

# Memories of a Child in a Pink Bow

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Fiction based on non-fiction

Morning sun streaked through a crack in a wall near my crib. I awoke to the sun's rays and infants screaming as they grabbed at the air for milk and touch. The scent of urine permeated the nursery. Fully awakened, I began howling. The collage of sights and sounds remain with me. Sounds of crinkled paper slippers moving through the rows of cribs, caressing whispers of, "Shush," meant to soothe sweat-stained foreheads, words of, "Acc, the smell," from harsh voices, infants rising as if on their own accord from slat prisons, hands dipping my small body into sudsy water, the drying of our wiggling forms, short tops serving as the only covering, tipped cribs, puddles of warm urine trickling into waiting buckets, the chafing noise of the scrubbing of cribs. Even now, I hear the snap of freshly cleaned covers as they cut through the air, and recall their coarseness against my body, as I fought my way out of the maelstrom.

Images of bottles of milk propped against slats of wood stay with me. If the milk soaked its nourishment into the sheets, tiny, shriveled hands grasped at the sweet moistness. Mouth sucked cloth until sleep lulled infants back to nightmares or the rare gift of a dream of family, to a warm embrace. Older babies held their bottles high, as prizes, sucked the milk from them, until only air existed. Toddlers got sticky mush and hungrily grasped for the spoons, "Greedy little ones," were the words heard, as the tasteless watered-down porridge slipped down throats. None was greedier than I.

On that first morning, the same caretaker lifted me from the crib as I kicked and scratched at her. It turned out that this was also her first year at the orphanage and so she kept a diary of my progress, among others. My entries were translated to say that the woman sang my name, Sonia, and rocked me until I was calm enough to enter the playroom where she placed me in a chair. She wrote that I sat straight, looking ahead. I don't remember much of this.

Fortunately, the caretaker gave her diary to my adoptive parents. I do recall flat voices responding to music with the most basic of rhythms. The walls in that room were stark white and our voices echoed around them. I remember shy, stoic smiles, and a dance-like shuffling from left to right as we sang. It seems an odd directive to me now. The diary reads that the caretaker was proud of my behavior until we played patty cake. My flat hand curled into a claw-like instrument that raked down the arm of a sweet child next to me. Scolded, I was returned to my crib, where I screamed over the singsong sounds of children.

At three years old, I was regularly placed in a playroom with two other children but again and again I scratched at their faces. My punishment remained the same. I'd be taken back to my crib to cry in solitude. And so, I began rocking back and forth on my knees in my crib. My eyes stared ahead as the caretakers whisked by, so the diary says. The doctor examined me, finding me healthy enough but so bored that the rocking had

become my escape. The notes read that when he patted my head, my determined look met his stare.

Perhaps the caretaker who was so good to me wished me a better home. Perhaps she wished to be rid of me. I only know it was my turn for a videotape. All of us children were up for adoption, and since many couples came from other countries, they wanted proof of healthy bodies. The tape came out well. It was the dress, that God-awful pattern of pink pigs frolicking across the dress that enchanted me. I passed a mirror, touched the matching pink bow in my hair and covered my mouth with my hands, as giggles escaped like breaking bubbles. I was so pleased with myself that I smiled through the whole videotape.

After the day of the taping, I began running to the playroom, pulling at toddlers my own age who didn't behave properly. The diary pages, and these my mother won't let me forget, say I moved to the stilted music adding antics of raised eyebrows, flirtatious glances and exaggerated movements. I became a star, playing to a full audience. One caretaker began to bring a hankie to cover her mouth should she need to stifle laughter.

One day a new child came into the playroom. She was sobbing. The caretaker's notes say I rushed to her, saying, "Don't cry. Don't cry." The following day I crushed her with a hug. She cried from the squeeze. My embraces became lighter and eventually she came to sit next to me. We'd hold hands. Moved from my crib and placed in a bed, I

found my new friend in the bed next to mine. We locked eyes until sleep embraced us. My rocking back and forth stopped and never again did I strike out at anyone.

And so, at four years old, I had American visitors. Once again, I wore a colorful dress and pink bow. I remember looking us at dark-haired man and a pretty woman. They talked to me, but I didn't understand their words. I smiled. I was so happy to be back in a dress, and, of course, to be the center of attention. Three days later the woman from America held me in her lap as a doctor gave me a shot. "What a wonderful child," he said. "Not a peep out of her." He laughed, repeated the words in a language I didn't understand. The doctor was not looking, but the woman was, and that's why I think she needs to believe I only imagine memories of the orphanage. You see, Mother placed her hand over mine, for what we both saw in the mirror before us was the reflection of a child, screaming, without letting out a sound.

Once outside of the orphanage, the woman leaned down to my height. I only recognized my name, Sonia, not the other words she spoke. But I saw her tears and patted her face. We walked, at my pace, to a waiting car, which would drive us to the airport, and to my new home. I turned once to see the caretaker's face at the orphanage window. She waved a white hankie at me. I offered a big wave for two, as my friend stood next to her. I turned and held to the woman I learned to call Mother.