In one corner, much like the sick room, sit two nurses, again with face masks, feeding two babies each. Three hip-high walls divide the room, and baskets are affixed at regular intervals along the walls. Asha presumes this is laundry, and only after a while of watching the nurses does she realise that all of the baskets contain babies.

“Oh God,” she murmurs, a sort of numbness slowly flooding through her. So this would have been where her parents first saw her. Here, one of a row of babies all laying in cradles, some asleep and some awake, some staring into space and frowning, several pairs of eyes expressionlessly watching her, not expecting anything, unresponsive. She pushes a hand through her hair. The madness of it, she thinks. The fucking, rutting, the hot adolescent lust and hopeless acquiescence, the abuse and rape, the want of food, all those families with no job and too many children already, all these mistakes and signs of cruelty, these rows of unintended children starved of attention, harmless and helpless and alone. She understands her parents all at once, love for them crippling her, thinking that, in their position, she would have done the same thing too. Because you’ve got to make things right, as much as you can; force some meaning into the brutal senselessness of the world. You can lift a child out of one of these cradles, smile at it, love it, carve out a life for it. And someone’s got to, she thinks, otherwise what are we?

The pain her parents felt when she told them what she was going to do suddenly becomes real. She puts a hand to her face and finds it wet with tears. Mrs Gupta quickly walks over and takes her by the shoulder as she struggles not to sob, not wanting to wake any more of the babies. She lets herself be led out.

4.

The rain eases up and the children are allowed out into the playground. They run around shrieking and stamping in the puddles. Asha and Mrs Gupta sit on the wall nearby, watching. For a long time, neither speaks.

“I was left in the cradle, wasn’t I?” Asha says at last.

Mrs Gupta looks at her with a tender expression. “You were. I’m sorry.”

“So that’s it. I’ll never find out who my mother is.” She rubs her cheek and tries not to cry again. “If everyone’s right about my looks, then she’s from Assam, and that’s all I’m ever going to know. Not why she was in Delhi, what happened... It’s not much.” She feels her appearance – the neat clothes, the lipstick, the nail varnish – crack open.

She stares down at her open palm, the lines tracing her history and fate, mysteries reaching back through time to her unknown mother. They will never speak, she thinks.

“Maybe it’s a blessing, just to be able to leave it now.” And Mrs Gupta gently lays her hand on Asha’s arm.

“Yeah. Perhaps you’re right.” She sighs, thinking of her parents in London and feeling suddenly very homesick. “What would have happened to me if I’d stayed?”

“All of our undamaged children get adopted sooner or later. You were quite lucky; according to the records you were brought in with septicaemia and malnutrition. You nearly didn’t survive. We always lose a few children every year.”

“And were you here then?”

“Oh God no,” she laughs. “I came a little after your time.”

“Pity.”

“We can’t let ourselves get too attached.”

“That must be difficult.”

“Everything with children,” Mrs Gupta says with a smile, “always is.”

“I’m starting to realise that. I used to think it was only me.”

Asha watches the children play. They’re so happy, she thinks. It’s easy to look at them and think that actually it’s all very simple. But she knows that it isn’t. All this trouble sat and waited, from an unremembered part of her past, growing inside her like a cancer, consuming her. It couldn’t be avoided.

“You must think I’m mad,” she says, “having come all this way just for one little detail.”

“You’re not first to have felt like that.”

“And what is it really? Even if you could have told me more, what would it mean? A name, some details of a person that I don’t know?” She shrugs uncomfortably. “It felt so important for me to find out, but now...”

“How long are you in Delhi?”

“Another week.”

“Well, feel free to come back. It’s never an easy thing to cope with.”

But in a way it is, Asha thinks. I’ve got a mother and father; I’ve got a whole life back in London waiting for me. And the past - the past is gone, unrecoverable.

5.

After she exits the gates, Asha takes a long look at the cradle. It is on a concrete plinth in a brick alcove, made from wicker and with a clean blue mattress inside it. Then she looks down at her hands. It could have been with hands like these, she thinks. A woman with the same skin and hair, perhaps, leaving no explanation and no reason for her act. Maybe she kissed me goodbye; maybe she didn’t. And then she left me, and after that everything that matters in my life started.

She turns around and walks back to the waiting taxi.

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