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Echoing Memories and Synchronicities of an Adoptive Family: *A Memoir*

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A Memoir

An Honors Project for the Program of Asian Studies

By Gemma Jyothika Kelton

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To my mama: You are an inspiration, and I am lucky and grateful to call you, my mother. You raised me to be a strong, beautiful, independent, and a disciplined person. You have given me what I have desired the most since I was a young girl: an education and a family to call mine. This is my small way of showing my gratitude to you. For that, I am dedicating this work to you, My Mama-ka.

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Acknowledgments

I first and foremost would like to thank my mother for choosing me to be her daughter, for allowing me this chance at life. You have put up with me and my rebellious stages for so many years, even as I have tried to push you away. Since my adoption, you've always been by my side as a strong support, a root, refusing to leave and bend and I cannot thank you enough for being my mother. Words cannot describe how grateful and happy I am to be a part of your family, and to call you, my mother. Recently, I was walking through the forest behind campus, and I remember looking up at the sky. I was fascinated with how the limbs of trees and stars aligned with one another, how everything flowed in and out of one another, a web of interconnectedness. In that moment, I realized that you have created that web of possibilities for me, that you are that external force in my life. Without you, I would not be where I am, and I felt this overwhelming power of being given the chance to live and exist in the spaces that you've gifted me with. I love you, mama. Thank you for everything you've done for me and for all that you've given me. I hope to make you proud.

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I also want to give a small shoutout to my carrel space in Hawthorne Longfellow Library. It was a safe and calm space for me to write in without anyone interrupting my flow. I discovered I need space and patience with myself to write, and that carrel was my constant that I leaned on. I brought my tea kettle and blanket to my carrel every day, and even put plants on my shelf. My carrel became my second home.

NOTE TO READER: This is a memoir and a work of nonfiction. I have tried my very best to remember conversations I've had with people over the course of my life and accurately depict places and people to the extent that I can remember. To respect the privacy of several persons, many names of persons have been changed, as well as place names and locations.

Echoing Memories and Synchronicities of an Adoptive Family

By Gemma Kelton

Monday, June 29th, 2009. I was 10 years old. I had been in America less than a year, about seven months, and had already enrolled in elementary school. I looked healthy, happy, and well-nourished, a stark contrast to what I had once been. Despite the many barriers and obstacles that immigrants like me face in the United States, I learned quickly: my one-word "yes" or "no" responses in English quickly turned into complete sentences; my fingers became adept at using utensils to eat; I wiped my bum with something called toilet paper. I was in the process of finding a new sense of familiarity and forming new kinships until I was confronted by something - something I was too young to understand at the time. I was experiencing a gross misunderstanding and misrepresentation of what 'adoption' is.

What Does It Mean By "Being Adopted?"

It was my very first day of tennis camp at Sidwell Friends School in the Tenleytown neighborhood of Washington DC. Sidwell is one of the most elite private schools in the nation and it has a well-known tennis program. The tennis counselor clapped her hands three times to get our attention. Out of a group of 12 or 13 kids, there were seven girls, including me. The counselor clapped her hands again.

"Great, thank you everyone. Now, we will go around and say our names, an interesting fact about ourselves, and … favorite ice-cream flavor."

"My name is Gemma. I am adopted. I like pink ice-cream."

The girls giggle. Then a boy pipes up. "So, what? Your parents didn't want you?"

I remember feeling confused and hurt. I tried to respond with my minimal English. He laughed. So I laughed too. Then he was confused. It wasn't until some years later that I realized he was laughing *at* me, and I was laughing at what he laughed at: *me*. I was laughing at myself. But who was I? I was so busy adjusting across the world, cultures, and races that I found myself clinging to the label of "adoptee." His comment made me feel ashamed and humiliated for being, and even saying, I was adopted.

Coming to America and to a new family was my source of hope, joy, and pride. I was not only proud, but also felt that it was a title that was *my* right to claim. I was proud to have been adopted and to have that compose such a large part of my identity here in America, in my new home. In that instance however, it felt like that by saying "I am adopted," I was also communicating that *I didn't belong* or that I had been given up. I felt confused, hurt, and rejected, feelings that weren't entirely foreign to me. I didn't understand then why he laughed at me, but looking back now, I see that he took my identity as an 'adoptee' as a means of putting me down in an effort to insert his own status above mine. Perhaps this feeling of threat for him stemmed from his fear of me. Or maybe even jealousy.

In that moment, it felt that by saying "I am adopted," I was also conveying that my mother wasn't my "real" mother, and I wasn't my mother's "real" daughter. And that not being related biologically meant my relationship with my mother was inferior. Here, in the United

States, and in parts of Asia, there is a common misconception that 'families' are supposed to look alike and must be related genetically; thus, when an individual stands out - whether it is due to skin color, creed, caste, or class - they do not "fit" the traditional American conception of "family," and risk discrimination and even ostracization.

The word "adoptee" or "adopter" sparks a great deal of questions, most of which are deeply personal, and force adopted people like me to explain ourselves. At the same time, however, the word 'adoption' itself is charged with so many double meanings that people automatically view it negatively: either parents could not bear children of their own or the child was given up. Of course, none of those circumstances are necessarily true. I recall my first memory at elementary school after I arrived in the United States.

When I arrived in the United States after my mother first adopted me, she asked me what I wanted. I said, *school*. I wanted an education. At my orphanage, or what is called a "care center," we had two volunteers who visited to provide a couple of hours of instruction a week. One volunteer, who always wore a kurta, was my favorite. But she was also the strictest, despite having a kind face. She tied her hair in a knot at the nape of her neck, trying to contain the frizz, but with little success. Her skin tone complexion was about a shade or two lighter than mine, and while the difference was not great, I was always aware of her lightness.

All the kids at the orphanage called the volunteers "Didi," meaning "older sister." She and the other volunteer taught us math and English. I quickly discovered that I loved competing with my peers and eagerly anticipated the gold stars and "very good" check marks from our teachers. When I didn't get as high of a mark as I had hoped, I'd try and smudge it for a better evaluation. But I'd find a gnawing sense of guilt creep on, finally forcing me to accept what I still to this day struggle to deal with: disappointing others, and myself. However, that little taste

of ‘education’ we received at the orphanage was neither enough to quench my curiosity nor satiate my appetite to learn. I wanted to know why it took the rains so long to come during the hot season; I wanted to know what the foul-smelling fumes that came out of the auto-rickshaws were; I wanted to know who the white people were; I wanted to know where America was - Was it another planet? Another world? Another realm of the gods? As a young child, my imagination was full and colorful. My curiosity drove me.

When Mary Paul, the orphanage’s director, told me that a mother in America was going to adopt me, I was ecstatic. I remember she called me into her spacious office on the third floor of our building and gave me the good news. Immediately, I started crying. I just couldn’t believe that after nearly four years of waiting at the orphanage, that somebody wanted me. I tried to picture my new mother’s face. It was only when my new mother and I started exchanging letters through the orphanage that my prospect of adoption felt *real* to me. In the letters, she sent me pictures of herself, of her home, of her dogs, and sparkly pink, blue, green glue sticks. I remember clearly in one of the pictures, she wore a pink puffy vest with black joggers and two large Golden Retrievers, Lilah and Pippa, flanking her on either side. The weather looked sunny and to be around wintertime because the trees had no leaves. My new mother sat on stone steps in front of her yellow home and smiled directly at the camera, slightly squinting. I remember thinking how beautiful she was, how lucky I was to soon call that my home too, to call her *my mother*. From those pictures, the world there, in America, looked pure and fresh, clean, and brimming with possibility.

Since hearing the news, I dreamed a great deal about going to America. In my dreams, I sat on my supernatural spaceship just above the cumulus clouds that looked like fluffy white cotton candy, peering into a pool of darkness beneath me, only to find my own reflection glaring

back at me. In Greek mythology, Narcissus, the mortal son of Gods, stared into this pool of darkness and fell in love with his own image that reflected. Eventually, he drowned in his own self-absorption. While I didn't drown in my own self-image, I saturated myself in my idea of what America must be - a land full of white people where I worried none of the things I knew in Bangalore, like dosas, idlis, gulab jamun, existed there. I didn't know what to expect, but I knew what I was most excited about: getting an education.

Knowing how important school was to me, my mother directly enrolled me in a small international school, Coeus International School. It was in the northwest sector of Washington DC on busy Connecticut Avenue. I was there only briefly, but I remember the large green tinted windows and that parts of the fitted building were exposed to red brick, which created a stark and odd contrast between modernity and traditional styles. Nonetheless, I was ecstatic: I was finally in school. I remember walking into the classroom with about ten or eleven kids. They boys wrestled with one another shouting and screaming, while the girls chatted in a circle. The teacher, a tall white woman with a slender build and short blonde hair, stood at the front writing words on the whiteboard. Peers, teacher, whiteboard, notebook, chair. Check. I was in school. I remember introducing myself to these two girls in my class, Emily and Hairway (I never learned how to spell her name correctly, so this is my spelling as a 10-year-old with very minimal English language capabilities).

"My name is Gemma. I am adopted."

My statement was met with sympathetic gazes. "So where are you from?"

"India."

"But like where?"

"Bangalore. Orphanage called Vathsalya Charitable Trust."

Their gazes reflected what I neither wanted nor felt: pity. They viewed my adoption as a negative part of who I was, while in fact, it was a part that brought me a great deal of hope, joy, and pride. For me, adoption was a way out - out of a life of extreme poverty, abuse, and despair. And it was also an affirmation that I was wanted and that I was part of a family. Adoption is what brought me to America, and to have sat in that chair at that moment with them. However, that feeling of hope and pride comes at a heavy cost. In identifying as an 'adoptee' (a term that I only came to embrace in my senior year of college), I also feel a great sense of guilt.

It was November of 2010. I was in the 5th grade at British International School in Washington DC. The school was located right off Wisconsin Avenue, where Safeway, a tennis repair shop, and cafes ran along it. Wisconsin Avenue was one of the busiest roads in Washington DC with cars, bikers, joggers all traveling up and down. I had just won the election to be Deputy Head Girl. My best friend, Mina, was the head girl. We were the two tallest girls in the entire primary school (and now, I am amongst the shortest of my peers in my college, while Mina remains rather tall for a woman at 5'7"). I remember coming home that day, carrying the glass trophy, and my mother's face relishing in absolute glory and delight. She was proud. Despite the language and cultural barrier, I could tell she was proud, and I beamed with the joy of her praise and approval. And then she showed me something - letters from my foster brothers, Lokesh and Ramesh. They were adopted together to a white family in Ohio shortly after I left the care center. When I saw the letters, I thought, *they made it out too*. I momentarily felt a desire to re-connect with them, so I wrote them back and forth a couple of times, but something in me *stuck*.

I couldn't figure it out then, but I now can identify it as guilt and loss. I didn't want to keep in touch with my foster brothers because they were from my past life, and I selfishly

wanted something that was only *mine*. I didn't want to re-connect because I left them alone with the foster brother who sexually assaulted us on a daily basis. At the orphanage, Lokesh, Ramesh, and I were assigned the same foster family for overnight care. The family consisted of our foster mother, Sindhu, and her children, Harini and Vijay. Sindhu worked long hours, and only returned at 8pm every night. A jeep full of ten or so kids would drop Lokesh, Ramesh, and I from the orphanage at the foster home at around 4 or 5pm. Between those few hours, Lokesh, Ramesh, and I did our best to hide in plain sight. We would pretend to diligently study, huddled together in a circle, with our books in the middle, our heads touching. We mumbled the same words repeatedly, rocking back and forth on our haunches. Most of the time, this technique would work, but other times, we were unfortunate to have cable TV displaying selected scenes of WWE matches. The TV would scream at him as we tried to focus on our studies. Vijay thoroughly enjoyed these matches, and oftentimes decided to practice his favorite WWE fighting techniques on us as mere 7- and 8-year-olds. He would lay a thin mat on the ground and wrestle us into a headlock; raise us high above his head and throw us onto the thin mat. Oftentimes, I would end up with a bloody nose and unexplainable bruises. Thankfully, none of us ever broke any bones.

Sleep was scarce. The seven of us slept together in a small room, our bodies curled up against one another. Lokesh and Ramesh would be together on one end, and I would be next to Harini. I remember one night going to bed wearing light blue jeans that were three sizes too big, only held together by a large safety pin, and a bright red sleeveless top. That night, I had my worst nightmare. In my dream, Lokesh, Ramesh, and I had killed Vijay to free ourselves from his abuse, but no sooner had we relaxed that his hand shot up from a mound of dirt, clawing at me. I gasped for air. I thought we had killed and buried Vijay. His hand rose higher and higher. I

thrashed around in my thin sheet. In my dreams, he haunted and gnawed at me, eating me alive, like how a maggot uses its mouth to hook and its rough skin to scrape away dead flesh as they feed on the decaying carcass. This same dream repeated itself over and over again, even when I came to America.

It was about a year and half after my adoption that I told my mother, the first and only person ever, of what happened at the foster care. I learned at the YMCA camp near the Ferry Building by the pier that if someone violates your person or touches you without your permission, it is important to speak up. I came home that day and told my mother everything. It was only when I spoke of it out loud, the dreams started to fade, chased away by the exposed secret and the protective presence of my mother. This was the first time I ever saw my mother cry. When she started crying, my own tears flowed freely. In that moment, our tears blended into a single stream, our bodies embraced one another. Touch and body language became our new language where spoken language didn't dare enter those dark spaces. We shared something so fragile and heavy our relationship grew that much tighter: that was our final act of securing our mother-daughter relationship.

Being a lawyer, my mother is accustomed to masking her feelings and putting on a facade, so when I saw this visible display of emotion, I realized then how violating a moment it was for me, and a traumatic thing for my mother to hear. I knew what Vijay did was bad and I was not to tell anyone, but I didn't think much more than that. She kept apologizing as if it was her fault and I remember saying, "It's okay. It's not that bad, it happens." She asked me if she could tell Mary Paul, the head of the orphanage at the time, and I vehemently said no. I was afraid of what might happen to Sindhu, and Harini if he found out I told my mother. I felt that whatever had happened, I too played a large role. Despite my protests, she reported the incident

to the head of the orphanage and the family was immediately removed from the foster care system. While they are no longer able to care for children, the trauma I experienced then will always be carried with me. I believe that trauma is so deeply ingrained in me that it now is part of who I am.

Contacting Lokesh and Ramesh in America was like re-opening old wounds that were just finally beginning to scab. I found myself wanting to itch that scab, making myself bleed again, but I sought out resistance instead, something I was all too familiar with. Thus, my decision to not maintain contact with them made me feel guilty too. How dare I turn my back to those who experienced the same, whom I partly grew up with? I was once their elder foster sister, and now I am deliberately *choosing* to be nothing to them. What does that make me? Is my decision to not maintain contact for their own sake, to not revive any old memories they've probably tried to bury deep, or is it selfish because I didn't want to be reminded of my feeling of guilt for leaving them behind? Am I brave for giving them space to allow them to heal from their own wounds or am I a coward for being unwilling to even acknowledge the battle scars of the past?

It felt like by choosing to not maintain connection with them, I was rejecting them and my past. More broadly, that rejection in extension fed into my rejection of my life at the orphanage and my story. In India, I was not ashamed or guilty of my story. I knew my story was not typical, but I never found myself scrutinized or investigated. In America, I found myself *ashamed* of my story. I was exotified and investigated in ways I had never been before: boys thought I might taste like curry, adults assumed I ate samosas and chicken tikka masala growing up, airport authorities questioned me for no apparent reason. I wanted my childhood to be like

everybody else's - growing up in a "regular" family with a mother and a father, going to school from pre-K, learning to ride a bicycle at age 5. So, I pretended I had a life like everyone else.

I remember when I was asked by a couple why mother and I looked so different, I responded, "You see, she had an Indian husband who died before I was born." The couple didn't know what to say. They seemed bewildered if anything. What I told them wasn't entirely a lie either - my biological father (who is Indian) died before I was born. Narrating some fabricated story with a kernel of truth instead of admitting "I am adopted" felt as if I'd get asked fewer questions, as if it was less shameful because then it meant I *belonged*, that I wasn't a *sad story*. So, instead, I learned to stay silent and let people's preconceived assumptions wash over me.

Ocean Vuong, the author of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, also learned to stay silent and "not draw attention to [himself because he was] already Vietnamese." On the outside, he was already *different* enough. By choosing to stay silent, he wasn't giving them, boys who were "only nine [but had] already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers" the chance to take advantage of his language abilities. The author refused to speak, even at their beckoning, and his silence was his strength that he clung to in the face of bullying. Looking within myself however, the silence I held onto was strength to an extent, but it also transformed into feelings of *guilt* and *shame*, no matter how hard I tried to cover up my story with fabrications and simple avoidance. I often feel guilty that I am the one that was 'chosen' and got the chance at another life, not Primilla, not Sultana, not the girl in desperate need of cataract surgery. *Me*.

While this feeling of guilt drives me to do better, to *be* better, it also reminds me of the sacrifices I've made, of the crimes I committed, of the *chance* I stole from someone else to be where I am. I remember telling my mother how guilty I felt that she chose me because I felt like I wasn't 'doing enough'; thus, a disappointment to myself and to her. She reassured me that I

wasn't a disappointment and that in fact, she was proud of my progress, of how far I've come to make something of myself, of how fast of a leaner I was. My first couple of years in America were really a test to my character and my abilities. My English wasn't good enough with the heavy Indian accent that clung heavy to my tongue like how masala stinks up the kitchen when it's on high heat. I failed at being athletic or at pursuing piano. I often fought with my mother, and even physically hit her. I even told her she wasn't my "real" mother, and she was just a guardian by paper. I violently demanded to call the orphanage every day, exponentially increasing her phone bill.

For a long time, I was and still am plagued by the way I treated my mother when I first arrived in the United States. I described these incidents to my therapist, Tristan, who called them "moments of showing attachment." These moments of "acting out," as she called it, were my way of demonstrating healthy attachment, a willingness to form an unbreakable bond with my mother. Still, I find myself regretting how *mean* and belligerent I was towards my mother and have yet to accept it as a formation of "healthy attachment."

At times, I find myself wondering what my life could've been like if I had not been adopted. I find myself conjuring up stories in my head, none of which reflect where I am now, but are reflected in the short fictional stories I write. *If I hadn't been adopted, I'd be a prostitute or a mother with nine children*. When I was younger, my mother encouraged me to write, to keep a journal, like a collection of memories. "Write your memories down so you won't forget them," my mother said. I remember thinking then, *I want to forget. I don't care about those memories*.

I recall trying to write in my journal. I remember writing about my foster mother, Sindhu and me going to the mill to grind whole grains. The place was small and cramped, a short walk from our pink apartment complex. This mill always had a long line, and so we waited. When it

was our turn, Sindhu dumped all the grain into a large blue metal cone-shaped tool and turned the wheel. On the other end of the tool, newly grinded grain poured out. We licked our fingers to scrape up any last remnants of grounded grain, like how one would lick their bowls clean as if food had never even been there. After jotting this memory down in my fragmented English, I quickly realized I didn't have the patience nor the confidence to write. Writing takes energy, man! The words I wrote in English couldn't describe what I was feeling - I was sad, guilt-ridden, ashamed, and in pain, not physically, but emotionally and mentally. Is there one word to describe a deep sense of loss and longing, of yearning and needing?

As I've gotten older and become more comfortable with myself, the language, and the labels that I find myself trapped in, I've found a source of comfort in writing. Ironic, right? Most of the stories I tell of myself are reflected in the short stories I write, or the notes I scribble in my journal. When I read Nicole Chung's memoir, *All You Can Ever Know* in my senior English class, I saw how writing for her was a release and a relief of sorts. As a Korean adoptee adopted by white parents in Oregon, and part of the transracial and transcultural adoption, "writing became [her] way to look ahead to the unknowable future, the one adoptees in stories so rarely get to have. To imagine that it would be *better* somehow." Her parents supported her writing endeavors and Nicole Chung "found a measure of previously unknown power as [she] envisioned, in [her] own stories, places where someone like [her] could be happy, accepted, *normal*." Writing, for me, has become a kind of world building that runs according to my standards, which is exactly what Nicole Chung creates in her memoir. Writing has also helped me find a "measure of previously unknown power" where "someone like me could be happy, accepted, *normal"* without having to explain myself. These standards in my world are so simple - me, an equal to a white man, both socially and economically; me, in a space that accepts those

like me who are orphaned, whether it be by choice or circumstance; me and my voice allowed to ring and sing about my own story.

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act in India states that an "orphan" is a "child who is without parents or willing and capable legal or natural guardian." In India, there is no specific legislation that talks about the rights of an orphan, and there are no rules or regulations that explicitly mention their welfare either. Given this definition, am I an "orphan," despite having (biological) parents? Can I wear the label of an "orphan" just because I've "lived" in an orphanage? Do I truly know what it's like to be an orphan who's been abandoned or given up by their own parents? At the orphanage, I was labeled as an "orphan," and so, I've always felt comfortable associating myself with that.

By owning the label of an "orphan," I was not only severing ties to my biological family, despite being bonded by DNA, but I was becoming independent, no longer tethered to anything that reminded me of them and the circumstances I was unluckily born into. Being an orphan and living at an orphanage was a form of liberation for me. Running away from my biological family and being an orphan was my own experience of freedom, hope, and joy, which is not what people usually think when they hear about an 'orphan.' While I rejected my biological family to be in an orphanage and called myself an "orphan," it in many ways is also a kind of a loss - a loss of family, a loss of belonging, a loss of security of sorts.

In comparison to the other children at the orphanage, they were true to the definition of an "orphan" - a child, whose one or both parents were deceased or incapable of nurturing them. So, did I have a right and a place to be at the orphanage, the supposed "safe haven," or was I taking away that space from a "true" orphan? Technically speaking, the children at the orphanage had nowhere else to go, no one to turn to, while I on the other hand, did have that, but

chose not to go. As I'm writing this sentence, I realize that I've had more privileges in my life than I had previously been aware of or even accepted. And I don't use this word "privilege" lightly, or even in the sense that's been distorted in America. If I'm not an "orphan," then what am I? There is no word in the English language to describe what I am - a girl, orphan by choice, turned to an adoptee by chance and fate. What do you call that? I wasn't abandoned or given up by my biological parents; instead, I had the privilege of knowing I had a biological parent who was very much alive. In other words, I had psychic privilege. What I mean is, I had the privilege of knowing my birth mother was out there somewhere, of knowing I had a choice to go back if I wanted to. So, I ask again, what am I?

Currently, there are about 30 million orphans, and perhaps even more due to the COVID-19 pandemic (the true number is not known). Nevertheless, orphans comprise a little more than 4% of India's total population. That is a considerable number. Given this context, I am merely one voice, one child without a home out of the millions. Thinking back on my life trajectory and the different points of transitions, I am in awe and disbelief. I can't help but feel lucky, feel that chance was on my side, feel the desire to want to live. I remember I was looking at my left hand the other day and seeing three black freckles on the back of my palm, all equally distanced from one another in an isosceles triangle. The three freckles, the three different points of transition in my life marked my body. I carried with me a physical reminder of the paths that I have crossed, of the roads I've roamed, of the lives I've lived. Writing, more precisely self and personal writing, has been a way for me to process the different points of transition in my life. To write is to re-live, but it's also to go back to an event or memory following the shadow of your younger self but with the lens of a 23-year-old woman: you are the ghost in your own past. I have

travelled and survived, felt desolation and powerlessness, seen the wrath of nature and felt the unkind and unwanted touch of men. I have experienced two sides of the same coin.

In India, I experienced extreme poverty, abuse, and despair. In America, through transracial, transnational, transcultural adoption, I experienced extreme wealth - in terms of opportunities, as well as in terms of material goods and emotional gratification. I transitioned from wearing tattered clothes to buying designer jeans, boots, and sweaters; I transitioned from eating rice and dhaal to making pastas and pizzas; I transitioned from dreaming in the masala of languages I spoke at the orphanage to solely communicating in English. The transition from extreme poverty, from eating cement, clay, and dirt to dining at five-star restaurants and always having our pantry full was overwhelming to say the least. I couldn't understand how people had *so much stuff*. It fascinated me. But that made my transition to the "American way of life" that much easier. I eagerly took part in the consumption of material goods like clothes, earrings, the newest iPhone, and yet, I found myself always *wanting* more. I was eager to spend money, but hesitant to accept my new status as part of the "wealthy" class. I just couldn't accept that I was rich. I couldn't accept that wealth and riches because it wasn't mine. It wasn't what I had earned. It almost seemed like if I accepted my new social and financial status as belonging to the "wealthy" class, then I was also rejecting my past life and the experiences from it. *How could I have both? How could I be in both?*

It was the fall of 2019, and I had just begun the first semester of my sophomore year at Bowdoin College in a small town called Brunswick, Maine. It was around 4pm on a Friday afternoon and I had a gathering of a few friends in my common room on the 10th floor of Coles Tower. As we sat around in a circle taking small sips from our red solo cups, the conversation

rolled towards Bowdoin's robust $2.8 billion endowment, and the statistics of students paying full tuition.

"I think that the majority of the students that pay full tuition are white." One friend said, as he leaned back into the couch and rested comfortably in his white privilege. He twirled the red solo cup in his hands - once, twice, thrice - and then took a large gulp.

"Huh? That's not a fair assessment at all." I remarked, setting my cup down and learning forward.

"Well, aren't you on financial aid?"

I stared at him; he stared back, the cup nestled between his lips and his rather yellowing teeth. The other two friends looked between the two of us. They shifted in their seats and tried to change the topic. I answered before they could.

"Well, actually. I'm fortunate to have a mother that can afford my tuition. So, I guess not everyone paying full tuition is white after all."

I was a little surprised, but not shocked he would draw a correlation between my skin color and my family's financial status. By paying full tuition to attend Bowdoin College, I was a walking tree full of contradictions: I was born poor and an orphan (of my own volition), who's now paying full tuition at this elite white institution; my "Indian" identity and ethnicity clashed with my "American" mannerisms and mindset. Money, or lack thereof, has played a key role in my life, one that continues to torment me today. There is an idiom in the United States that "money doesn't bring you happiness." Thus, there's a sudden shift from splurging to budgeting, from gluttonous consumption to finding significance in materials, from money being an enabler

to it being a barrier. As a young girl, I understood the value of money and how important it was to even live. While money may not bring you *happiness* per say, it does make life a whole lot easier - it gives you a running toilet, convenient and affordable transportation, healthier food, warmer clothing, a solid roof over one's head. Going out to dinner with friends or going for a drive, I am too afraid to owe anyone anything because I view it as someone putting me down, like I'm powerless. In having to owe someone something, it feels like I'm in their debt, a feeling I'm all too familiar with. My mother and I, to this day, continue to bicker over my finances. At age 23, my mother has full access to all my finances and transactions, and even supports me financially while I finish up my last semester of college. The catch? Reinforcing financial dependence.

Before the toothpaste even finishes, I tell my mother to get another one. My mother chides me for this. She says to wait until the toothpaste is nearly done to get another, but I have this fear of not having enough that has its roots from my childhood that continues to psychologically affect me today. The "American way" of eating candy, of wearing tattered clothes as fashion, of lack of modesty astounded me. I remember my mother bought me some swimsuits in my first summer in the United States. They were two-piece swimsuits. I remember shaking my head and asking her to purchase another swimsuit that covered my arms, stomach, chest, and legs. As you can imagine, it was impossible to find anything that covered the whole body, so I had to settle for swim shorts and a tankini that covered my entire stomach.

Over time, as I've traveled abroad and switched several schools within the United States, gaining various kinds of exposure to cultures, languages, traditions, weather, food, I grew to understand why American girls preferred to wear what younger me might've perceived to be as "immodest." To them, wearing "immodest" clothing was an affirmation of their sense of security

and confidence within their bodies. To me, it felt *disrespectful* of their own bodies. If they liked and cared about their bodies, they would want to preserve it, right? No. My culture taught me that by women and girls putting their bodies on "display" in such a manner, it was a demonstration of them asking to be looked at, whether it be admiration from women or creepy ogling from men.

Modesty, in my younger self's mind, was the ultimate demonstration of respecting oneself and body. However, as I've assimilated to "American culture," I've also changed a great deal. I have gone from wearing modest long skirts to miniskirts, from eating idlis to cereal in the morning, from speaking Tamil to English. I have become more and more "American," while at the same time growing further and further away from my Indian roots, so I'm left with the question: Am I an imposter? Despite how much I might've looked down on such "American girls," they managed to bring me down even lower. At times, when I mention my marker as an 'adoptee,' I receive pitiful gazes, particularly from those around my own age (like what happened at Coeus International School).

One reason why adoptees like me sometimes receive such pitiful gazes is due to the misrepresentation of orphans, particularly in the media. Nicole Chung, in her memoir, writes that "in most published stories, adoptees still aren't the adults, the ones with power or agency or desires that matter - we're the babies in the orphanage; we're the kids who don't quite fit in; we are struggling souls our adoptive families fought for, objects of hope, symbols of tantalizing potential and parental magnanimity and wishes fulfilled. We are wanted, found, or saved, but never grown, never entirely our own." Looking back on my own picture from the orphanage, I look like a kid "who didn't quite fit in," who was an "object of hope," despite I, myself wanting to be adopted. This just goes to show that whether it be on the news or on social media, orphans

are often shown to be malnourished, unhappy, in poor environments, wearing tattered clothes and barefoot. This image of orphans makes it seem as if there is no hope, as if they are a charity case; when in fact, orphans are just children in need of a loving family and home. This entrenched cultural construction of orphans as a "poor charity case" runs dominant in adoptee narratives. In fact, the label "poor charity case" is so rampant that it continues to shape how people perceive adoptees even after they've been adopted. In addition, even if the adoptees have been raised in wealth, there's this cultural perception that is implicitly underpinned by racial and imperial ideologies that align US or whiteness with wealth and privilege and India or non-whiteness with poverty and lack of social or financial status. These very perceptions and assumptions are what create a dissonance of reality for the transracial and the transnational adoptee, which then forces the adoptee to carry burdens of uncertainty, as well as the burden of proof.

Choosing to Run Away

Thinking back to the incident at tennis camp as a graduating senior in college, I can't help but find it ironic that the boy associated adoption with the biological parents *not wanting* the child. Adoptions occur for a variety of reasons ranging from parents' inability to bear children of their own to neglect to abuse to the biological parent's inability to provide care and support, to the death of the biological parents. What he didn't understand was that adoption in fact doesn't have a correlation with whether the biological parents want the child or not. Adoption, instead, in essence, deems the environment and/or the biological parents to be unfit for the benefit of the

child, resulting in adoption and adaption of the child to another environment and/or parents. In my case, as a mere 5-year-old, I removed myself from my abusive family and the slum where I lived. I made a conscious decision to leave behind my biological family in pursuit of a better life.

Life in an Indian slum is hard. It is filled with life's daily humiliations: villagers defecating in open arid fields, children eating dirt just to fill their stomachs with something, stray animals gnawing on plastic milk bags, men and boys abusing young girls, open sewers flowing nearby collecting garbage along the way. I couldn't see a way out. No matter which direction I turned to, I saw no path, until an old rickety run-down bus slowly drove through our village. Because this was such a pivotal point in my life, I remember it vividly, despite it happening over 18 years ago.

Here, I would like to address any concerns of memory fragmentation, imagination, and trauma. While I remember a great deal from my past life in Bangalore, India, I at the same time don't quite remember specific details like the name of the village I lived in, or the kind of bus that went through our village, or where my village is even located. Trauma does a funny thing to memories - it can either heighten and strengthen the emotions associated with memories, or cause our brain to react and interpret, potentially influencing how we remember those events later on. Many of the experiences I choose to describe are memories that I had buried long ago, waiting to be found and unpacked like a time capsule of sorts. These memories were a burden that clung heavy, leaking out of my pores, a pain so deep it wanted to pull me back. Again. And again. And again. I always said that I wasn't "ready," but will there ever be a time I'm "ready?" As a 23-year-old woman, having grown, having been challenged and stretched in various ways and directions, and having been exposed to many different cultures, experiences, and ideologies,

I feel "ready" now to open my time capsule. That's not to say I'm not apprehensive or even ambivalent, however. I am aware; I am guarded; I'm hard - like how a plant needs a hard exterior to hold it upright, to protect the phloem and xylem from trauma. Despite its hardness, the insides flow freely, this way and that. To the extent that I cannot remember, I will try my best to re-imagine, but not fabricate.

Being the only girl in an Indian family is hard. Being the only girl in an Indian family that comes from poverty, ostracization, and discrimination makes me the punching bag. My three brothers in my family deflected the arrows that society threw at them, piercing me by default. They'd come home from a drunken night out where they chugged alcohol from clear plastic bags and sought me out. I, my body, was the release for their anger, for their frustrations, for their repressed sexual desires. My body has never been mine. My body and mind disassociated from one another, as if repelled like oil on water. I thought my body was meant to be taken, meant to serve the male gaze and their obtrusive touch. After both consensual and non-consensual sex, did I realize the meaning of body: my body is a map of scars, of battles won and lost, of a source of divine pleasure, both for my mine and others'.

Since I can remember, I have cooked, cleaned, and washed. I can't remember being a child or having the freedom of a child - running around in a green yard with a white picket fence, gulping lemonade and sucking on watermelon popsicles that dripped down my mouth, chin, and hands, landing at my feet in a sad puddle of sweetness. Instead, I was to make sure the fire we cooked on outside our hut stayed hot; the toys and clothes were put back into old trucks that; the ratty mats were rolled up neatly. Even at age 5, I understood the obligation of a girl to a family, the responsibility she held to care.

The transportation system in Bangalore, India is complicated and mostly unreliable, oftentimes arriving 30 minutes well over the initial scheduled arrival. In our village, located in the outskirts of sprawling Bangalore, a bus drove twice a day - once to pick up, and again to drop off villagers. The markings on the bus were worn and frayed, barely readable. Tattered posters hung off the old windows, waving in wind as if calling for one last attention. The rusted wheels of the rickety bus screeched and groaned with every pothole in the road, with the very subtle touch of the brake. Large fumes of black smoke would emit from the back of the bus, leaving the air smelling of burnt rubber and rancid gasoline. The bus creakily came to a halt to let some of the villagers out. The wheels squealed, piercing our ears, and making our teeth ache. As my grandmother (unfortunately, I don't remember her much) struggled to tie her saree, she instructed me to spread the pumpkin seeds on the ground behind our hovel. I obeyed. What happened next changed my life forever.

I suddenly crouched behind a thin tree, the trunk struggling to uphold the weight of the branches and the leaves competing to provide shade. My heart pounded in my chest. The hot sun beat down hard on my neck, beads of sweat dripping down the sides of my temples. I was barefoot, the whiteness underneath my feet black, and wearing tattered clothes that hung loosely on my bony skeleton. The bones in my body stuck out, like the protruding, disjointed limbs of a tree; my hair was matted and covered in lice; my stomach bulged, not from indulgence but from malnutrition.

I hid without thinking. It was if someone else had control over my body and I was their puppet. My neighbor, Karthik, shouted at me from afar. He sauntered over, amused. I frantically silenced him, afraid that my grandmother might hear his shouts. He grew silent and watched me watch the bus. The bus slowly teetered to a stop. With my heart pounding and hands balled into

fists, I ran. I ran to the bus, Karthik following me, close on my heels. My bare feet picked up dust after us, forcing my eyes to squint. I didn't dare look back. I didn't dare check how long I was gone since my grandmother told me to spread the pumpkin seeds outside. *I didn't dare*. At that moment, despite struggling to free my vision from the grasp of the dust particles, I was *free*. I tasted the brief sense of *something*, a cusp of a new beginning. We boarded the bus together, wedged between people, hidden from the conductor. If my grandmother saw me run or board the bus, I don't know. She may have screamed my name, beckoning me back, or she may have simply said nothing and watched me leave. I will never know, but it is something I will continue to wonder about, nonetheless.

As I'm sitting in my college kitchen counter as a 23-year-old, I find myself wondering what their reaction might have been when she told the rest of the family I was missing, that I had *disappeared*. I wonder if they felt sadness over losing me, or if they felt a sense of relief knowing there was one less mouth to feed and one less body to clothe. I wonder what they thought had happened to me - whether I willingly ran away, or had been kidnapped, or even killed. I never used to wonder about these things, until now. As a young girl, I had mixed feelings about my biological family - I never wanted to see them again; I never wanted any kind of contact; I never wanted to try to even find them. *They had their chance to care for me, and they lost it*, is what I often told myself. *What kind of mother places a burning stick to her own daughter's face, scarring her forever?* I find myself asking over and over again but coming up empty with no answers. At the time, I couldn't think of an explanation, but now, as an adult, I find myself understanding my biological mother more and more. That's not to say I pardon her or my biological family, however. A part of me wants to believe they cared for me - that they went out on a search or sought out help to find me. I want so badly to believe in the good. But then,

another part of me remembers how they treated me, and how I blamed them for how trapped I felt, and we were as a family - socially, physically, psychologically, emotionally, geographically, financially. It's been so many years now that I don't remember my birth mother's or my brother's or my grandmother's names, but I still remember my birth mother's face. Is that a gift or a burden?

As an adult now, I have come to realize that it isn't fair for me to blame my biological family for all my life's misgivings; instead, I now fault the system and circumstances that were and are still in place for people like me, that immobilize and dehumanize us, trapping us in our own filth and grime. It's not my biological family's fault for the experiences I had as a child or the circumstances I was put in. Those were the set of cards that life had dealt me, and all I could do was reshuffle my hand. It's a complicated story between love, family, and poverty - one that might make you question the value of family and life, as well as what it means to survive.

I think my biological mother showed me love the only way she knew how: she gave me clothes she found on her way to work to lift bricks for a construction site. She was paid less than $1.00 for a whole day's worth of work. I don't remember her keeping anything for herself. My mother's meager salary, the only source of income in the family, would go to the eldest brother. Most of it would be spent on booze that came in clear plastic bags and cigarettes with cancer warnings all over it. We barely had any money left for rice and lentils, the cheapest food we could afford. We ate rice and dhaal consistently, like all the other villagers. My biological mother would make dhaal with searing chilies and bland white rice that cooled down the heat. This is still something I make to this day. Sometimes, if I was lucky, I'd find someone's leftovers on the side of the road - *what a treasure!* As the American saying goes, one man's trash is another man's treasure.

Out of a family of 7, including me, my birth mother, my three brothers, and grandmother and grandfather, we were constantly scrambling to get by. In that life, I never had a home; I never drank clean water; I never used a running toilet; I never had a stable roof over my head; I never owned anything of my own; I never knew what electricity was or could imagine the stuff one can put in their homes. I remember we often went to bed without supper because there simply wasn't enough. That was our everyday reality, and we reckoned with that.

Hunger became a game - it gnawed at me, bloating my stomach, and stunting my bodily functions, but that's precisely what drove me forward. Hong Ying, an inspirational writer, and poet from China wrote an autobiography titled *Daughter of the River*. She was born during the Great Famine of the early 1960s and raised in the slums of Chongqing. In her autobiography, she discusses her own experiences with hunger and the horrors of living in the slums until the age of 18 where she left home to travel and find her voice as a writer. Hunger, for her, was a constant that she relied on to remind herself that she was human, that she was deserving of food even if her own family resented her for even being born. Hunger, for her and me, became a game of cat and mouse - *how long can I avoid her?*

As a child with a rather wild imagination, I became quite creative at this game. I would go by the riverbank and dig into the ground with my bare hands until my nimble fingers felt the soft slimy clay. Bingo. The soft clay tickled my throat, but I couldn't care less - I needed something to fill my stomach with. Sometimes, it would be wet cement, other times, it would be sand, and occasionally, petrol. I didn't like the texture of sand for it was grainy and the grinding of the small stones in my mouth would cause the hairs on the back of my neck to rise. I found myself liking the texture of the soft clay, but not liking the earthy scent. The raw smell of petrol made my mouth water, making me almost crave it. To this day, when I find myself in a

construction area and I smell cement or gasoline, I am immediately brought back to a time when I relied on that as my nutritional supplement. My mouth, as if on cue, salivates, and I turn my head, ashamed. *How can I now still have this urge to taste the cement and petrol, given everything I have at my disposal? Why does this particular memory torment me, even in my 'new' life?* In Hong Ying's "new life," she also admits to having certain cravings from childhood. I recently learned from my therapist that these cravings are called pica, a compulsive eating and psychological disorder in which people eat nonfood items and non-nutritional food like clay, chalk, paint. Oftentimes, people who experience pica are carrying on traumas from their childhood in which their bodies were introduced to non-nutritional food, which can cause negative impacts on bodily functions and growth, as well as a psychological disorder. Despite Hong Ying experiencing pica, she continues to live a happily married life. Her story gave me hope that even when you're from the slums and have faced a great deal of trauma, love is still possible to find, give, and take.

Once on the bus, I exhaled deeply. My nostrils took in the stench of several day-old body odor, of feces and urine, of gasoline and garam masala. Bodies pressed up against one another, the elderly sat on the edge of their seats, gripping tightly onto the fragile bus poles, as if holding on for what remained of their dear life. Karthik and I squeezed ourselves onto the bus, holding onto anything stable to steady us - the arms of a man, the legs of a woman. The paint on the metal seats was completely worn, only little specks of blue remained here and there. It was sweltering hot that day and I remember sweat threatening to drench me in entirety. The bus began to squeal and move, and the conductor collected the fares. Because we could not pay the fare, we were forced to sit in the front of the bus. Up front, we had the best view, so I found little to complain about. The field around us was vast and wide and brown, with huddles of villagers

living their lives on the side of the road. They went through the motions of the mundane everyday routine, as autos, cars, bikes, motorcycles whizzed by them. Their lives seemed slow in comparison, but one that was bright and complex. Dark, black smoke enveloped the village, like a storm about to release her wrath. Dust picked up after the bus, swirling and twirling until the people turned into specks of dust themselves. Out in the distance, enshrouded in a hazy fog, you could see the city - *the great large city of Bangalore*!

Throughout the whole bus ride, I stared ahead, mesmerized, never looking back. It never occurred to me to turn back. Instead, I turned to Karthik, only to find him missing. He had chickened out. Nevertheless, I was not deterred. I spent the next couple of days in a prison cell, as the police tried every tactic possible to get me to reveal the location of my home. I was silent. They slapped me with a stick so hard it left welts on my legs and arms. I said nothing. A woman police officer with a violet saree on forced me to strip down, humiliating and stripping me of my dignity. Still, I remained silent. They gave me a couple of Parl-E biscuits. Even though my stomach grumbled desperately for that biscuit, I said nothing. Even when I arrived at the orphanage at the age of 5, I refused to reveal the location of my home. Even as kind and loving Mary Paul, the head of the orphanage, placed me on her lap and served me wonderful warm food, I said nothing. To those few individuals who showed me kindness at the orphanage, I still didn't trust them. The location of my birth family was my secret and because it's been so many years, it has died in my memory, unspoken.

Silence at that time was my greatest strength. I relied on it like it was a weapon, like it was the only thing saving me from being sent back to my birth family. My insistence on remaining silent wasn't because I was scared or because I was a coward, but because I knew that if I told the many people where I lived, they would send me back. My desire to not go back to

my birth family was so strong that I clung that much more tightly to my silence. Looking back now, my silence is what saved me. My determination to stay silent was what got me out, gave me a fighting chance at another life. My silence said nothing, yet it spoke volumes. My silence was an answer of defiance, perseverance, and strength. In K-Ming Chang's novel, *Bestiary*, it tells the story of three generations of Taiwanese American women regarding topics of migration, queer lineages, and girlhood. In a scene in which the narrator's father abuses her, she describes her silence as a "weapon. [Her silence] was a mercy too. [She] gave him a hundred silences to translate into anything: sorry, goodbye, come back, leave, don't, go stay." Silence for her was a weapon and a show of mercy, and silence for me was a source of strength and my only weapon.

In this instance, as a 5-year-old, I *chose* to leave behind my biological family and the life of a slum dweller in search of a different home, a new family. I was a child trying to escape, trying to re-shuffle the cards that life had dealt me. With agency, luck, and fate, much like the father, son, and the holy spirit, I landed a new life (yes, pun intended).

I remember when I first came to America, I was ashamed of the life I had lived. I hated how different I was from everyone. I remember complaining to my mother how differently I wish my life had been.

> "I hate that I'm so different. No one gets me. Life has been so unfair to me, why can't I have a normal life like everyone else?"
>
> "Listen Gumby, I can imagine how you might feel, but you simply have to accept your life. Life is unfair and we're all dealt a certain set of cards, and all we can do is re-shuffle the deck and make the best of the hand we've been dealt. And yours is different, but it is your story and a very special one. Trust me, when those girls

> grow up, they're going to be looking at you and wishing they had your story. You should be proud."

My mother faced her own set of challenges growing up, having also grown up with few opportunities and struggling to find acceptance and a place to "fit in." My mother's language of "reshuffling the cards we've been dealt" and of *choosing* to run away is powerful and one that is part of my everyday vernacular. My mother doesn't believe in fate, but she does believe in making choices and the power of decision-making. I don't use this word *choice* very lightly. My biological family lived a life that was trapped by the cycle of poverty and the routine of everyday life, which blocked their vision of a future; consequently, I inherited that same life from them. Frankly put, I was born unlucky. So, when I say I made a conscious *choice* as a 5-year-old to run away, I am forced to confront the question: how much choice does a 5-year-old really have? What does 'choice' mean to a 5-year-old?

Psychologically speaking, children at the age 5 of are not given *choices* because they need guidance on basic decision-making skills such as what's safe to eat, how to cross the street, how to tie shoelaces, how to brush hair. In my case, my *choice* to run away was one that was made of restraint, out of limitations. Thus, if a choice is made of limitations, is that choice or is that survival? Recently, a professor made me aware that *all* choices are ones essentially made from limitations or constraints. However, what's slightly different here is that, even as a mere 5-year-old, I saw the old rickety bus as an *opportunity* to escape, and I chose to follow it. I believe my decision to board the bus and run away was mere survival instincts. Yes, I did *choose* to hide behind the tree and run away, but what led me to make that decision is crucial to understanding why this *choice* was one for survival, one to fight for life.

*

Thinking back on this moment now as a 23-year-old, I view the old rickety bus as my calling. It transported me, both physically, emotionally, and psychologically - from a world in which I was no one, a reverse self-orphan, into a life in which I could be anything, be whoever I wanted (of course, now under a new and different set of "rules" and limitations). I find myself wanting to tell the boy at tennis camp that he was wrong; that I *chose* to leave behind my biological family and fight for another life; that my adoption had nothing to do with my biological parents wanting me or not, but due to circumstances and the surrounding environment. However, I'm not sure if he would understand, given how little representation and recognition adoptees receive. Is my desire to correct the boy one for his own educational benefit or is it another instance of my defending my marker as an adoptee? While I am not entirely sure, I believe it to be a conglomeration of both. To this day, I find myself having to explain my mother's and my relationship. I find myself having to defend and fight to be recognized as a daughter. I find myself having to explain *why* I was adopted. Will there be a time when I can simply be, and not explain myself?

Later that day, when tennis camp ended and my mother came to pick me up, the boy saw her. He looked at my mother and then at me. Back and forth. He was baffled. *How can two people who look so different be a family?* I could see his brain trying to comprehend, but even at such a young age, he was already indoctrinated with the notion that 'family' was between blood relations only.

"But you're so dark and she's so white." He observed.

"Maybe she had an Indian husband and then had me." I joked.

But of course, this boy was not the only one who had the myth of family-as-blood in his mind. This myth, in turn, closely tied Americans' general ignorance about the institutions and histories of adoption in other countries such as India, which then directly entered the American landscape as transnational and transracial adoption precisely because of US capitalist power.

White Mother, Colored Daughter

I was completely misunderstood. My mother and I were the 'misfits': she was a single white mother adopting a 10-year-old Indian girl. We were two individuals from two completely different backgrounds, with vastly different experiences, opportunities, desires, yet, we were a family bonded not by blood, but by something much stronger and larger: love. In the eyes of society, family by adoption is not equal to family by blood, so much so that blood relations in some cases are valued more highly. So, why does family only have to be between blood relations? Can adoptive families and families by blood ever be viewed equally, so that blood and adoptive status are valued the same? If families can be formed through marriage, in which individuals don't remotely resemble one another genetically, then how is adoption any different? The answers to these questions are so complex that it can't be clearly delineated because adoption has such an intricate relationship between skin color, caste, religion, race, gender, and culture. However, it is evident that the notion of adoption is not a foreign concept in India.

For more than 4,000 years, Indian parents actively sought out adoption to complete their families. According to the scholar Vinita Bhargava, in India, there is a heavy emphasis on the

concept of family and bearing children, not only to pass on property and inheritance, but also among Hindus, to ensure achieving moksha (ultimate salvation). The traditional Indian family is not just a social unit - it constitutes a value in itself. In a relationship-centered culture, individual autonomy is secondary to that of cultivating intimate relationships within the family and honoring one's family. The scholar further states that the child in the Indian family is seen as a creation of the parents and a gift from God. Thus, if a family cannot not have children, they seek out adoption to fulfill a religious and secular purpose.

*

I must note here that the concept of 'adoption' in the long millennia before British colonialism was slightly different from the modern definition of adoption: specifically, adoption in the pre-British colonial era and even through the nineteenth century was primarily intra-familial. In other words, if a member of a certain family could not have children, they could 'adopt' the child of a cousin, or an uncle, within the extended family. "Traditional" adoptions were mostly intra-familial because high caste Hindu elites at the time prohibited the adoption of abandoned or orphaned children on the grounds they didn't know the child's background, parents, caste, social status, or any potential genetic disorders, which they deemed to be a threat to their family name, honor, and purity. However, that's not to say that there weren't cases of adoptions that occurred outside of the extended family because we don't actually know how many people actively internalized British ideologies.

In the English Law, family name, property, and inheritance could only be passed on through blood lineage to keep their (white) race "pure" and "clean". The British didn't participate in this "intra-familial" form of adoption but did encourage guardianship. Because

they practiced guardianship, "adoption" of a child from outside of the extended family network was much less common. Thus, the need to provide families for abandoned or orphaned children was hardly addressed then.

According to the scholar Vinita Bhargava, it was only in 1926 that adoption entered the English legal system and in 1969 that allowed adoptees to inherit family name, property, and inheritance. In India, "traditional" forms of adoptions were recognized long before adoption even entered the English law, but as the British attempted to create a Hindu legal system drawing on ancient texts, they solidified the idea that if the family already had a biological child, that adopted child would only get half of the inheritance. So, in this way, the adopted child and the *aurasa* (or biological child) were not seen as equals. It is no wonder then that adoption in India continues to be a stigmatized process. In history, adopted children were recognized and somewhat accepted, but among Hindu elites, this was probably limited to intra-familial adoptions.

Even more shocking, the colonial state of India first accepted responsibility to look after destitute and neglected children in 1920, right around the time adoption finally had a place in English Law when the first Children's Act was enacted in the Madras and Bombay Presidencies. What's significantly different from the "traditional" forms of adoptions and adoption today is that adoption nowadays puts the welfare of the child at the center of the institution, instead of the parent's need for a child or their desire to fulfill a religious purpose.

When my mother adopted me, she of course sought out motherhood, and in extension, a creation of her own family that was made possible only through adoption. I must state here that while my mother was given options of other older orphan girls to choose from when adopting me, that doesn't necessarily mean that my adoptive mother had all the agency or that she was

"buying me" like she would buy a bag of green pears at the supermarket. I remember I was in the 6th grade and it was around wintertime when I asked my mother a question that had silently gnawed at me. I remember my mother was picking me up from the British School of Washington after just another mundane workday. It was wintertime, so by the time school let out at 3pm, it was already dark. That day, I had learned about how the British colonized India, who settled there for spices and jewels. I hopped in the backseat of our brand-new BMW X3, letting the NPR news radio station wash over my ears.

"Ma, did you buy me?"

My mother turned the radio down. The light turned red. She swiveled her head to look back at me.

"Marmalade, what do you mean? Who asked you that?"

"This boy! I mean, you got me, so did you have to pay for me?"

My mother took a minute to pause. The light turned green. She gently put her foot on the gas pedal.

"No, I did not "buy" you. You see, the orphanage had certain fees, like your transportation, clothing, medications and vaccinations, food, and air travel. I paid for your travel basically, to get you to America. And, tell that boy he's wrong."

At the time, I was satisfied by the answer. Yet, when I do hear on the rare occasion the phrase "your mother bought you," like when I tried to tell the kids I taught at in Pune that I was adopted and not "bought", I can't help but let myself fall into that misconstrued theory that adoption is buying. I had this strong need to feel wanted, to feel like someone cared about me,

but that seemed to come at the price of being commodified. When you use the language of "buying" and involve transactional vernacular, commodification of children then becomes an issue. How can you humanize children, while at the same time, making them seem desirable and feel wanted?

Instead of correcting people about their preconceived assumptions surrounding adoption, I find myself staying silent. I tell myself, "my mother didn't buy me," "she got me." What's the difference? In my mind, "buying" was for goods and commodities, a fulfillment of the supply and demand chain; while in contrast, "getting" meant choosing and receiving something out of permission - in this case, a human child. For me, money in exchange for a human child wasn't even in the same equation until I learned much later as a senior in college that orphans are marked with price tags based off their skin tone complexion. Dark skin toned children are "worth less" and not preferred, while fairer skin toned children are highly desired and "more expensive". This is true for all cases of adoptions, not just specific to India.

I am purposefully using this transactional language to demonstrate how demeaning and degrading it is for orphans and adopted children to be given and using that kind of language. I am also using this language because I do hold a lot of self-hate and self-rejection, and this language only seems fitting in encapsulating those emotions. When we're told "you're going to be adopted," or that "you are wanted by a mother in America," it comes packaged as a gift. The reality is, that gift is also a burden disguised as a gift, and one that comes at a heavy cost: the feeling of 'owing' and being 'in debt' to our adoptive parent(s). Growing up, I've internalized this language and for a long time, and even now, I believe that "I was rescued" and given a "better life." I believe that my mother was a "saving grace"; thus, I am eternally in debt to her. In this commodified language, there is no room for us to speak up because we're not even seen as

human, but a charity case who is in need of "saving" and "rescuing." This kind of language that comes wrapped up in tags, labels, and categories scarily resembles a grocery store - the grade A apples with perfect coloration and zero signs of bruising or deformity are placed at the front, and the few day-old pears at the bottom of the crate that are sickly shade of green with ugly scratches and bruises are in the back of the supermarket.

According to the CARA adoption agency, which oversees all of India's adoptions (both in-country and inter-country), kids who are older (ages 3 and up), twins and siblings, and those with special needs are placed in a new category of "Hard to Place Children." (This new category was just implemented in 2017 by CARA adoption agency in an effort to make it more difficult for parents to "choose" their child based off skin tone complexion). "Hard to Place Children," as the name suggests, is full of children with lower price tags because they are less desired by adoptive parents, either due to skin tone complexion, gender, age, disabilities, and health conditions. Categories such as "Hard to Place Children" are the several day-old pears at a grocery store, the ones that nobody wants to have or even look at. Many, oftentimes, do not find homes.

While the promotion of such categories is done to get the "unlucky" adopted sooner and faster, the CARA adoption agency at the same time faces a great deal of contradictions. On their website, the pages are filled with smiling faces of children, but as I flip through and look closer, I realize that something's wrong here. The smiling children in the pictures mostly have fair skin tone complexion. If CARA adoption agency was working to promote the adoption of "unlucky" children, many of whom have darker skin tone complexions, why aren't *their* faces on the website, particularly on the front cover? And if there happens to be a picture, the darker skin toned orphan is often not smiling and placed behind the fairer skin toned orphan. These are the

unspoken, perhaps even subconscious elements that reveal the deeply ingrained biases surrounding skin color and the supposed meaning behind it. As much good as CARA adoption agency is doing, they at the same time walk the fine line between humanizing the children and commodifying the adoption process.

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When my mother chose to adopt me, I was at the same time desperately wanting to be adopted, wanting a family, wanting to escape again. After four years of living at the orphanage, I remember Mary Paul, the former head of the orphanage telling me that I was going to be adopted by a single mother in the United States. I was ecstatic, overjoyed, and overwhelmed. *Finally. I was getting a home! A family!* I wanted to be adopted. While I couldn't exactly choose *who* would adopt me, I did however have the choice to reject them. If for whatever reason, the adoption did not work out (as was the case for some of my orphan friends who were unable to adapt to their new environments or form attachment with their adoptive parents), they had the option to come back to the orphanage and be adopted again.

There's a common misconception that orphans and adoptees have no agency or voice over their own narratives or over the adoption process, but that's not entirely true. I want to reiterate again that in the adoption process, we adoptees do have agency and a voice: if we don't want to be adopted to that particular family, we have that choice. We are not forced to live with a new family, even if the paperwork legally transfers rights from the orphanage or biological parents to the adoptive parents. This, of course, is complicated when it comes to adoptions of babies because well, they can't talk. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the adoption

process has shifted from solely emphasizing parent-centric ideologies and fulfilling a social or religious standard to instead emphasizing the welfare and benefit of the child.

When I was a young girl, I remember reading stories of Krishna. He was depicted to be strong, powerful, and beloved by all, despite being of darker skin tone complexion. Pasted on the walls of the orphanage or even on the streets, images of Krishna were everywhere, and people stopped to pray to him. Irrespective of his dark skin tone complexion and his history, he was revered by many Indians, and I too, looked up to him. In Indian mythologies, epics, and scriptures, stories of Krishna, Karna, Andal, Sita, Draupadi, and many others have adoption as a core element. They may not be true 'adoptions' in the modern sense, but they represent the 'concept of adoption' - that is, of bringing up someone else's child as their own. For example, in all the epics and scriptures, Krishna, who is the eighth reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, and one of the most highly revered gods, is 'adopted,' or rather, raised by a different member of the same family as if he were their own child. According to Bhagavata Purana, one of Hinduism's eighteen great Puranas, Krishna was the son of Devaki and Vasudev, both of whom are high caste Hindus. According to the *Mahabharata*, Devaki's brother, Kansa, threatened to kill her eighth son, who happens to be Krishna. Fearing for their child's life, Devaki and Vasudev give Krishna to their cousins, Yashoda and Nand, who are lower in the caste "system," hailing from the Yadava tribe. The Yadava tribe is part of the peasant-pastoral class and lower in the caste "system."

Thus, through the practice of intra-familial adoption, Krishna is fostered by adoptive parents who are lower in caste and class than his biological parents. This expresses a profound statement - adoptive parents lower in class and caste can raise the child of a high caste and class Brahmin. I also want to mention that the name "Krishna" itself originates from the Sanskrit word

"*Kṛṣṇa,*" meaning "black," and "all attractive". Because his skin tone complexion is dark and his name itself reinforces his 'darkness' or 'blackness,' it is evident that there was a time when dark skin tone complexion (of an "adopted" child) was accepted and perhaps even glorified. Krishna's story reinforces the notion that an adoptive mother can love and care for a non-biological son, irrespective of the child's skin tone complexion, whether it is dark or fair.

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Adoption serves a double purpose: it gives the child a home, and a parent a child. It is a social institution that is supported by almost every society. However, in India, adoptions are done in a shroud of secrecy. Why? There are many reasons, but the foremost is the parent's wish to keep the adoption a secret. This is because many Indian parents fear that if the child knew he or she was adopted, the child wouldn't see herself or himself as being "their child," and potentially have an even harder time integrating and adjusting to a new family. According to Sherly Thomas, a social worker who used to work at my orphanage, Vathsalya Charitable Trust (VCT), "a parent's decision to hide the status of the child is very selfish, because it could potentially result in the child exhibiting even more psychological and emotional trauma." Surprisingly, or not so surprisingly, there are even some women who, unable to bear a child of their own, undergo medical IVF procedure before adopting an infant, so that the family and community can accept the baby. This shows just how stigmatized the process of adoption is in India, and how fearful women (and men) are to adopt in such a stratified society.

As a secondary complement to this project, I conducted interviews with adoptive parents who adopted children from India, some of whom were of Indian descent themselves and others who were Western. My main goal was to interview adoptive parents from my own orphanage,

Vathsalya Charitable Trust (VCT). However, because VCT no longer does adoptions due to adoption policy changes within CARA, reaching out to such adoptive parents and orphans proved to be extremely difficult. Thus, I was forced to change tactics. Through networking and with the help of social media, I reached out to a group of (Prospective) and Adoptive Parents on Facebook. Not surprisingly, I received a great deal of interest (about 63 parents volunteered to be interviewed for this project!). In order to choose the optimal candidates for these interviews, I created a set of criteria: 1) varying differences in adoptive parents' age, 2) gender, 3) place of residence, and 4) whether they went through the in-country or international adoption selection process. Based off these criteria, I chose a total of eight adoptive parents for this project, ranging in age, geographic location, and gender. For these interviews, I adopted a semi-structured style, in which I, the interviewer, asked the adoptive parents some basic questions such as their name, age, ethnicity, location of current residence, while at the same time, provided a space for the individuals to express their experience in adoption and the in-laws' (and extended families') perception on adoption. I must also make clear that the pool of adoptive parents I was able to interview virtually via zoom were only a small sliver of a particular economic standing and social class - that is, mainly high caste and class Brahmins and wealthy Westerners.

One of the parents I interviewed, Raniya (who indicated a preference for using a pseudonym) said she underwent IVF procedure for about four years as the initial step of starting a family. When it became clear to her that procuring a child biologically was not going to be possible, she registered with CARA adoption agency in 2014. At the time, there was not a lot of information on adoption nor was there counseling of any sorts, so it was a "very sketchy" process. In 2017, she was able to bring her baby daughter home. When I asked her why she chose to go through with the IVF procedure instead of opting straight for adoption, she said, "We

really wanted to try to have a child of our own. The idea of adoption was always in the back of my mind, but my husband and in-laws weren't on board, so we let it up to fate to determine how we had a child." I must mention that the IVF procedure is not only extremely expensive, but also takes a massive toll on the woman's body that can change the relationship and dynamics between the two partners.

Arguably, it is cheaper and perhaps even more efficient to adopt than to undergo a medical IVF procedure. So, it doesn't seem like money plays as large a role as I had thought in the stigmatization of adoption today. If that's the case, then why is adoption stigmatized? If money doesn't play a role, then what does? While this is a difficult and complex question to unravel, it seems to have close ties to the history surrounding the rights, status, and inheritance of an *aurasa* or biological child versus an adopted child. Historically speaking, an adopted child did not get the same rights, status, and inheritance as an *aurasa* child until the early 1970s. Thus, the continuation of this ideology and belief still permeates Indian society today.

Besides familial pressure to bear children, there are societal expectations too, such as women reaching motherhood. Meaning, to be a woman is to be a mother. Thus, many Indian parents choose to adopt in secret because of these pressures surrounding familyhood and motherhood in India. In India, children are an integral part of the family unit - they are constantly doted on. Thus, if a family is unable to bear a child, they risk raising the suspicions of neighbors and other family members. People in the community begin to view the family as being hexed or inauspicious, so relationships and friendships are affected, as well as their social and political mobility and standing.

There has been a decent amount of scholarly research done on why adoption in India in particular is so stigmatized, and oftentimes done in a shroud of secrecy. Adoption, in an essence,

destabilizes and threatens the traditional structural family unit of mother, father, and children, all bonded and connected by blood. It also subverts the caste "system," enabling there to be mixing of castes and classes. To some, adoption, particularly that of orphans and neglected children, tests and strains caste ties and familial relationships; it taints years of tradition and family history; it even is seen as 'unnatural' and sinful.

In the Vedic era, Hindus could only formally adopt boys. It is evident that during the Vedic times, sons were 'adopted,' or rather transferred, only for fulfilling a religious purpose. However, since adoption was meant to fulfill both religious and secular purposes, adoption of daughters was not formally recognized. In Hindu mythology, it is believed that only sons can carry on lineage; therefore, adoption of boys was highly preferred over girls. According to the Vedas, a Brahmin son is born with three different kinds of debts - debt to the rishis (meaning, studying the Vedas with the utmost diligence), debt to the gods (by providing sacrifices and offerings), and debt to the ancestors (by birthing a male child). On the other hand, a daughter is born with the burden of birthing a child, especially a male child, yet she will not receive the same recognition or acceptance as her male counterpart in traditional Hindu society. The importance of the son can be gauged by the fact that the ancient Hindu texts recognized fourteen different kinds of sons; however, only three kinds are recognized today: biological birth of a son, a son that is given in for adoption, and a son that is adopted into a family. As I mentioned earlier, at no time was an adopted son equal in rank and status to an *aurasa*, or biological son, if one existed. The adopted sons also did not get equal inheritance rights in the presence of an *aurasa* son. By placing higher regard and value for male children, it was a continuation of not only deeply entrenched patriarchal values, but also of male supremacy.

However, this is not to mention that there weren't instances of girl adoptions either. In the Hindu epics and scriptures, examples of girl adoptions are evident. Two of the most important examples are Shakuntala and Andal. Shakuntala's story is also told in the *Mahabharata*. According to the *Mahabharata*, Shakuntala was born to the sage Vishwamitra, and a celestial spirit, Menaka. However, because he broke his tapas, or his asceticism, Vishwamitra was forced to give up his daughter to the sage Kanva. Thus, Shakuntala is raised by an adoptive father.

Similarly, Andal, a popular goddess particularly in the south of India, is also an adoptee. According to the legend, Andal was discovered as a baby by a Brahmin priest, Periyalvar. Periyalvar adopted Andal and raised her as his own child. In such epics and mythological stories, adoption, particularly that of girls, is evident, and one that seems to have been accepted. There are other tales in the Hindu mythology that suggest the concept of raising a stranger's child has always existed. Children were brought up by sages or rishis; girl children were brought up and given in marriage to princes and kings. However, little is known about neglected or destitute children.

Returning to My Birth-Place as a Foreign Other (I)

After graduating from high school in 2017, I decided to defer college for a year and embark on a gap year with a program called Global Citizen Year (GCY) to Pune, India. Pune, while not Bangalore, was only a one-hour plane ride away. Pune was in the state of Maharashtra,

a region that is famous for its beauty and culture, including ancient cave paintings and sculptures. Bangalore, on the other hand, is south-central in the Karnataka state that is known for its wildlife and national parks, including spectacular waterfalls and iconic pilgrimage centers. Pune was much smaller than Bangalore, but just as cosmopolitan, busy, and hot.

The streets in Pune were dotted with unmarked sidewalks and large, unforgiving potholes that no one bothered to fix. Cars, autos, motorcycles, dipped deep into this pothole, leaving billowing black smoke in its wake. Pollution was a problem that no one was willing to address; instead, they moved further and further into the mountains, away from pollution and corruption, leaving the slums behind. In contrast, Bangalore was a hustling and bustling city with many young people who were in the technology industry either as developing software engineers or answering your customer service calls, helping you fix your computer issues or software malfunctions more than 8,000 miles away. In Pune, there was no hiding the Dalits and low caste from the upper caste - they both coexisted side-by-side, wheatish, fair, chestnut, expresso, all coated in fear, pretending the other didn't exist.

In Bangalore, there was a concentrated effort to push the Dalits and the low caste to the edge of the city limits, where they live under blue, white, and black tarps in sprawling arid fields, surrounded by dilapidated buildings and exposed live wire lines. Though I can't remember where my own village was located - either because it has been too long, and I've simply forgotten it or because I've deliberately blocked it from my memory as a young girl - I am confident that it was within the city limits of Bangalore. The 23&me DNA test I did recently confirmed that I am indeed 99.8% South Indian/Sri Lankan and from the Karnataka region, while the 0.2% is given to Sardinia, a small region in Italy. While the borders and the city itself have changed a great deal in the last 10 years, I still remember certain markers, like the large tree that stood stoic in

front of my hovel, or the well pump with worn yellow handle that stood some ways away, or how close we were to the village central because my biological brothers went out a lot late at night coming home stumbling and cussing at one another.

After high school, I felt burnout. I didn't feel like I was "ready" for college. I wanted to find closure from my past before starting another chapter of my life. Through GCY, I was able to return to my home country, India, 10 years after leaving. I was apprehensive to say the least. I always pictured that I would return to India with my mother (since I left with her) to create that full circle (we did end up creating that full circle when my mother visited me in Bangalore for Christmas in December of 2017). Initially though, I returned with a bunch of other mostly American kids. I remember being disappointed then, but I realize now that it's significant that I didn't return to India with my mother - it was a sign that I was regaining my childhood agency and reconnecting with and strengthening my roots; that I no longer was a little girl, but a young woman evolving from a wilting and deprived geranium to a thriving, thorny rosebush. I left India as a poor orphan girl and I was coming back as a wealthy Indian American woman - what a conundrum! I was now a changed woman, armed with fancy new clothes and an elite education, but with no sense of who she was or an understanding of the power she possessed.

While I didn't feel ready to go back to the life I once had, I felt it was necessary for me to return to my orphanage before transitioning to the college chapters of my life. I think a part of this feeling of necessity was that I felt I needed a reminder of where I came from, of those that I left behind, of the hardships I've been through to be where I am. I am ashamed to admit that I find myself almost forgetting the journey I've traveled and the story I've written, not as an adoptee, but as an orphan. When I returned to India, I don't think I fully understood the significance then. I hung out frequently with the American peers I traveled with and partied a lot.

Some of this has to do with the fact that in high school, I never went out or drank or smoked; so, when gap year rolled around, I "let loose". I was what you would call a "goody two-shoes" or a "teacher's pet" in high school. But in Pune, I stripped myself of that label and went to the most high-end bars, clubs, and hotels. I stayed away from the slum areas and avoided those who resided on that side of the road. I'd look in their direction and be hit with a pang of familiarity, a deep sense of guilt. I'd feel the rise of an early memory come on, threatening salty tears to pour out of my eyes and flood down my cheeks, like a dam that's been broken and cannot control the power of the water. I looked away. Humiliated. Ashamed.

I found myself aligning with the class and caste I neither belonged in, nor found acceptance in, the Brahmin caste. On many occasions, I caught auto drivers or passersby staring at me, despite me "fitting in" and resembling a local Indian. I could see they were trying to figure me out, their eyes twitching and the gears turning and turning and turning in their heads - what is she? What region is she from? What caste is she? What class? It usually was only when I opened my mouth did they realize that I indeed was no local, but a foreigner disguised as a local, pretending to be one of them. It's not just that I didn't speak Marathi or that my Hindi was abysmal to say the least, but I had a strong, heavy American accent that clung heavy to my every word, every breath, every snore. However, I recognized that the way I walked, gestured, and combed my hair screamed *American* too. While I might've *looked* like them, my mannerisms gave me away. I didn't belong with the Brahmin caste nor did I find acceptance with the Dalits or the low caste classes. So, where did I belong? Anywhere or nowhere, or everywhere?

In the process of self-writing, this question of "where do I belong?" seems to infiltrate almost every scenario. I want so badly to belong somewhere that I have slowly come to realize that the more I want to belong, the more I won't because I don't "fit" anywhere. The spaces that

are open and accessible to me aren't enough for me, and ones that so clearly reject me that I must conform to an extent to just feel accepted. I don't want to be accepted at the cost of my identity; I no longer want to hide myself. I want to be seen and heard; I want my story to be a voice of strength, hope, and a will to power, not as a weak and feeble bodied thing.

In my Anthropology class just last semester, I learned that as part of the South Asian diaspora in the United States, I must create spaces for myself to retain and maintain a sense of my connection to India. I used to be ashamed for looking the way I did and claiming that I was "Indian," but when I saw how the British and Americans responded to the hip-hop artist, MIA's music, I began to take a lot of pride. Here was a South Asian Sri-Lankan feminist daring to dabble in hip-pop while remixing her own ethnic sounds, cultural musical elements, and aspects of South Asian culture, such as bindi, make-up, dupatta as means of re-making herself as a cultural icon living in London. Like me, MIA also had to overcome a great deal of trauma and violence to be where she is - that is, having fled from the brutal Civil War in Sri Lanka where the Sri Lankan Tamils, both in and outside of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), fought against the Sinhalese dominated Sri-Lankan government to create an independent Tamil state free of discrimination and violent persecution.

In her documentary, *Matangi/Maya/MIA*, MIA talks about this question of "where do I belong?" as something that continues to plague her, despite the success and recognition she's achieved for herself. She achieved greatness by *accepting* her story, by being willing to share with the world where she came from, and the roots she draws upon to express who she is. From that documentary, I have learned that I cannot unpack that looming question if I cannot accept and take ownership and authorship of my past as *my* story. Thus, through this form of self and personal writing, I hope to re-write my own story and create a space for my voice as an orphan,

as an adoptee, as an Indian American immigrant woman to speak for itself. This form of self-writing has proven to be a space that allows me to try on and wear all these different labels I had been so ambivalent to claim before. I once thought labels and categories were actually what held me back, when in fact, it was my own unwillingness to sit in the discomfort of wealth and a certain level of privilege I had yet to recognize and accept.

I will admit this is the *first* time I am taking ownership and authorship of my own story, and claiming it as my own, not me and my mother's. I recently realized that when I tell people about myself, the story always starts with "I was adopted from India by my mother when I was 10 years old…." So, what happened to the 10 years before my mother adopted me? I never talked about it (and still rarely do unless I'm asked directly) because what's there to say? I couldn't even put into words what happened in those 10 years because everything that I managed to come up with - I didn't have schooling; I lived in an orphanage; I don't know when my birthday is; I only knew of hunger, never of satiation - made me sound pathetic and like a charity case. My memories and attachment to India were so fresh and raw at the time that I thought by not talking about it or even acknowledging it, I could pretend it had never even happened. In other words, I disassociated as a way of healing. As absurd as this sounds, I was more willing to accept that my mother "gave birth" to me at the age of 10, and that's how we came to be a family than to tell my story. I knew that the concoction of such a story was ridiculous, but to me, it still sounded better than the actual truth.

I recently had an odd interaction with some friends when the topic rolled around to birthdays and birthday parties they had growing up. While I don't know when my "actual birthday" is, I proudly claimed to be born on July 6, 1998 based off bone scans. I clung to birthdays because it was proof (on legal paper) that you existed. In other words, it was a

validation of sorts, and I felt that by not having that "proof," I ceased to exist. I, once again, wanted something that will neither be mine nor given. I wanted a reason to believe that I existed because without knowing when you came into this world, how can you celebrate yourself? My birth date was my own choice. I chose the day I was born, which is another kind of privilege and liberation.

One of my friends went into great detail about the time she was born, about how her mother swaddled her, about how they had an astrologer bless her because she was born on a "lucky number and year." I stayed silent, choosing to not say anything, but I felt envious. I was envious that she had the privilege of knowing exactly when and where she was born because to be born is a gift. Ocean Vuong, in a podcast said that "birth and re-birth are a gift, and the act of survival is a creative one." In other words, my choice to survive was itself an act of creativity, and me not knowing my birthday was such a small thing because I *survived*.

In my English class, I recently read a novel, *Bestiary,* by K-Ming Chang. In one of the scenes, the author describes how the main narrator's mother admits to not knowing her own birthday. It struck me then perhaps not knowing is also just as advantageous as knowing the day, date, and time you were born. What I mean is, it's not uncommon for people from the non-West in earlier generations to not give significance to birth as a calendrical date. I found a sense of comfort in this knowledge because the day you were born is relatively insignificant to the individual you become in your lifetime. I wonder why people in America and the United Kingdom then cling so tightly to birthdays - is it because they need that paper validation of being important and recognized or because they fear losing themselves and being unseen? While birthdays in America and in England are significant when we're growing up as kids, we celebrate

them less and less as we get older. Is this because it's a reminder of us getting older and that much closer to exiting this life?

It is only in my senior year of college, and as this chapter of my life slowly comes to an end, I find myself wanting to tell my story, wanting to be heard and seen - no longer invisible, no longer hiding behind the mask of anonymity. I *want* to participate in and explore the dialogue of Asian American transracial, transnational, and transcultural adoptions. Particularly at Bowdoin, an elite majority white institution, there is absolutely no discourse or awareness surrounding adoptions or what it means to be adopted. I know for a fact that I am not the only adopted student at this college, and yet, our voices are silent, our identities are suppressed, unknown to one another. I only know of one person who's adopted at this college, and statistically speaking, there must be more given the 2,000-student body - that's how little discourse and recognition exists for us. In fact, there isn't even an established language on adoptions, so people don't know how to act when they are interacting with an adoptee or an adopter. They don't know what to ask or how to navigate such a situation because a language for it just simply doesn't exist. Because the language surrounding adoptions doesn't exist, does it mean that adoptions also shouldn't exist? Isn't it about time we start talking about adoptions and the silent voices of the adoptees and lost ones of orphans? Isn't it time adoptees have the space and recognition to tell their own narratives, if they are indeed seen as human beings worthy of families?

I finally feel like I have something to offer, that I and my sole existence have a meaning. I always wondered what I was good at, what my purpose in my life was. A tennis player? An artist? A linguist? A researcher? A writer? It took me until senior year of college to realize that I can be a voice, a force to reckon with that can change the tides and language surrounding adoptions and multi-racial identities; that I indeed do have a talent for storytelling. And for that, I

have Michelle Zauner, the author of *Crying In H-Mart*, to thank. She writes her memoir in such a vivid, honest, and unapologetic manner that I found myself weeping throughout the memoir. She describes in depth the strains and tensions of her and her mother's relationship, as well as her own exploration of her birth culture (and her mother's culture) through food and cooking. She goes to H-Mart, a Korean grocery store in America that's special to her mother, while I go to Vick's Chaat, an Indian grocery store in America where my mother and I feel transported back in time to the first time we met in India. While the two supermarkets are different, the struggle to connect and form memories with another individual, another country, another culture through the medium of food is a very real predicament. I related a great deal to Michelle Zauner's struggles with navigating the delicate balance of a mother-daughter relationship, as well as her journey in teaching herself to be kind to herself. I understood how her relationship with her mother was filled with unconditional love, but there were rules and tacit expectations that seemed to put conditions on that love. I understood that relationship that was strained by racial tensions and a large generational gap that only seemed to grow larger and wider, pulling a mother and a daughter apart to become mere strangers. My mother and I started our family together as mere strangers, and we've created a bond that's inseparable, so deeply intertwined that as much as I know her, I also don't know her at all.

Returning to My Birth-Place as a Foreign Other (II)

It was August 29th, 2017. I remember stepping off the airplane in Pune, India and the rush of the smell of urine, gardenia, and car exhaust all assaulting my nose. I inhaled deeply. I was overcome with a feeling of *belonging*, of familiarity. The cacophony of honking of autos and motorcycles was a jarring, but warm welcome. They crawled on the unevenly paved road like ants, going this way and that, leaking petrol here, billowing black smoke there; yet, somehow managing to avoid collisions at the same time. I had forgotten how *loud* the city in India can get, even when the villagers sleep soundly, unknown to all, unfazed by life's bizarre intricacies. I was relieved to see that I looked like almost everyone else in the crowd. No one stared, no one bothered. No one questioned, no one cared. I was a nobody, but I didn't mind that. I remember looking around when we climbed onto an old bus that took the GCY group from the airport to a large property with lots of greenery just outside of the city. This bus was nothing like what drove me to America; instead, it was more sturdy, newer, and well-greased, yet, only took me to the other side of the city of Pune.

The noise that never seemed to end and the smell that was profoundly nauseating like the odor that leaks from an old person's laundry basement bothered my fellow mostly American peers, but it's how much I blended in, how much I *fit* here, in this community and space that shocked me. I had forgotten what it was like to be a part of the majority again. I was no longer the brown speck amongst a sea of white I had grown so used to. I was experiencing another kind of culture shock, or rather an identity crisis? I had tried so hard to assimilate to "American culture" for so long that it took me coming back to India some 10 years after leaving to remind me just how brown I am. More simply put, the return to my birth country was a reminder of the meaning behind my dark brown skin color complexion - that in India, I was automatically viewed as being low caste, class, and a "savage," just because of my skin tone complexion. In

America, my dark skin tone complexion was seen as inferior, but didn't necessarily equate with class. When in India, my dark skin tone complexion did correctly give away my caste status as a "Dalit," however, skin tone complexion and caste don't necessarily have such a tightly correlated relationship. If anything, geography, ethnic orientation, gender, and caste do have a loosely woven relationship, but is there any correlation between caste and skin color complexion?

The caste "system" in India is renowned for its resilience as social hierarchy. It is a key defining feature of Hinduism, the predominant religion in India, in which the "caste" is a grouping and re-grouping of people on the basis of ritual purity. I must note that the caste "system" has changed slightly over time particularly when topics of gender and even association of wealth as a status have entered the discourse. What has remained consistent, however, is that an individual is born into a specific caste and remains there until death (although the particular ranking of that caste may differ from region to region). Traditional scholars describe the caste "system" within the context of four principle varnas, or rather, larger caste categories. They are (in respective order of ranking), Brahmins, who generally occupied the roles of priests and intellectuals, the Kshatriyas, who were warriors and soldiers, the Vaisyas, who were merchants and traders, and the Shudras, who were laborers and artisans. These four principles of varna are part of the "General Category" (GC) caste. There is another fifth varna, or caste that's not included in the "system", who are the Dalits, or "untouchables," and are part of the "Scheduled Caste" (SC).

As a member of the Dalit "caste," I have certainly experienced not only caste discrimination, but also discrimination on the basis of my skin color. To experience racism is one thing, but to experience a colorist attitude by your own people is a rejection that hits deep,

cracking and denting the soul, while stripping away our dignities and questioning our status as citizens of India and even as a family.

In Pune, I stayed with a host family for a year. The program, GCY, compensated the families handsomely for hosting foreign students. My host family, with the last name "Kulkarni," were of the Brahmin caste and had far lighter skin tones in comparison to mine. They lived comfortably together as a family of 5 on one of the busiest roads in Pune, Lakshmi Road. We had four other neighbors, only two of whom had children too. Directly across from us was a pharmacy with bright green neon lights that flickered at odd times. Down Laxmi Road was Vijay Talkies, an extremely old movie theatre that is still in use today. In front of it were rows of vendors frying, sautéing, and baking. The smell caused my mouth to immediately salivate. I never stopped by these vendors - most of whom were men that blatantly ogled at me - even as I wore the loosest and most modest clothing, revealing absolutely nothing.

One day, I remember we hopped on our motorcycles as a family to go to a bustling night market about 15 minutes away - the host father rode a motorcycle with the two young sons in the back, and the host mother rode the other motorcycle with me in the back, clutching onto the seat for dear life. The night market was filled with vendors yelling their prices and the goods they had - spinach, cucumbers, brinjal, fenugreek, tomatoes, cilantro, okra. They neatly laid out all their fresh vegetables and fruits on a blue tarp on the side of the road, where people could directly drive up to the vendors. Customers nudged and elbowed one another for closer inspection of the produce. I became quite adept at elbowing my way to the front and glaring when they nudged back. Despite the produce laying on the side of the road, it was fresh and affordable. I remember I was admiring the small size of the eggplants at the night market when I heard the younger son of the host family - a mere 8-year-old boy - comment about my dark skin to his mother.

"Amma, why doesn't she have to walk behind us?"

"Beta, it's different for her. She comes from America, not really like us."

"But she looks like them."

He pointed to a cluster of villagers on the other side of the bridge. The host mother and I made eye contact, but I pretended to be talking to a vendor. My face felt hot, and my ears burned. Thankfully, my dark brown skin tone complexion concealed my true feelings. If I was white, I would've gone red as a tomato. I felt humiliated. But it didn't shock me that even as a mere 8-year-old, he was already indoctrinated with the notion that dark skin tone complexion meant low caste and class, and fair skin tone complexion meant high caste and class. This incident was never mentioned again throughout my stay in their home.

I didn't think about this moment until I began writing. I remember feeling ashamed and humiliated but choosing to stay silent. On one hand, the little boy did see me as a fellow Indian, but at what cost? At the cost of my identity. I realize now that the little boy didn't see *me*, instead he *saw* my dark skin tone complexion, and interpreted what its *meaning* was. I thought that in returning to my birth country, I could regain some part of my Indian identity, that I could still be accepted in Indian society despite having been born and grown up as an outcast, as a reject. I could not have been farther from the truth.

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I must note here that *racism* and *colorism*, or skin color bias, while similar, are not interchangeable. Racism is the discrimination against people of color, perpetuated by whites. *Colorism*, or *skin color bias*, on the other hand, is discrimination on the basis of skin color,

which may be within the same race, ethnicity, and community. While one may be tempted to argue that colorism is still perpetuated by the white majority by pitting minority communities against each other and creating the notion that "fairness equals superiority" complex, that is not necessarily the case throughout the world, particularly in India. In India, colorism has a complicated relationship with region, caste, class, gender, and religion, such that identifying the origins and roots of color bias is indeed a difficult task.

Untouchability and caste discrimination were banned in the Indian Constitution in 1948; however, caste in general and untouchability in particular continue to dominate and structure Indian society today, as my encounter with the boy in Pune attests. As a member of a Dalit "caste," I was subject to not only caste discrimination but also discrimination on the basis of my skin color. Some of the roots of color bias in India can be traced back to Hindu epics and religious scriptures, yet it would be misguided to simply equate colorism with premodern religious traditions. The goddess Kali, for example, is celebrated for her dark skin and the power she exudes. The word "kali" itself means "black," and dark-skinned gods and goddesses were historically celebrated for their complexion. Hence, colorism in India exists in complex relation to caste, class, gender, region, and religion.

In my own life, color bias has exerted its force most strongly within the adoption process. Currently in India, there is no uniform code of law for adoption, and the practice is dominated by a mix of personal laws and government policies. In 2017, the Central Adoption Resource Agency (CARA) passed an anti-commodification policy that made it more difficult for prospective adoptive parents to use skin color as a consideration in the adoption selection process. Up until then, CARA adoption agency permitted orphans to be classified by their skin color. Due to widely held colorist prejudices, fair skin toned orphans were adopted at a much higher and faster

rate than their darker skin toned counterparts. This is still very much the case today, and it certainly accounts for why it took years for me to be adopted, as my fairer skinned peers at the orphanage were repeatedly chosen over me.

When I returned to India as a young adult, color bias once again shaped how I was perceived. Except this time, it was compounded by my visible Americanness. While I may have looked like everyone else in the crowd, my accent, my behavior, my choice of clothing gave way to something else - that I was *Americanized*. To most Indians and even to the friends I made in Pune, I wasn't "Indian," but a *visitor* in my own birth country. They saw my skin tone complexion and interpreted it and "read' me according to the Indian modes of social differentiation. As a dark skin toned Indian woman, I was at once perceived as Dalit (in how much ever Indian I am, however you quantify that). As a dark skin toned Indian clearly westernized (judging by my accent, clothing, habits, ideologies, beliefs), I didn't receive the same privileged treatment that people in my social class normally receive. I was recognized as an Indian but treated as less than. I was also recognized as an American, but not treated with the same privilege. In this aspect, I was a visitor in my own native country, but without the prestige of a white visitor. It was as if I was sent into exile and returning with no right to vote, no right to own property, no right to India's citizenship. When I became a naturalized citizen of the United States, I was forced to relinquish my Indian citizenship and instead opt for Overseas Citizen of India (OCI), which grants me the right to work and own property in India but prohibits me from voting. Thus, when I returned in 2017, I entered as an American *citizen*, as a *subject* of India. Perhaps my friends in Pune are right: I am a visitor in my own birth country.

In Pune, I made local friends quickly. However, I could see that in their eyes, I was no longer a 'real' Indian. In their eyes, I was a *fake* - while I might've looked like them, I did not

speak the language well, I did not practice the religion, I did not live their way of life or share their beliefs, I was 'westernized' in every way possible. I wore jeans and blouses, I ate with utensils, I consider myself to be an atheist, my accent is very American with an Indian tilt to it. In returning to India, I had hoped I could regain some of my heritage. I had hoped I could find some closure in my identity as an Indian, and an American, as well as an adoptee. I shouldn't have been surprised when the little boy in my host family made that remark about my dark skin because even as a young child, he was already well indoctrinated with the notion that "dark" was "bad" and "low caste" and "fair" was "desired" and "high caste." Will I ever be viewed as an Indian without the inherent status and caste my skin tone complexion may convey? When will this obsession with *fairness* and equating skin tone complexion with social value cease to exist?

Throughout my stay in India, I was constantly viewed as a foreigner. Perhaps it was because I was traveling with an almost all-white group of high school graduates, but even as I walked along the crowded streets by myself, I was viewed as a foreigner, never a local. My identity as an "Indian" wasn't even recognized or validated, yet I still found myself succumbing to the societal pressures in India.

I remember walking to the government school I taught at in Pune. It was in an underprivileged area of the city, where those who've been ousted by society, have no choice but to reside there. It was 6:50 in the morning and roosters screeched into the morning light. I walked by empty auto stalls, piles of garbage that threatened to block the road, dilapidated homes, and cows that stared at me lazily as I passed by. Here, I would receive unsolicited comments about my dark skin tone from complete strangers. Particularly when school let out and parents or older siblings came to collect the children, they remarked freely about my skin tone complexion. The mums would huddle amongst themselves and whisper. They knew I didn't

know Marathi, but that didn't stop them. In fact, that's probably what emboldened them even more. My friend, a local who taught at the school, refused to translate for me until I threatened him.

"With that color, she won't find a husband!"

"She's so dark, what's wrong with her?"

"I bet you she's Tamilian, poor girl."

"She would be much prettier if she was about four shades lighter!"

They were from various walks of Indian society, but the freedom with which they made comments about my dark skin made clear to me the long history of skin color bias in India. Skin color bias's deep roots in India extend back about 3500 years to when India was first settled by the Aryans, then the Mughals, and following that, by the Portuguese and the British. Though these invaders were from different parts of the world and had different cultural traditions, they all had one thing in common: fair skin. Their fair skin perhaps is precisely why dark skin over time also became associated with manual labor, which then wrongfully became syndicated with caste. Over time however, success, power, and supremacy became associated with lighter skin, and those associations and concepts became internalized by the Indian people: fairness was equated with superiority.

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When I was adopted and came to America, I carried with me only two small children's book bags that contained all my belongings. In one, tucked among a few items of clothing, was a half-used tube of *Fair and Lovely,* India's number one skin bleaching cream. I must mention that

Fair and Lovely is now called *Glow and Lovely* due to backlash from the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, which accused beauty companies like Hindustan Unilever, L'Oréal, and Garnier of profiting off of color bias and for promoting harmful beauty standards. The tube of *Fair and Lovely* had been given to me by a well-meaning Indian aunty who wanted to help me with my most undesirable trait: my dark skin color. Every day, I faithfully applied *Fair and Lovely* lightening cream to my face. When I did, I felt transformed, as if my skin immediately looked two or three shades lighter - like the models on the product box's label. With my imagined fair skin, I felt worthier and prettier, more like the actors and actresses in the Bollywood movies, that we, as children at the orphanage, clamored to watch. While I don't use *Fair and Lovely* anymore, there is still a part of me, that I am embarrassed to admit, that wants to be *fair*, despite knowing better.

I must mention that the use of skin lighteners is widespread not just in India, but across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. It is estimated that 70% of Indians use skin lighteners. In Nigeria, it is closer to 80%. In China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and South Korea, it is over 40%. In 2019 alone, global sales of *Glow and Lovely* – the most popular brand – was over $5 billion. By 2027, global sales of skin lightening products are expected to reach $24 billion.

Glow and Lovely, manufactured by the consumer product giant Unilever, was launched in 1975. Since then, Unilever has raked in massive profits from a product that depends on the existence of color bias in Indian society and throughout the world. In 2019 alone, profits from *Glow and Lovely's* sales in India alone topped $550 million, and Unilever's global sales of the *Glow and Lovely* brand exceeded $2.5 billion. That's enough tubes of the skin lighteners to encircle the earth's circumference six times.

Indian media is saturated with ads showing dark-skinned women bemoaning their lack of a husband or poor job prospects, but whose lives, jobs and romantic prospects are transformed for the better by several applications of skin lighteners. Apart from selling the myth of white superiority, advertisements for skin lighteners neglect to mention that they can contain harmful ingredients, even ingredients that are banned because of their significant health risks. For example, skin lighteners have been known to contain mercury, which can cause permanent neurological damage, infertility, and birth defects. Lighteners may contain hydroquinone, which has been described as the biological equivalent of paint stripper, and which is associated with liver, kidney, and skin cancers. Steroids are also often an ingredient. They can be associated with high blood pressure, elevated blood sugar and depression. And the known carcinogens, butylated hydroxytoluene and butylated hydroxy anisole, are also among lightening ingredients.

Despite the risks, 70% of Indian adults use fairness products, including men. While skin color bias does disproportionately affect women, it also affects men. The slogan "tall, fair, and debonair" drives men to partake in this skin bleaching epidemic, so much so that *Fair and Handsome* has a 40% share in the men's beauty industry. Given the prevalence of lightening and the implicit acceptance of the superiority of "lightness," it should not be surprising that dark skin is often a significant barrier to opportunity in India. Public facing positions in sales, media, acting, and the service industries are often out of reach for those who do not have fair skin, and skin lightening brands and their advertising leverage that reality to generate even greater profits.

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I remember during my gap year in Pune, I walked by an enormous stall of *Glow and Lovely* products. Unable to help myself, I retraced my steps back and stared at the labels. I

couldn't help but be enticed by the glossiness of the products, be brainwashed by the promise of *achieving fairness in just 6 days*. The label preyed on what I feared the most; it fed on my deepest insecurity: my dark skin color complexion. Even at age 19, having received elite Western education and knowing of the harmful chemicals in such skin bleaching products, I find myself still falling prey to colorist ideologies. For a long time, I believed that light skin was beautiful, and dark skin didn't matter. This is what I had been taught in India, which I carried with me to the United States.

This feeling of *dark skin didn't matter* was confirmed when no boy ever complimented me, or when the popular girls in high school (whom I thought to be superior to me) never invited me anywhere. It's not simply that they didn't hang out with me, but they would cut me in line at the cafeteria, and they would see past me as if I didn't exist - that is what hurt the most. To them, I was invisible, and I had to learn to be satisfied with that. That same feeling was also confirmed when I went to Vick's Chaat, an Indian store in Berkeley, California. Even when I found myself amongst my brothers and sisters and fellow South Asians, there was something else that ran rampant amongst the people: *fear of the other*. As a member of the western South Asian diaspora, I thought I would get a sense of *community*, or at least feel like I was home in India, but what I received was something completely opposite: I felt alienated, from the very people whom I sought acceptance from. As I scanned the room while my mother ordered at the cash register, there were South Asians of all different skin colors and types - some were dark, some were fair, some were tall, some were big. We sat down next to a family. I tried to make eye contact with the father, but his eyes skirted around mine. I made eye contact with the mother, no sign of acknowledgment. I was invisible once again.

While we might've looked like one another and my identity as an Indian was somewhat recognized, I was not accepted. I was now walking the tensioned line like a tightrope between two vastly different cultures, languages, traditions, histories. I belong in both and belong in neither. I will make explicit here that not only did Indian Americans continue this *fear* and non-recognition, but so did Americans with their anti-Blackness. At Sidwell Summer tennis camp, I was reminded by a little girl that my skin color was the color of feces. Of course, she is not wrong. But her immediate connection between the skin color 'brown' and 'feces' is one that speaks volumes: her family was not and did not encourage diversity. Clearly, she saw my difference, one that she thought she could shit on (yes, pun intended).

I envied my mother for how fair her skin was. I envied how she glowed. I hated how dark my skin got in the summers, especially my forehead and arms and legs. I remember coming home from tennis camp and looking at myself in the mirror and not recognizing myself. I hated that no matter how hard I scrubbed, my skin wouldn't peel off. My mother and I would intertwine our fingers together and say we were the perfect swirl of chocolate and vanilla. I remember that cheering me up because who doesn't like chocolate ice-cream? My mother always knew what to say to distract me, to make me feel wanted.

Synchronizing and Converging a New Family

Going home to India in 2017 was a bitter-sweet homecoming of sorts that gave life to these questions. I was returning to the country that gave me the first taste of life, to the people

that nurtured me to health and safety, to the abusers who stripped me of my right to my own body, to a supposed biological family who probably forgot about me. I think about that family I left behind from time to time, but I don't find myself regretting any decision I've made. I do, however, find myself wondering if they're alive and what they're doing. I wonder if they ever even noticed I was gone. When I was young, my heart and mind hardened when it came to my biological family; I wanted nothing more than to forget them. I didn't wish them ill will per say, but I didn't feel any sympathy either.

As I got older, however, I began to ask more and more questions. For me, it's a lot of wonders and questions that will never be answered. It's like throwing a boomerang into the deep void, only for it to be swallowed up by the black hole, never to be seen again. Finding my biological family is virtually impossible, but if there's anything I've learned from *Lion* - a phenomenal film directed by Garth Davis and starring Dev Patel - it is that with enough determination, persistence, resilience, and a little bit of luck, family is a force that will find its lost roots. *Lion* is based on a true story about two siblings who get separated at a train station in Calcutta, India, and when one is adopted to Australia, he tries to find his way back home using google maps. It's a heartbreaking story that explores the fragility of human connections, as well as the strength of familial bonds.

As I've begun to wonder more about my biological parents and what their experiences and circumstances might have been like in trying to raise me, I've also reflected a great deal on my own experiences in the adoption process, as well as my mother's. It took me many years and until this project to acknowledge that adoption is a *two-way street*, that just as much as *my* life changed, so did *my mother's*.

My mother was in her early 40s when she decided to adopt. She had been in many relationships previously but didn't find herself believing in the social construct of 'marriage.' She grew up in Berkeley, California, to a lower middle-class family. Neither her mother and father, nor her siblings went to college, so she was the first in her family to attend university and achieve a higher degree. My mother, in essence, is an exemplary trope of the "American Dream," in which she successfully pulled herself (and her family) up by the bootstraps.

My mother grew up with two siblings, with her as the middle child. Her older sibling, my uncle, Chris, lives in San Francisco, California, while her younger sibling passed away at the age of 16. My mother often describes herself as the "ugly duckling," where she didn't have many friends in college and found herself extremely insecure, particularly when it came to 'proving' her smartness or even viewing herself as beautiful. To me, my mother is the smartest, the most intelligent person I know. When she was in middle school, my mother describes herself as having the "least popular lunch or snacks" and being bullied for being 'different' and 'quirky.' This is astonishing to me. My mother is such a strong, independent woman that it's hard to believe that she had struggled (and still does to an extent) with the same insecurities that I face, particularly in college.

My mother attended University of California, Berkeley, or Cal, as it is commonly known, situated overlooking the San Francisco Bay. Eventually, she went further in education and attended Bolt Hall, Berkeley's prestigious law school where she found her passion in whistleblower law and social justice, fighting against pharmaceutical corporations for the rights of the people. I am proud to say that my mother has filed the United States' number 1 and 2 healthcare fraud settlements, which are GlaxoSmithKline and Pfizer Incorporation. What a badass!

In college, my mother carried around a journal in which she wrote down words she didn't understand or know, later looking them up in a dictionary and planting them in her memory. This is what I began doing in college too, by means of 'proving' my smartness and my right to be attending such a prestigious, white elite institution. I've always struggled with this idea of whether I was actually "smart enough" to be at Bowdoin College, or whether I was here to fulfill some quota. But then, I found myself questioning, if I'm here to fulfill some diversity quota, then why are the others here too? What are they fulfilling?

When my American mother decided to adopt me and asked for the help of her friends, she received overwhelming support. What made her want to adopt? You might ask. More than 3,000 miles away, I gave my mother a phone call at 6:30pm my time, 3:30pm her time. By 3:30pm, I imagine she'd already had a day full of phone calls and emailing back and forth with colleagues and clients. So, I appreciated that she made time for me anyways. The line rings a couple of times.

"Gumby, what's going on?"

"Hi mama, I just had a quick question for you about my thesis."

"Yeah, okay…"

"What made you want to adopt?"

My mother chuckles on the other end of the line.

"Well, honey, I decided I wanted a kid, but not an infant because that would've been way too much, and I wasn't married. That'd mean, I'd have to have given up my career, which I didn't want to do and it would've been financially unfair to the child. And you know, there's a lot of need, so it's more ethical to adopt. I specifically wanted to adopt internationally because there's a need and I have a familial connection to India.

> Because you know, your grandmother and great-grandmother lived in and traveled to India."

We said our goodbyes and hung up. I took a moment to breathe. I find myself in awe of my mother. Instead of choosing to marry, she decides to adopt as a single woman. She decides to become a mother without the help or need of a man. Not just to adopt, but to adopt transnationally, transculturally, transracially. My mother wanted to adopt; she *wanted me*. When my mother decided to adopt, VCT orphanage sent her two pictures - one of me, and the other of another girl in the orphanage around the same age as me with a far lighter skin tone complexion (even lighter than my mothers in fact). Despite the other girl being more fair and theoretically more desired than me, my mother *chose* me. When I asked my mother why she chose *me*, she responded:

> "Gemma, you were a very beautiful girl. When I saw your picture, I immediately knew. You were glowing so bright. Your eyes were big, and you were smiling wide. And I knew you'd been there for over three years, and I wanted an older child."

My mother wanted me. Out of the 30 million orphans, and the several thousand parents waiting in line for a child, my mother and I wound up together. This is no coincidence. When I think of coincidence, I think of randomness or "accidents". However, when you take apart the word "co-incidence," it suggests two things happening at once. "Co-incidence" doesn't attach meaning or any major significance to the events occurring at once; instead, it suggests mundanity. But it doesn't have to mean just that. "Co-incidence" also suggests synchronicity, as Carl Jung, a Swiss psychoanalyst, suggests. He argues that synchronicity adds profound meaning to the "co-incidence", so that we have a sense of our reality, of transforming possibilities. In this

sense, while I don't entirely believe in the "randomness" of co-incidence, I do believe that synchronicity played a large role in my mother and I connecting with one another. I also find myself believing more and more in *fate* - that my mother and I were meant to find one another. I was in search of a new home; my mother was in search of a new family. I wanted opportunity; my mother wanted fulfillment. We provided each other with what the other needed. My mother chose to adopt me, while I chose to run away. We were two separate narratives that ran parallel to one another until we converged on December 17th, 2008. So, what played a larger role in our collision, in our formation of a usual kind of family - fate or choice? While fate and choice in the same sentence are contradictory, where one is predestined and the other lends itself to free will, I do believe that in this instance, fate and choice aligned and converged with one another to become one story. In other words, fate and choice converged to create a profound synchronicity that changed both of our lives drastically.

As my mother's and my narrative have converged, it's become one story. While this 'one story' has allowed my mother and I to bond as a family, there are also some dangers to the single-story framework, as storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie points out in her Ted Talks - that is, "how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children." For example, when I came to America, I drew a picture with crayons that said, "you are invited." In the picture was an individual with peach colored skin standing in front of a house with pink balloons. Why did I draw a peach-colored person when I, myself, wasn't? How was it that I didn't see what was wrong until many years later where I questioned my own representation on paper? The fact that I drew a peach-colored person who did not resemble me highlights the precise danger of a single-story narrative. Even at a young age, I understood that a person was fair, and whoever I was couldn't be represented on paper. Or perhaps, I had become

so accustomed to only seeing fair skin toned individuals in movies, shows, and books that I began associating myself with that.

On the other hand, the mixing of two narratives into one comes in unison to create a family. Afterall, a family is a fusion of two different individuals. This family breaks boundaries, tests the strength and conditions of love, and rebels against the traditional concept of family. The convergence of me and my mother's narratives seemed so perfect - perhaps too perfect - that I found myself believing in the existence of fate. The fact that my adoption made me believe in fate is a testimony to the value and power of adoption as a force for good.

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I remember my mother and I buying a house in San Francisco together as a family. We went house hunting together, as mother and daughter, trying to find a home that would fit both of our tastes - close to school and my friends, a quiet neighborhood within walking distance of everything, a large yard for the three big Golden Retrievers, enough garden space to grow jasmine and wisteria. We settled on a corner house in a quaint little neighborhood called Russian Hill. Our home sits perched up on a corner street, creating an alcove that invites couples and tourists for a quick getaway into the sunset. We are within walking distance of North Beach and Fisherman's Wharf, areas that are constantly flooded with tourists, performers, and joggers. It's also the area with some of the best food, although it is seafood heavy. One block from our house is Lombard Street, the world's famous "crooked street." Lombard street curves this way and that at a steep downhill, forcing drivers to maneuver stiffly and swiftly. The street is lined with hydrangeas of all different colors ranging from blue to pink to yellow to red, and gnarly vines of honeysuckle line the neighbor's fences. The air reeks of flowers and salt, and the seals chat well

into the evening. The foghorn echoes throughout the valley, its vibration causing the dog's ears to perk up. Our home has balconies off of every room with a phenomenal, panoramic view of the entire city. When the sun sets, it casts a pastel-y hue on our dove-colored home, streaking the sky over the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge with shades of pink, orange, and blue.

One day, standing off of the living room balcony overlooking the Embarcadero, the financial district, and the Bay Bridge, I found myself feeling adrift and undeserving of all that I've come to call mine, despite being in my own space and in my own home. I felt like a ghost standing on the balcony, inhabiting a stranger's body, seeing the world through the lens of an eye I no longer recognized. I have never felt so privileged before. I found there was an ocean between me and the life I was living, and my mother was my lifeboat that I clung to as I was living my life in translation and in transitions. At that moment, the ocean washed ashore buried memories, forcing me to look directly into my past life that I so adamantly rejected, and I couldn't help but feel utterly helpless. I once had so much promise, and now, here I was, questioning all that I've come to know, acquire, and possess. Was I doing enough here? I often felt, and still do, like I am competing with my peers by condemning myself and devaluing my own strength. At times, I find myself worrying that I've lost myself, that I've lost the core parts of me - my resilience, my confidence, my strength, my inner voice - and submerged it deep into the ocean. I realize now, at that moment, the ocean was giving back what I had concealed, even from myself: my ability to give credit to myself. This I think came at the cost of recognizing that I was physically living, facing, and standing on two sides of the same coin.

There is only one other time in my life that I have felt this way; that is, back when my mother first adopted me in New Delhi. My mother, Larry, her colleague, and travel companion at the time, and I, were waiting at the New Delhi Embassy for the dossier to be completed. It felt

like hours and hours, and I remember the large glass window that overlooked a far too manicured garden as Larry, and I played a game of charades - our only language and communication at the time. Eventually, we received the necessary documents and were able to walk out of the embassy. At the entrance of the embassy, I was confronted by a little girl. A little beggar girl, about my size and age. In my right hand lay a 1-rupee coin. This memory has been deeply buried for a long time, so I don't remember exactly how I felt in that moment, but I do remember feeling a great deal of confusion. The little beggar girl stared at the coin. I stared at her. I stared at the coin, she stared at me. We stared at one another, my right palm with the 1-rupee coin between us. I remember feeling confused - looking from the coin to her. I felt like I was staring at myself, or at a version of myself. I asked Larry if he recalled this moment and what he remembered from his third person perspective.

> "You know, that moment, as I saw it, was a juxtaposition of two worlds. You were moving from one world into another, and it must've been confusing how to relate to that world in which you just came from. It was an interface between something before and something later, and we were all in that interspace, in that in-between space. It honestly was a visceral image - like a mouse taken into the household of another animal, and that mouse just now encountered another kind of mouse."

I was never on the street begging, more like *stealing* from the streets of Bangalore. So, when Larry used the metaphor of a mouse encountering another kind of mouse, he is right. I had never encountered a beggar girl before. Sure, I've seen them, but never interacted with one. On one side of the coin, lay my old self, my past life. On the other side of the coin, lay my new identity, my new life. I found myself looking at my mother, as if seeking her advice. My mother

describes this moment as her "feeling gratified, having received validation from me as her mother" because it looked like I was looking up to my mother for guidance. My mother closed my palm with the coin, and we walked away. In the moment that the beggar girl and I stared at the same coin, we knew exactly the significance and weight of the coin, of the possibilities it promised. We both knew that 1 rupee coin wasn't *just* a coin, but a way out, an escape. That coin wasn't just a coin, but another world, another chance, another life. No wonder my relationship with money and privilege is so tense and ambivalent. No wonder I don't feel like I *deserve* this life and all that I have and have come to know. This life could've been hers in that instant, and I took it without looking back.

*

My mother was at the top of her career when she decided to adopt me. She was the ideal parent candidate for CARA adoption agency: relatively young with healthy financial and social security. However, she just had one problem: she was single and unmarried. During the adoption process, CARA put forth documents that went along the lines of "I am not gay, I am not thinking of being gay, I will not become gay." While I found this statement to be strange and questionable, we must not forget India is a nation that is still recovering from post-colonial trauma with very lengthy bureaucratic processes. In an interview with Nishta Mehra, the author of *Brown White Black,* which is a set of intimate essays about her experience as a queer couple adopting a child transracially, Mehra explains, that "their lawyer recommended that Jill [her wife] not come to the initial adoption interview, when [she] adopted Shiv." Even as an American couple adopting within the United States, a supposedly liberal nation, homophobia is still prevalent against gay adoptive parents. After listening to the interview, I was shocked to find

how gay adoptive parents were discriminated against and told not to emphasize their "queerness" when adopting, particularly in a nation like the United States.

Even after I scanned the documents that my mother had to sign, I found myself filled with questions: Does homophobia override the advantages of a successful transracial and transnational adoption? (To this day, all formal documents, police statements, and other government issued papers in India follow the colonial British system and format). Despite such enormous difficulties, my mother persisted on for four more years before she was finally approved and authorized to adopt me. In the last year of the adoption process, my mother and I exchanged hand-written notes and photographs with one another. I remember she asked me what my favorite color was, my favorite cake, whether I liked dogs, and who my friends were, what I liked to do in my free time. She told me of the things I could do, the kids I could meet, the places I could see, the people that eagerly awaited to meet me. She told me of the school I could go to, of the flowers that bloomed in our garden, of the spices that lay awaiting in our cabinet, of the kind of home she had. I couldn't believe the life I was getting into. While I was hopeful and joyous to receive letters from my mother, I was also painfully aware at the time it could all be taken away, that there was a possibility of it not happening at all. Every day, I prayed. I knelt on the ground, clasped my palms together in front of me, and chanted verses from the Bible. VCT was a Christian care center, so we were told stories from the Bible. I prayed to God that I would be adopted, that my new American mother would come for me.

On December 17th, 2008, my prayers were answered with a blessing: my mother came to India to adopt me. I wore my favorite beige dress with brown sandals with a thick one-inch wedge. I wore a mango yellow headband with little beads that pulled my wavy, shoulder length hair back. I wore two layers of *Glow and Lovely,* India's number one skin lightening cream. I

still have all these things tucked away in a closet in San Francisco, including the half-used tube of *Glow and Lovely*. I felt excited and *worthy*. I looked healthy, and genuinely happy.

According to CARA adoption agency guidelines, the parent must come in-country to pick up and adopt the child. That day was the first time I saw and met my new American mother. My back was turned to the large mahogany wooden doors. That day, I knew I was being adopted. I remember waking up extra early and staring out from the second floor of our pink building overlooking the stray dogs and lonesome cows. I remember trying to burn what I saw into my memory, willing myself not to forget the smell, the color, the noise. I did feel sad for leaving behind Lokesh and Ramesh, my foster brothers that lived with me, but I also felt giddy. *I* was finally chosen. I made sure to wash myself extra hard and extra well. I remember telling my foster mother, Sindhu, how excited I was to meet my new mother. She rarely smiled, but this time, she managed a small smile with a slight wobble of her head. She even painted a bindi on my forehead with the black eyeliner that she only uses on her own daughter, Harini. That day, I truly felt wanted, like I finally had a place to call home and a person to call my mother.

My mother walked through the doors with black high heels, long black pants with white vertical lines, and a black blouse. I felt a rush of emotions - excitement, fear, joy, sadness. She was so beautiful, but so alien. I found myself hiding behind Mary Paul, the head of the orphanage, tugging at her saree. “I know Jyothika, she looks strange, and her accent is very strong, but this is your new mother,” she said. Just moments ago, I was giddy and nervous with anticipation. Now, upon seeing her here, at the orphanage finally coming to get me, I was scared. I was scared because I was going to leave behind everything and everyone I had ever known. I was scared because I was forced to re-locate, to transition once again. I was scared because I was walking into the unknown, completely bare, and exposed, with only a few belongings that

tethered me to the orphanage - a few pairs of tiger striped underwear, a pink and white kurta, a beige colored dress, and a black butterfly backpack. Soon, those ties were severed, and the few belongings were reduced to objects that became the vessels for burying and transporting my memories. However, that's not to say I was not exuberant too. I was happy because I was leaving - leaving behind pain, trauma, and abuse that had plagued me for so long. I was happy because I now had a family, a mother, who wanted me just as much as I wanted her. My story is filled with tears and rips, scratches and scars, but it's not one that deserves pity or commiseration, but one that gives *hope*.

I remember my mother and Larry, and I waiting at the New Delhi airport for our flight to Frankfurt to the United States. We were flying first-class Lufthansa airline from New Delhi to Frankfurt. I had never been on an airplane or seen so many foreigners traveling. I'd never had such good food! I was in awe. As we boarded the airplane and prepared for take-off, I remember feeling like I was going to a whole other planet, or even another galaxy; the world I had once called home became smaller and smaller until it was no longer in sight, but just a collection of memories. These memories, despite having been buried in a time capsule, are as fresh as the flowers I picked just yesterday. As a 10-year-old, my imagination ran wild: I imagined I was going through celestial space to a whole new planet called 'America'.

*

I remember landing at Dulles International Airport on December 21, 2008. I remember being extremely jetlagged, but also eager. I remember driving from Dulles International Airport to our home in Middleburg, Virginia. Here, the days are short, but the weeks are long. Lightness scurries away quickly, as if intimidated by the darkness. One by one, the cars trickle out of the

garage and speed around the corner. I press my nose up close to the car window. *I have never seen so many white people*. Their pale ghostly appearance fascinated me. My eyes ran along the lines of their protruding veins, bulging at the arms and calves. I found myself unabashedly staring. Gazing out from the backseat of the car, the trees stand tall in line, naked and exposed against the dark sky. My mother drives fast, so the trees are just a blur lining our way. She stops at a red light and I stare fixedly out the window. The gray branches stick out like broken limbs, pointing in disturbing angles and directions.

> "Why trees have no leaves?" I ask my mother in my broken English with a thick, heavy Indian accent.
>
> "In winter time here, the trees lose their leaves, it's their seasonal cycle," my mother explains.
>
> "But they not lonely without them? It seems lonely."

My mother nods thoughtfully as she continues to drive. She taps her fingers on the wheel, one by one, considering my question. Here, in the United States, I was in an unfamiliar space: I was like a plant that's been transplanted. With no experience in this climate or with this food or place, I feared I would wilt - I withheld parts of myself, my roots stunted. In need of comfort, I searched for the familiar bright colors or the incessant honking of cars and autos or the stench of urine mixed with car exhaust, garam masala and cardamom. Instead, I was confronted with trees that created monstrous illustrations in the sky, casting eerie shadows on the dirt road. Once again, I was afraid. I was accosted by air that was so cold it made my nose run. I was desolate. I was no longer who I once was - my exuberance was snatched by the cold, replaced with rising panic. I swallowed hard.

The cars obediently followed the yellow and white lines on the road, traveling at the same speed, turning at the same angle, braking at the same time. No one seemed to be in a hurry, the cars were slow to start, and slow to stop. No one drove on the sidewalks or rushed through a yellow light or veered around the pedestrians. It was orderly, it was timed, it was a system. *So strange,* I thought.

Coming to America was a first for everything - first time using utensils, first time eating pasta, first time wearing brand new clothes, first time going to school, first time having my own space and room, first time sleeping in a silent city. I was transplanted to a new environment, not knowing the language, culture, food, climate, people, nature. I had to survive again. To survive, I had to plant my roots here in America too. What I had not realized until several years later was that my roots had already begun to grow and intertwine with one another when my mother and Larry came to India to adopt me. The first root grew as tears streamed down my face and I turned my back to the orphanage and my fellow orphan friends, looking instead at the future and my new American mother. This is what psychologists call "forming attachment." What they mean is, I was emotionally balanced and in tune to form a bond with my new mother, an important factor in any adoption. However, the three of us together confused people - were they a family? Were they friends? What were they? We were the misfits. The three of us together looked strange - two older white adults with a young Indian girl. Whether it be rushing through the airport or window shopping in Georgetown shopping mall or getting our hair blown out, my mother and I are a constant cause of attraction.

*

I was in the 7th grade and about to attend my very first Bar Mitzvah. I had been living in the United States for almost two years by then. My English had progressed quickly, but my Indian accent still clung heavy. Despite growing up in extreme poverty and never having enough food to fill my stomach, the habits of American consumption came to me easily - I enjoyed buying new material goods, trying on glamour, daring to wear shorter and more revealing skirts, eating until the trousers' buttons popped off. I was changing fast, and my old self was fading quickly. My mother and I went to Nordstrom, an American luxury department store. The salesperson offered to help us find some dresses.

"Here are some things I was able to find. Should I give this to you or uhh…?"

"My daughter." My mother finished her sentence.

The salesperson's face shifted from confusion to surprise. She did not expect for two people like my mother and I to be mother and daughter. Why? Because we neither had any genetic connection nor did we resemble one another in any way, despite demonstrating similarities in our mannerisms and speech habits. I stared at her as the salesperson struggled to grapple with our relationship. Reflecting now some years later as a college student about to graduate, I remember my mother always correcting strangers. "No, I am not her baby-sitter." "No, we are not sisters." "No, we are not friends." I imagine it was exhausting and frustrating to always have to defend her relationship with me. To find out what my mother's experience with my adoption was like, I gave her a call from Brunswick, Maine to San Francisco, California. My mother picked up the phone immediately.

"Gumby! What's up?" Her voice echoed through the speakers.

"So I'm writing a section of my thesis, and I wondered what it was like for you to

always have to defend, or re-assert your relationship with me?"

My mother took a minute to think.

"You know, it was difficult. I definitely did feel like I was defending my role as your mother, and just fighting to be recognized as a mother even."

Especially when I was younger, my mother was constantly questioned about her role as a mother, particularly as *my* mother, whether it be at other people's homes, at airports, at school performances, or even at parent teacher conferences. Any sense of recognition and validation as a mother came from me, her friends, family, and her support system, not from strangers or others. For my mother, adoption was a way into motherhood. Adoption was her way of creating a family - one that threatens the traditional family unit, being a single mother raising an adopted daughter on her own. In adoption, my mother found a different sort of fulfillment.

I am in 8th grade at Maret School in Washington DC. Every winter, the school put on a middle school talent show. Being the bold, confident 8th grader I was, I signed up to play a solo on the piano. On the day of the talent show, I wore the brand-new outfit that my mother got me just a couple of days before: shiny black, white and grey puffy skirt with a white blouse and long grey earrings from Claire's, a cheap jewelry store that I quickly became obsessed with.

It was my turn to perform next. My friends cheered me on. I got onto the stage and walked to the piano. Before sitting down, I walked to the microphone. I remember the light blinding my eyes, so I shifted away from the light. It followed me. I held my right hand up like a visor, trying to keep the light from blinding my eyes. The audience laughed. I remember trying to find my mother in the audience of about 150 or so members.

> "Before I play, I would like to dedicate this song to my mom." The audience audibly 'aww'ed.'
>
> "You have done so much for me, and given me everything I have. So thank you mom. I love you. I hope you like the song."

I remember making several mistakes during the performance of *Für Elise* by Beethoven, and my cheeks turning hot. I finished the song quickly. I stood up, with my left hand on the piano, and bowed. Despite my mistakes, every single audience member stood up and clapped. My mother isn't too fond of surprises, but this is one she still cherishes to this day. My mother likes to joke that on that day, I made every parent in that room jealous. (I'd like to agree). This is my mother's earliest recollection of feeling a sense of validation and recognition as a mother: my extemporaneous speech confirmed her identity and her role as my mother. That day, I made my mother proud. I was proud to be her daughter, and to call her my mother. After the talent show was over, I remember friends and even strangers coming up to my mother and congratulating my mother for raising such a good daughter. *My mother had succeeded*. Her identity as a mother, and as *my* mother, was finally recognized, and even *admired* by strangers and others.

The fight to enter motherhood and to be recognized as a mother isn't easy, especially in transracial adoptions. When I asked my mother what her transition into motherhood was like, she had several thoughts:

> "You see in adoption, the transition in becoming a mother is very abrupt, and I don't mean that negatively at all. What I mean by 'abrupt' is that, when you're having a biological child, you have 9 months to prepare for it. You can feel the biological child growing inside you, so there's already a connection between you

> and the child. In adoption, there is a different kind of connection that is formed through letter and picture exchanges and such, but it's not the same, you know? It is almost artificial in a sense. In adoption, becoming a mother is dealing with it intellectually and communicating about it. Now that I think about it, adoption also misses the physical ramifications of having a child. There is an abrupt physical introduction to the child. It was like turning a light switch on and off - one instant I wasn't a mother, and in another, I was."

For a long time, I viewed adoption only from my perspective, until I started writing this thesis and began to wonder what the adoption process and experience was like for my mother. Reflecting on my childhood and teen-hood in America, I remember I felt a real close connection and attachment to my mom, so much so that I think I might've put a stop to her romantic and sex life for a while. I remember my mother walking down the carpeted stairs one day. Even from the eyes of a 7th grader, I knew my mother looked too dressed up - she was wearing a dark blue dress that hugged her figure with a beige colored necklace and fancy high heels. I remember thinking she was going on a date and worrying that she might run away with that man and leave me behind. (She was in fact going to a business dinner meeting). Looking back now, I know that was irrational thinking, but back then, the introduction of another member into the family was a real threat. I felt very possessive of my mom, and most certainly didn't want to share her with someone else!

By the winter of 2014, my mother and I had been living in Washington DC for about five years, while Larry returned to San Francisco, living the humble life of a monk-turned-lawyer. It was just my mother and me, and our three golden retrievers in our upper-middle class house located in Dupont Circle in Washington DC. Some might say this is a small family, but to me,

my dogs are my siblings, so I consider my family to be big, like many Indian families. With every break I got from school, we would travel to San Francisco, my mother's childhood place. The first couple of times we went, I enjoyed the trips. We went to see the Alcatraz, rode on the famous Trolley, walked on the Golden Gate Bridge, ate Indian food in Berkeley that actually nearly tasted like my old home. However, because we went there for every break I had from school, I grew tired and found myself complaining. Oftentimes, a babysitter or Larry would watch over me, while my mother went into the office by the Ferry building to continue working.

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I didn't understand how similar and alone my mother and I were until we decided to move to San Francisco from Washington DC in the summer of 2014. I had just finished 9th grade at Maret High School, after what was a tumultuous year for me and my mother. In the 9th grade, I went down a dark hole on the internet, seeking validation from strange random men on the inter web. As you can imagine, this put my mother on edge, causing a bout of anxiety for both of us. In the summer of 2014, my mother and I went house hunting in Mill Valley, where the Branson School, my new high school, was located. I remember walking around Mill Valley and counting how many people of color we saw. We saw just one Asian family. By this point, I was already adjusted well to living in predominantly white neighborhoods and attending majority white elite schools, but being in Mill Valley with my mother, I have never felt so alienated. We looked like tourists who clearly didn't belong. It almost felt as if it was *wrong* for us to be there. We looked at each other and knew instantly we could not live there. Thus, we looked at homes in the heart of the city. On Russian Hill, we found our home: we laid on the soft white carpet together and admired the chirping of the parrots and birds and the distant sound of the foghorn.

We had a full view of the city, with just a 20-minute drive across the Golden Gate Bridge to get to school. In finding a home together, my mother and I reinforced our bond as a family. This was permanent. This was a home we could call *ours*. In the city, we didn't stick out. In the city, we were asked fewer questions. In the city, we didn't have to explain ourselves. *This was our home*.

Starting high school in one place and finishing at another was difficult, but transition and adaptation were not notions I wasn't already familiar with. Even though I was starting the Branson School in the 10th grade (and I was the only transfer student at the time), I made friends quickly and excelled in all my classes (with a lot of help from my mother).

I remember it was August 30th, 2014. My mother and I were invited to the "new student and family reception." My mother and I were the only family entering in the 10th grade. I immediately stuck out, but as soon as I stepped foot onto Branson High School's campus, I knew that I wasn't going to "fit in" anyway. Branson's campus sat perched up on top of a hill with the mountains as its backdrop in a tiny, extremely wealthy area called Ross. On top of the hill, was the admissions office and the fine arts building. Below the hill was the athletics facilities, the soccer field, and many classrooms. As my mother and I walked down the long winding driveway on a beautiful Friday afternoon, we consistently saw only white people. We'd occasionally see a Latino, or an Asian, but very rarely did we see a dark skin toned Indian or even a Black person. The smell of eucalyptus was in the air, and the small campus evoked a sense of serenity. Sure, I felt out of place, but I was *calm*. Trees lined the driveway, and the buildings were a sunshine yellow that complimented the simple landscape of the campus. Melea was told by my interviewer, Ellie, to show me around. Melea introduced me to her friends, where I met Shoshi, a fellow adoptee. Shoshi, quite fair in skin tone complexion, was adopted from China as a baby by a white single mother. I found I could relate a great deal to her, particularly in the transracial,

transcultural, and transnational adoption aspects, as well as in terms of the absence of a father figure or male role model.

To this day, she and I still communicate with one another, sending each other a text out of the blue and liking each other's Instagram posts. While Shoshi understood many of the struggles that my mother and I faced, she at the same time didn't exactly understand my identity crisis - of being Indian and American, of being poor and rich, of having a dark skin tone complexion. She explained to me that despite her skin tone complexion being fair, her mother and her still dealt with racial tensions in their relationship. She explained to me that the absence of a father didn't really bother her because being a single mom, though hard, is "pretty badass." At the Branson School, within my friend group (which consisted of all Asian girls and one African American boy), I kind of "fit in". We were all BIPOCs, and I found a sense of comfort in that, even though I didn't necessarily receive validation as an adoptee or allowed myself to talk about my years at the orphanage. Because well, that would make everybody sad, and I was not about to tell a sob story while starting at a new high school.

During the new students and family reception, I asked my newly established friend group who they thought my mother was. They all scanned the crowd. Shoshi pointed to a white mother sitting next to a group of African American parents. My mother was the only white person sitting next to another person of color. Scanning the cafeteria, tables were segregated by race and color - white families sat on one side, the blacks and everyone else sat on the other side. I nodded my head. *How did she know?* I found myself asking her later. She responded, "my mom told me that after she adopted me, she saw how different I was treated from her, so I guess she just kind of gravitated towards the Chinese community." Shoshi, or rather her mother, *understood*. When she saw me and my mother, she didn't question us. For the first time, I felt a sense of community

with her. For the first time, I no longer squirmed for being 'different.' Instead, I took delight in my marker as 'adoptee.'

Privileges of An Adoptee

The marker of "adoptee" or being adopted is a core part of my identity. However, this wasn't always the case. In Bangalore, India, my markers transitioned from being 'no one' to an 'orphan,' in which I experienced another kind of freedom and liberation in calling myself an 'orphan.' In America, I was no longer an orphan, but an adoptee and a daughter - one who was wanted, cared for, and with a whole lot of privilege.

In coming to America, this marker of 'adoptee' has constantly been under attack and threatened, whether it be in schools, camps, parks, coffee shops. This is not uncommon, especially in transracial adoptions. Reported incidents of discrimination, racism, colorism, sexism, are extremely high in transracial adoptions (CARA). This is because most of the transracial adoptions occur in which a child of color is placed with a white family. In such instances, the adopted child may undergo what psychologists call the "transracial adoption paradox". I certainly experienced this "transracial adoption paradox" because despite the differences in my mother's and my skin color, I was able to experience some of the privileges that come with Whiteness.

The term "transracial adoption paradox" is oftentimes used interchangeably with the English colloquial term, "being white-washed." While there are some overlaps in terms of terminology and meaning, there is also a distinct difference. The term "being white-washed" is

colloquial English and has connotations that are derogatory. This term is used to insult adoptees, immigrants, and BIPOCs, accusing them of assimilating to the "American culture" so well, they've forgotten their *own* culture and identity. Thus, terms such as "oreo" or "banana" are derogatory English slang that grew out of the term "white-washed" and are used as weapons to oppress BIPOCs. "Transracial adoption paradox" in comparison is an adoptee, often a BIPOC, who due to transracial adoption can share some of the same privileges that Whiteness brings, despite themselves not being white. This doesn't necessarily mean they've "forgotten" their own culture and identity or view themselves as 'being white' - that's where the paradox comes in. In this paradox, the adoptees are neither white nor brown, black, yellow; they are neither Indian nor American; they are a *mix* - accepted nowhere yet belonging in both.

It was a week before the semester was supposed to start at Branson High School in 2014. My mother and I decided to go shopping to buy new clothes for a fresh start. We drove across the Golden Gate Bridge and went to Corte Madera Shopping Mall, the place where "bougee" people go (which just so happens to be majority white). I remember walking around with my mother and just witnessing the wealth displayed openly on the people - designer clothes, multiple brand-name bags on each arm, pristine white skin with not a single blonde hair out of place. Corte Madera shopping mall was filled with popular expensive brands like Anthropologie, Williams and Sonoma, Tesla, Restoration Hardware, Pottery Barn, Peloton, you name it. There were couples and families with kids running around eating hotdogs and spilling juice on the concrete ground. There were seating areas that were positioned towards the sun, allowing individuals to sunbathe and people watch. I especially liked people watching here because I saw their need to put on an air of confidence, of wealth they may not necessarily have. I found myself conjuring stories of them in my head - what they ate last, whom they've loved, what their

obligations might be, when they last masturbated, when they last had sex. It didn't strike me then, but I understand now that adoption is a privilege.

For me, in India, adoption was a way out - out of a life of extreme poverty, abuse, and despair. However, in America, adoption has brought me tremendous privilege. It was a privilege for me, as a dark skin toned Indian woman, to have the audacity to shop in such luxury stores. I remember one time walking into Restoration Hardware without my mother and the salespeople raising their eyebrows as if to suggest, "What is she doing here?" I went in because my mother told me to gauge the size of the dining room chairs and test how comfortable they were while she went to the restroom. Of course, as a high school student, I could not afford any of the stuff there, but that's not the point. Just by me being in that space made those around me uncomfortable. How dare they question my right to be in that space? I realized then it was because of my mother's 'whiteness,' and due to this phenomenon of 'transracial adoption paradox,' that I was able to share some of the privileges that Whiteness provides. Despite having access to some of the privileges that Whiteness brings, I was also made aware of my presence in that space, which was not mine to begin with. It was a weird experience with privilege where white people didn't have to think twice about being in that particular space, but I was all too aware.

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It was around Christmas time in 2017 that my mother and her partner, Andrew, came to visit me in India during my gap year. We all met in Bangalore. I remember getting on the airplane from Pune to Bangalore and thinking, *I am finally going back. But, I am in control*. It felt strange. I didn't feel like I was ready to face my past, to fully confront the life I so willingly

and happily left behind. I think a part of me felt shame. Shame, because I didn't feel like I was doing well enough in the life I was given in America to face my orphanage and the staff that ran it. I walked down the carpeted pathway to my mother's hotel room. I knocked. She immediately opened the door. We embraced for a long time. Lying on our beds, we eagerly discussed my time in India, how excited we were to finally be going back to my orphanage after ten years. She asked me how I felt about going back. I remember telling her, *I need closure from my past. I cannot forget where I came from.*

My mother and I sat in the backseat of the car as it took us to my orphanage. There were far more wild brush and construction than I remembered. The buildings looked newer and taller. But the roads remained the same - it was never quite smooth nor bumpy, just gravely. The car pulled up, and my mother and I stepped out holding hands. Tears streamed down our faces. I recalled a small blue fountain that was next to the now tall and fruitful papaya tree. The place had changed, but it also looked the exact same - the same beige paint on the building, the same logo, the same layout.

We opened the same mahogany doors that my mother had walked through ten years earlier to adopt me. This time however, we walked through the doors *together*. At that moment, we weren't two strangers meeting each other for the first time, we were a *family*, united by the joy of adoption, that occurred right behind those very doors. A staff member walked towards us. She immediately recognized me.

"Jyothika, you are back!"

"Wow, how beautiful you've become! How proud we are!"

"You have not forgotten us. You are hope."

It was then that a fresh batch of tears streamed down my face. *She remembered. I remembered*. In that moment, we shared everything words simply cannot explain - pain, fear, sorrow, loss, pride. I felt like I was that 9-year-old girl trapped inside the body of a 19 year old. After what was an emotionally challenging day, my mother and I met with the former head of the orphanage, Mary Paul for dinner at a traditional South Indian style restaurant. We sat outside under a canopy of trees. Man-made waterfall trickled nearby, creating an air of serenity in the middle of bustling Bangalore. We reflected and reminisced; we laughed and cried. Mary Paul told me how proud she was, of how far I've come and will go. She told me I was an inspiration. And I believed her. I looked at my mother, because if not for her, then who else to thank for the life I have now? After a few days, my mother and Andrew flew back to the United States, and I went back to Pune to finish the gap year program.

The Burning Touch of My Birth Mother

To be entirely honest, I never really found myself beautiful. I thought the shape of my body was wonky, my breasts too large, my thighs too thick, my calves too small, my skin too dark. Prior to adoption, I knew that I was darker than my orphan counterparts, but it didn't bother me as much then. It was only when I came to America and became exposed to 'whiteness' that I realized just *how dark* I was. I remember growing up in America wanting to be like that "American Dream Girl" - tall, blonde, white, blue eyes, the classic conundrum every child goes through. I went to high school with many of these "American Dream Girls" - they were the most

popular all-white friend group in the school. I remember thinking if they knew how *white* they looked; how *exclusionary* they seemed and decided to come to the conclusion they're probably not even aware! That's when I stopped wanting to be white, wanting to "fit in." I decided then I didn't want to be as unaware. I chose to wear Indian clothes, to listen to Indian music, to re-learn Hindi and Tamil. It was then I thanked myself for *being different*. It was then I became even more grateful to be adopted. Because of those "American Dream Girls," I was able to accept my past and the journey I've traveled. They made me realize I had something they didn't: an amazing life's journey.

I started college still struggling to accept my skin color and to even find beauty within myself. In college, I was surrounded by people from all over the world. As I met more and more of my peers and the wider Bowdoin community, I found myself saying, *Oh, she's beautiful*. Afiah was a peer in my class from Ghana. Her skin was very dark, but she glowed. I found myself then finding beauty with dark skin too, that dark skin in fact *enhances* beauty. As I scroll through the pictures of myself on my iPhone, I realize my features have grown more noticeable over the years. My cheekbones have become more prominent, my eyelashes longer and fuller, the scar has slowly faded. When my mother first adopted me, the head of the orphanage, Mary Paul, told her I was very self-conscious of the scar on my right cheek. I was so ashamed I would make sure to turn the right side of my face away from the camera; I would add extra layers of *Glow and Lovely* to try and cover it up. I was so ashamed of it that my mother and I went to several dermatologists to try and get it fixed. There was no cream, no laser therapy that could fix it, just *time*.

For a long time, I walked around with that scar as it clung heavy to my face, as if it held me back somehow. I remember scrubbing my cheek hard trying to make it go away, but my skin

was only burning and stinging. The scar was given to me by my biological mother when I was a young girl. I remember she planted the fiery stick on my face, the skin burning and charring. I don't remember what I did or who made a mistake, but I paid the price for disobedience. While the scar now has faded to be barely noticeable, it reminds me of the life I have lived and escaped, of the family that birthed me, of my inner strength. I don't normally like using the word 'scar' and I don't use it lightly here. The word 'scar' connotes a traumatic or negative event, as if the individual is *tainted* or *wounded*. While one may view my biological mother burning my face as a 'traumatic' memory, I believe that that was a pivotal point in my life at the time: it is what made me *choose* to leave behind, to escape, my family in search of something better. The 'scar' used to remind me of the *hate* I had for my biological mother. I couldn't understand *why* a mother would do that to a child, and I found myself shutting her out and rejecting the life she had given me. I found myself blaming her for branding me, as if claiming me as her own, forcing me to carry an essence of her everywhere I go, even in my new life here in America. The scar was supposed to teach me a lesson, and it most certainly did: to run when the opportunity arises.

That scar is the only physical trait that ties me to my biological family (besides DNA), but I don't view that negatively anymore. That scar is the only remainder and reminder of my birth family, but I'm not repulsed by that either. In fact, I now welcome this idea of potentially reconnecting with my birth family and have even sent off a "23&me" DNA test kit to the lab. The test result came back with five potential individuals who are in my extended family as 5th cousins. I have yet to reach out to them. Why? Because if I wanted to reach out to them, I would need to give them my private and personal information. I was okay with giving my DNA to "23&me" because we still don't know what to do with it, apart from coding the sequences and finding any medical conditions that we are genetically prone to.

I think my desire to reconnect with my birth family isn't one to rejoice, but for *me* to see where and remember who they are. I can imagine myself standing in front of them, but I'm not able to completely put into words the predicament I feel, or the contradictory emotions that threaten to engulf me. But that scar is what gives me strength - to adjust, to adapt, to survive - because I remember the pain, the fear, the sheer sense of hopelessness. I wonder if I reconnected with my birth family if that association of pain would dissipate or whether it might exacerbate it? This, I might never know. My mother says that that scar is the mark of life, the mark of a life lived and survived, and I could not agree more. To this day, I carry this mark not as a *scar*, but as a reminder of my inner strength and resilience, of what I've endured. The mark is a testimony of my resilience and my desire to *live* and burn bright.

The Self Found and A Voice Uttered

I was recently asked a question: "Do you view your adoption as a 'good thing'?" *What a strange question,* I thought. I find myself at a loss. *Well, of course, adoption is a good thing! If I hadn't been adopted, who knows what would've happened to me*. This is the narrative that so often circulated in and around my circle - and continues to do so today. But the problem with this story is that it removes all agency and ownership of my own narrative in lieu of adoption. Before adoption, my story was mine to be told. After adoption, my story and my identity became so closely intertwined with my mother's that some psychologists might call it "unhealthy attachment." I've tried some therapy here and there, but I didn't get the point of paying someone

to sit there and listen to all your problems. However, upon encouragement from my own mother, friends, and my own apparent inability to handle any conversation relating to my mother without my throat tightening up and tears glistening my eyes, I tried therapy again. I remember describing to Tristan the fear I had of losing my mother - not just in death, but in her *leaving* me. I remember telling Tristan that I wish I could give up some years of my life so that my mother could live longer and not die. I remember telling her that every time I go home, I see a few new gray hairs, more wrinkles, and I become sad, like *I'm* the cause of her aging so fast. I remember telling her how I have a lot of regrets and shame in how I treated my mother growing up, constantly doing the opposite of whatever she said, lying to get my way and to hide my secrets. Growing up for me felt like living in the Montagues and Capulets' household drama from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. I remember telling Tristan that the day that my mother is gone, I wouldn't know what or how to handle myself. *How do I exist then?* I remember asking her. I remember telling her that my mother means everything to me, that if she says no, then it's a no. Tristan listened with a keen ear, and immediately pinpointed one of my main torments: *fear of abandonment*.

Growing up, my mother eased that fear by constantly reassuring me that no one was going to take me away, or that she wasn't going to marry someone and go off with them. As a 14-year-old, I was very protective of my mother. The idea of *sharing* her with someone triggered me in ways that continue to do so to an extent. I think it's because of all the women I've called "mom"s in my life. In Julayne Lee's *Not My White Savior*, she describes in a poem style the different mother's she had - her birth mother, her caretaker, and her adoptive mother - and the different roles they've played in her life. I started thinking about the people I've called "moms" in my life, and I realized that out of all the "mom"s I've had, my mother has been the most

accepting, loving, and caring. My birth mother didn't know how to be a mother. My foster mother at the orphanage turned a blind eye to the despicable actions of her son. With my mother, the love is unconditional, even if I do deeply disappoint her at times. With my mother, I am safe, not just physically, but also financially and emotionally. With my mother, I have a *chance at another life*.

My mother likes to bring up the idea that she *gave me a chance at another life*, that she *rescued me*, that she *saved me* from a life of poverty. And I internalized this growing up and continue to do so today. At age 23, being told that my mother "rescued me" or that she "saved me," and having that reinforced by my own mother makes me feel as if I'm not only a charity case of sorts, but like I am *in debt* to my mother. Whenever my mother tells me to do something, like to take the trash out, or to change my clothing, I feel obligated to do so because who am I to rebel? Who am I to go against her wishes? And in the instances that I do rebel, even now, I immediately regret going against her wishes: I am in utter turmoil. I am plagued by the idea that whatever I have, whoever I am, whatever I know, whoever I know, I feel like I *owe* it to my mother. If it wasn't for my mother, I wouldn't be who I am or where I am today - that's a statement that both comforts me, but also suffocates me.

I remember just a few days ago, I was walking along the woods by campus. I remember looking up and seeing stars dot the sky, the tall trees intertwining their limbs with one another and swaying to the beat of the wind. It looked as if the stars and the limbs connected and flowed into each other, this supernatural energy keeping them alive and bright. As I was looking up, I was overcome with this feeling of gratefulness. I fully succumbed to it. I understood that my mother was my external force, that she was the one who created a web of possibilities for me. She was my saving grace - exactly as I had seen her at the orphanage for the first time.

In this 'white savior complex' discourse, though, I don't have space to be my own self. As an adoptee, my identity is already intrinsically tied to my mother, the adopter. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it can lead to a power imbalance, and perhaps, even abuse of that power as an "adopter." I'm not saying that my mother abused her power as the "adopter" with me, but I am insinuating that my mother took advantage of that power to guilt trip me and manipulate me emotionally. Even as I'm writing this sentence, I am very aware of the double standard I have created for myself in this "white savior complex" discourse. I can't entirely fault the "white savior complex" narrative because I benefit a great deal from that. If it wasn't for my mother's morally righteous decision, I wouldn't have the opportunities I have now.

It was freshman year of college in 2018 and my mother flew from San Francisco for the college's annual "Family Weekend." Family Weekend is an opportunity for parents and family members to visit students "in action," meet their professors, and take a stroll through the lovely Bowdoin campus. It usually occurs in late October, just when the leaves start turning colors and the fall crisp lies still in the air. My mother took one of my friends, Maynor, and me out to dinner at Enoteca, a fancy Italian restaurant on Maine street that only you'd want your parents or your friend's parents taking you to. (It's my mother's and my favorite restaurant in Brunswick). I remember going to the bathroom and returning to find my mother upset.

> "Mary Paul would be so appalled. I mean passing out every weekend? Smoking all the time? Good god Gemma, what has gotten into you? And you complain about the food? I mean my god, you came from eating dirt! I never knew a child that complains as much as you."

I later discovered that my friend had completely exposed me to my mother. As you can imagine that friend and I are no longer on talking terms. I mean, who rats their friend out to their parents, especially to one as strict as mine? While my mother was upset, she was even more so disappointed because I was straying further and further away from the 'version' or 'image' of me she had in her head. She had never imagined that I'd be smoking weed or drinking alcohol or hosting parties, because those are activities that she doesn't necessarily partake in nor really enjoy. However, my mother is an avid lover of entertainment and entertaining guests … So, I think I know where my joy for hosting gatherings comes from. Nevertheless, back when she said that it did exactly what she intended for her remark to do: make me question my own self.

My voice as an adoptee has been lost for a while, held at the mercy of a 'white savior.' I do have to note that growing up, my mother tried her best to reassure me that I wasn't a charity case or a sad orphan, but *her daughter*. But how could I be *her daughter* if we had to fight to be recognized as such? How could I be *her daughter* if I felt my place in the family was at threat? How could I be *her daughter* if she viewed me as a 'good deed' she'd done?

This "white savior complex" and the relationship between adopter and adoptee as "rescuer" and "rescued" runs rampant in the adoption process, especially in transracial, transnational, and transcultural adoptions. In adoption, my mother sought a way into motherhood. But for her, adoption wasn't just about taking on the role as a new 'mother,' but an investment that required a great deal of sacrifice. My mother had to adjust from being single and taking care of herself only to having another human being completely dependent on her. My mother had to transition from living in a condo to purchasing a house for the new family that seemed to grow only in the collection of Golden Retrievers.

Before adopting me, my mother had a successful life that was just missing one thing: a daughter. Before adoption, my life was wholly unsuccessful that was just missing one thing: a loving, caring, and kind mother. As much as we've provided each other with what the other needs, I still can't help but feel like I'm squandering away her 'investment.' Every kid disappoints their parents one way or another. To a 'normal' kid, when they disappoint their parents, they may feel remorse, but then get over it, forgetting it ever happened. For me, disappointment is a strike. For me, disappointing my mother isn't just a slap on the face, but a fist to the soul.

As I've matured and grown up, I've learned that as a daughter, there are some things I simply cannot provide for my mother. I remember talking to a friend of mine, Lior, about these fears. Lior graduated from Bowdoin College in the class of 2020, majoring in Government and Legal Studies. Lior, who looks like she's of Asian descent, was adopted as a baby from Russia by a white mother to New York. Her mother, like mine, adopted her as a single mother. I remember asking her how she dealt with the intrusion of a potential new family member, and how she abated her fears of her mother "leaving her." She explained:

> "You see, what I realized was that as a daughter, there are things I simply can't give my mom that a partner can. And I don't mean just sex or physical intimacy, but someone closer to her in age and experience that she can share and connect with, you know? And think of it this way, you're here in college in Maine, and your mother is in California, and Andrew is your way of knowing someone's looking out for her. I mean, without you in the house, she's got to be lonely with an empty nest, so why not let Andrew in?"

The introduction of Andrew, a male figure, into the family was a drastic change, and one that caused a great deal of strife between my mother and me. If he makes my mother happy, that's all that matters, right? Not in this case. Even in high school, my mother was distinctly aware of my fear of abandonment and didn't bring anyone home until I left the house for a gap year, and eventually college. She tried to date someone in the junior year of high school, and I couldn't deal with it. I became so paranoid that she would leave me behind that I snuck into her phone and read her messages and emails between her and her lover. I couldn't understand why she would want someone else, even though I, myself, had a boyfriend at the time. Ironic, right? More like pure selfishness. I couldn't bear the thought of sharing my mother with someone else. Doesn't that mean she will choose them over me? Doesn't that mean she will run away with them and leave me behind? In my own way, I became controlling of my mother, dictating who she could see and always asking where she was going and when she would be back. While at the same time, she tried to parent me - determining my "bedtime," who I could hang out with, where I could go, what I could wear. I think I had so many regrets of how I treated my mother growing up that I thought her meeting someone else was her way of rejecting me.

When my mother first adopted me, we both tested one another's boundaries. We both played on one another's fears and in many ways, traumatized one another so much that we are still recovering from that. When I first came to the United States, we lived with my mother's ex-boyfriend briefly while our house was still being built. I remember vividly the two of them whispering in the kitchen, while I eavesdropped tentatively by the stairs, hidden behind the wall. I couldn't quite understand what they were saying, but I knew they were talking about me. I felt so hurt, so angry that they would be talking about me behind my back. I remember one time I was caught, and I scrambled back up the stairs. Too late. It was then I confronted them as to why

they were talking about me behind my back. They were discussing my behavior - the way I lashed out at my mother, both verbally and physically. I wanted to call the orphanage all the time, not to beg them to take me back, but to hear and feel a sense of familiarity, of the place I left behind. My transition into this family was not smooth in the least, but I displayed a healthy level of pain and a "normal" reaction to such a drastic change, which ultimately is what bonded me to my mother.

I remember telling my mother as a little kid, "I ran away once, I can do it again." And she would respond, "I'll get you a one-way ticket back." We played on one another's fear - my mother's fear of failing as a single parent, and my fear of my mother abandoning me. My mother and I are both very strong independent women who are opinionated and emotionally charged individuals. Being vulnerable is hard for both of us. Even saying, "I miss you" is hard and I realized recently that I don't verbally say enough how grateful I am to have my mother, how happy I am to be where I am and to have the opportunity to learn. I think my mother often worries she's failed me as a mother, and the only sense of validation she can get is from me. I've become so accustomed to simply taking and living this life that I have yet to step back and be thankful for the things I have and the knowledge I have gained.

I sometimes wonder what it might have been like if there was another parent in the family, so that my mother didn't have to play the "bad cop" and "good cop". I used to joke that it would be great to have a dad so that when my mother gets mad, I can turn to someone else and sweet talk them. My mother laughed and said that's not how that works. Instead, she had asked me several times if I wanted a sibling. At the time, I was adamant to not have a sibling because that would mean I have to share my mother! I wanted my mother all to myself, but there are such things as hugging too hard, loving to suffocate.

I remember when Andrew first moved into our house in the fall of 2020. I remember that I verbally attacked him, claiming that my mother will never love him as much as she loves me, that she was my mother and not his wife, that maybe he should move out if he was going to wake up early and talk loudly on the phone. I lashed out because I didn't want to lose my mother. I lashed out because I felt that my place in my family was at threat. I lashed out because I was angry and scared.

It was only after I talked to Lior did I understand how to start viewing him differently. That the introduction of Andrew into the family wasn't my mother's way of saying she loves him more than me, but that she needed a kind of companionship that I simply couldn't provide (as a daughter). It is in this moment that I realized how much I changed my mother's life - for the better or worse. While I might've brought my mother a great deal of happiness, I have also caused her a lot of pain and trauma that still lingers at the fringes of our relationship. That demonstrates how full our relationship is: we are two people fully tethered to one another.

When I go home now, like when I went home for Thanksgiving just this past year in the fall of 2021, I couldn't help but feel like a visitor in my own home. I remember opening the front gates of my home in San Francisco and feeling out of place. Despite having grown up here, in this house, and having created memories with my mother, I felt that all vanish. I watched the two of them cooking in the kitchen with two big Golden Retrievers by their feet. They worked in unison, like puzzle pieces easily fitting together. Andrew cut the vegetables; my mother tossed it all into the pot. My mother served the plates, Andrew washed the dishes. Where was I? I was in the living room watching from afar. I saw no space in this family of theirs. I didn't go home for Christmas break or for spring break. I'm not sure if it's because of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic and my mother's fragile health state, or because I was no longer as integral to the

family as I thought I was. Now that I'm about to graduate from college, I feel a strong desire to stay close to home, but not live at home. My mother and I have such different lifestyles that we would drive one another crazy - my mother sleeps early, and I sleep late; I enjoy partaking in psychedelic drugs, and my mother is against it.

As I've grown up, our relationship has transitioned from mother-daughter to now being equals in a relationship - two strong independent adults with many scars who love and care fiercely. These are scars that we have both come to live with and love because they are the signs of a life lived, of the two bodies grown and stretched, of our souls intertwined and bloomed like wisteria. The scars not only show the complexities of an adoptive mother-daughter relationship with a lot of unforeseen challenges, but it is also a visible marker of vulnerability, tenderness, and mutual support and care for one another. To have scars means to have been vulnerable; to have been vulnerable means to build a stronger self, to create a bond so intense and hot that even the strongest earthquake or the largest forest fire can't break or burn it.

My mother is the strongest person I know who refuses to let others bring her down and stands up for what she believes in - love, choice, and social justice. Our bond, love, and care for one another is so fierce it's no wonder we fight even about the most innate things, like the thickness of my eyeliner or the depth of my blouses or the dogs' chew marks on the remote control. We fight to convey love, and we embrace to show care.

I am happy, fortunate, and lucky to call my mother *my mother*, to have someone who loves, cares, and protects me as fiercely as she does. Of the three people I've called "mother" in my life, my mother is the kindest, the most giving, and undoubtedly, the most protective of me. I am grateful to my mother for *choosing me* to be her daughter, for bringing me to be a part of her family, for giving me opportunities that she never had growing up, for showing me what it is to

be loved and wanted. But, as much as I have my mother to be grateful for, I also have to learn to be thankful to myself. As a mere 5-year-old, I escaped and survived my birth family. I orphaned myself as a means of seeking freedom and liberation. After my adoption, I broke free of the familiarity of poverty to the strangeness of wealth. My whole life has been of flight, a constant fight for survival. As much as I have my mother to thank for these transitions, I have to give myself credit too. I give thanks to myself. Thank you, Jyothika. I finally found you.

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