

Not Built for Children

by Garima Chhikara

It's one thing not to want something; another to be denied it. I never wanted children. I find them manipulative, burdensome, and annoyingly loud. And, to be fair, so was I until at least twenty-six. The very parts I despise in them are the same ones I've been trying to prune out of myself. People romanticize childhood innocence and treat kids like gods just because the world hasn't touched them yet. But that's not purity. It's just inexperience.

Still, I felt something like sadness. A loss I couldn't quite understand or accept when the doctor told me my chances of bearing a child were very slim.

I'd gone looking for answers to the painful, erratic periods I'd been having. Fibroids. An army of them had established their bases in and around my uterus. Worse than parasites, no matter how clean and fit my body was, they would stay put and multiply. "We'll operate if they grow," the doctor said, as if it was no more serious than a headache or a cold. It was quite common: four out of five women had fibroids, or their "siblings," cysts.

Why do I have it? Who knows? Maybe it's a curse of lineage. Maybe it's just bad luck, like getting COVID even though you never stepped foot outside.

It's one of those things where you accept the twisted reality and hope time unspools it into something not just bearable but understandable. No one warns you how unnerving it feels to step into new territories without a map.

I did not want to investigate my compromised fertility by subjecting my poor, twisted ovaries to radiation scans. So, that was that.

I should have been happy, considering how I feel about children. Why would it be any different for my own?

I could be reckless with my boyfriend; we could try anything. No caution or boundaries.

In a way, I was approaching the kind of life I'd wanted. But that glimpse of the future had always been vague, out of focus. Now it was suddenly vivid, close enough to swallow me whole.

I'm pretty sure I didn't even like myself as a child. Not that I remember much. My childhood wasn't interesting, as I keep reminding my therapist. She loves to poke at it anyway. She calls it "repressed memory," around which grief circles like a bee. I treat memory as a ghost, and grief as a feral cat in the yard. But this isn't about grief.

Maybe she's right, memory hides what we can't yet face, waiting for us to be ready to meet it again.

As for memory, I see it as a favor, a dutiful move your subconscious makes on your behalf. It's impressive what the body can do for you, how it frees you from what no longer serves you.

Later, at my aunt's place, I waited for someone to notice anything different about me. But they were too absorbed in chai recipes. A pinch of nutmeg, they said, would make you sleep like a cat. That, apparently, was more urgent.

When I finally managed to grab their attention, I told them what the doctor had said.

"You could have eaten our sister. Your twin. The remains of the fetus become fibroids later on," my sister said, matter-of-fact. It couldn't be genetic. Her periods were painless, like a floating ride in one of those pad commercials.

I asked my aunt if our mother had them. They never talked about that sort of thing—too personal. There were always more pressing topics: evil mothers-in-law, rishtas (marriage proposals) falling apart, or someone getting swindled over a plot of land.

She did offer me something, though: a tea recipe for easing periods. Ginger, fennel, basil. Saffron if you're feeling extravagant.

When I called my boyfriend, he said, "I can finally believe in the power of manifestation." He was thrilled. Congratulatory, even.

It's obvious to everyone that I despise children. Not just my family and friends. It's as if it's written on my face in a constant, disgusted sigh—my sister's words. It's one of those things that ends up defining you. The thing people use against you in pointless arguments, to make fun of you, to introduce you, and so on.

And yet sometimes I hear a girl's laughter, sharp as a crow at dawn, as she rides her cycle with pigtails flying, eyes sparkling. Her father is beside her, arms extended, ready to steady her. I catch myself smiling, then aching. I can't tell if I'm smiling the way one does at a kitten, or if it's the kind of yearning that pricks at old wounds. It's like being a child again, tapping a wooden scale against my head the way my mother did for headaches, then crying when she caught me doing it, ashamed and confused, torn between pain and shame. Those moments blur in memory, but the feeling lingers, unanswered. They stay, like a want with no end.

Not a single person comforted me that day, not with words, not even with more biscuits. My sister and aunt just got up and resumed their tasks, leaving me alone to wallow in silence.

My sister always insists I'd make a wonderful aunt. "You'd love my kid and guard her with everything. You just wait," she says. She's certain she'll have a daughter—no, more than certain, she demands it. She wouldn't have a boy. Just as our mother had only daughters, and our grandmother, five daughters and one good-for-nothing son. But there's something more to it, I think. You want it a certain way or not at all. Maybe it's like that with me and children.

When I smile and remind her that she already has one troublesome child to manage, why burden herself with another, she only laughs. It's taken me years to move from flat refusals, as if she needed my permission, to a small fantasy: taking her child to a metro station after reading Harry Potter together. Platform 9¾. You get the hint.

To make the day even more ironically perfect, this ten-year-old boy—the child my aunt looks after for a friend—showed up. He is the perfect embodiment of my feelings about children. Every time I see him, my conviction hardens. One time, we were stuck in the lift together. He reached out for the emergency phone on the lift wall and told me to calm down. He assured me the lift would reach the nearest floor shortly. I was calm. Just annoyed my Uber driver had called a dozen times. Know-it-alls who think they're adults are the worst.

Back at my aunt's that afternoon, he was still hanging around when irony decided to double down.

As if on cue, a woman appeared—of course, she had a baby with her. She handed me the baby and rushed to the bathroom. Unacceptable. I held the baby stiffly

at arm's length, hands wedged beneath his arms. The baby started wailing at my touch, but I kept steady so as not to drop him.

The ten-year-old boy strode up and plucked the baby from my arms. "What are you doing? This is not how you hold a baby," he screamed. I resisted yelling back and gladly retreated to a seat far away.

I watched the boy swing the baby and talk to him in some cooing language. He asked me to pass the ball that was lying on my side of the room. I threw the ball and said, "Fetch" to the baby. It just slipped out. I thought it was funny. But the boy glared at me. "You really shouldn't become a mother," he said.

The audacity. Can you imagine? The sneaky little minx actually said that to me.

I froze. I couldn't think of a savage reply. I was lacking, and that's why I couldn't be a mother. That hurt more than I was willing to accept.

I spent the whole night thinking of a comeback, but nothing came.

All I could think about was having a child ... just to spite a ten-year-old. And the world.

I kept hoping the memory of his words would soften, fade, bury itself. That I could go back to being someone who never lost anything. But is it even a loss when you never had it? When you never even wanted it?

It didn't fade. It stayed fresh like a leaf, like a goddamn baby. Like my mind wasn't just remembering, but mocking me.

My therapist suggested I take the radiation scan, so I'd know for sure how I feel about it. So much for not telling me what to do and letting me make my own decisions. She also suggested asking my sister about my childhood. For example, the dream where I stand outside my mother's bedroom, not going away, and not going inside. Is it because I'm guarding her?

I didn't tell her I knew the answer already. I didn't want to hear it or, worse, have it declared false. I do not wish to let go of that image: a child who couldn't sleep but was too pitiful to bother her mother.

I didn't want the scan either. What if it changed everything? Who would I be then if my beliefs were that fragile?

"Contradictions are the most human thing about us," she says.

Maybe so. But I'd rather be something stranger. Like a wicked woman in a gated garden, surrounded by peculiar fruits no child is allowed to touch.

A fortress built from the wild, messy parts of me, guarding against everything uninvited: memories, children, expectations, and the questions I am not ready to answer.



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