



**ANANDA DEVI**

**The Orchid**



To tell the truth, I've had ten children; why should one of them have been so special to me? And yet, so it was. No use denying it. It was the one who shouldn't have arrived and who didn't stay. Don't mistake me: I do love them, one and all, and will go through hell and fire for them—and these are not empty words. God if I had to tell you how many times I nearly died because of something that happened to them, and actually did die a little bit inside, we would be here until tomorrow morning and I wouldn't have any words left in that fat mouth of mine. So I won't. I'll just talk about that one. The fifth one.

The others, yes, there was the clever one, the cheeky one, the demanding one, the jealous one, the inquisitive one, each with a uniqueness that a mother learns to recognise even before they've begun to talk. Just the slant of an eye or the curve of a cheek, the cleft in a chin, the strength of a little hand's grasp were enough for me to know, when they came, what they would be. One of them used to scratch me with tiny pink nails, drawing blood. I looked at them in my arms and smiled



and knew and kept all this knowledge to myself, for of what use is it, you tell me, to be able to map out the road in front of a child from the way it smiles? No use at all. For things will happen, and we just have to make do.

Anyhow, there was so much to do, so much sheer, weary work, to raise them, to feed them, to clothe them, that soon the early insights were almost forgotten, or at least put aside for the exhausting busyness of motherhood.

We were young, Ehmet and I. Back home, in Ezzara, near the sea, we had had a lovely home, small, but bright and airy. We were neither rich nor poor. Like all in-betweeners, we were not satisfied. The call of France was ever present among us. Perhaps because we were on the Mediterranean Sea, we looked ever outwards, towards the invisible coastline of the dream countries. We only had one thought: to go there and make our fortune. The idea of “fortune” was to do with both material riches and with chance, luck. For me, it was perhaps more of the latter. And the need to get away from my in-laws. The idea of being alone with Ehmet, of setting up house on our own like grown-ups, and not as the retarded children we were treated like at home, was impossibly tempting. I imagined our house, how I would decorate it with yellow and blue ceramics I would bring from home, how I would keep it spotlessly clean, how we would go to the cinema at night without the jaundiced eye of an old woman following us as we left like an acid snake slipping over my skin, how my children would always be the best dressed and the most beautiful, and so on—I could not wait to go.

The dreams crumbled soon enough, as dreams do. But not my optimism and happiness. Because, after all, we were indeed free. Exhausted, but free. No matter that the only job Ehmet could get was as a construction worker. No matter that, once the children started coming, I had to add to our income by cleaning other people’s houses. No matter. I still kept our own home spotless, and still dressed my children like princes. The yellow and blue ceramics winked from the wooden shelves. I believed in the future. I never stopped believing, not once. Honest.

We were very much in love, Ehmet and I. I was too young then to know about contraception—whom could I have asked?—and he was too young to care. He could not wait to get me to bed at night and, if he could, during the day as well. Never seemed to have enough. At least, here, we were alone. There was no one to hear or to complain by rapping on the wall.

And so, there was the first son—strong and square-jawed like his father, couldn’t get enough of my breast, like his father—and then, just a little over a year later, another son. And on and on, like clockwork. After the fourth, our neighbours started sniggering when they saw my belly swell. As soon as one child was born, they would shout, in the streets, “When is the next one due, Jamila?” or “Shop still open, Jamila?” I smiled, despite the fact that it looked as if my sexual life was plastered over all my body for everyone to see. I was too happy and too tired to respond. Probably more tired than happy, by the fourth pregnancy in five years, when it looked as if my whole life was a long, hard labour in more ways than one. Anyway, as long as Ehmet would come back from work at night, his body full of aches and pains, his skin tanned brown by the sun, and wrap me in his arms, his nose in my hair, and say, “I was waiting for this all day, Jamila,” I did not mind too much. He had always said he wanted a large family. Yes. Well. He wasn’t the one to feed, bathe,



soothe, and sing to sleep day and night. Clean up their sick and their bums and wash their nappies because at the time we couldn't afford disposable ones. And, during the fast, get up before dawn to have the meal ready: meatballs, couscous, stuffed fish with vegetables, home-made yoghurt and half a dozen sweets, including the notoriously difficult gazelle horns that I had to decorate with tiny tweezers, squinting like a mad woman.

Still, every night before I slept, I listened to the quiet in the apartment. A quiet filled with small noises, Ehmet breathing (he wasn't snoring at the time), the babies whimpering or singing briefly in their dreams, a cat walking outside on the balcony, the wind in the chestnut trees, and my own body sagging a little more every year, and I felt content. Remarkably so, considering. The babies were a treasure, and Ehmet so safe, next to me. It didn't matter that the next day I would be cleaning toilets. It didn't matter, really. As often as I could, I slept with my windows open, thinking the wind sounded like the soft wash of the sea at low tide, and the honey-tinted Ezzara skies had bled into the greyish French ones when no one was looking.

In the morning, Ehmet's fingers would be playing with my hair in his sleep, and mine, combing the very long, thick, dark chestnut strands, and a kind of strange song would come out of his throat. Soon, I knew, the loose fingers would turn into a fist holding tight to my hair and, in one quick movement, he would climb onto me, his mouth searching—and I would hold my breath not to breathe in his musty morning breath—and his body would quickly and roughly find what it was looking for. Strong, strong man.

Later, he would get up, smiling and singing, chirpy like a teenager in love, and I would smile too, in spite of the burning, the yellow and blue ceramics winking, winking, almost mocking.

Back into the morning dance. The babies would all cry at the same time, their little mouths wide open, clamouring for the fullness of my breasts; so much need in such tiny bodies. *Drip-drip* would go the nipples, soaking my nightgown with tepid stickiness. I prepared a cup of chocolate milk for the first and a bottle for the second one. Then I would take the two younger ones and place each at one breast. The tiny one would drink contentedly, but the other one would start kicking and making a fuss because he didn't like to share. I cooed and crooned and calmed him down. By that time the youngest had gone back to sleep, I could change his nappies and put him back in his crib and let him sleep happily for the next three hours, and I would wash the third one and put him in his cot with a few toys, and then I could look after the two oldest, who would be going to the nursery. I was like a well-oiled tool already, but I would really learn to move in auto-pilot when there would be even more children to look after, accomplishing each task with a kind of machine-like efficiency and a totally blank mind. Feed, wash, change, sing, play, clean, cook, smilesmile. The smile stayed on my face like it was cut there by a knife.

Ehmet would be long gone with the lunch I would have packed at dawn. I don't think I ever had a moment alone from the time I had the first baby. I hardly needed to think, except when I was sitting on the toilet and everything came pouring out of me in abundant tears and snot that I couldn't understand or stop, that were just the by-product of weariness, for indeed, I wasn't unhappy.



After the fourth, when we invited some friends, neighbours, and colleagues of Ehmet to our place to see the baby, Ehmet's boss came into the kitchen where I was preparing cakes and tea, and he talked to me in a kindly way.

"Jamila," he said, "this is too difficult for you, and it will get harder as they grow up. Do you know how much money you need in this country to raise so many children?" I was looking down, too shy to acknowledge him. My long hair hid my face, but he moved it away.

"Jamila," he said, "listen to me."

I had to show I was listening. I nodded.

"I will come during the day when Ehmet isn't here and I will explain to you how to stop yourself from having children when you have sex with him."

I went bright red when he said this. I couldn't believe this man was talking like this to me—was mentioning this subject to me. In our family, we never spoke of such things.

"I am trying to help you both," he said. "He will ruin you if you go on like this."

And he did come by one day to explain these things, he told me to ask my gynaecologist for pills or for a diaphragm when I next went to see her; he told me four children were more than enough and that I needed some rest from child-bearing because it would spoil my body and my life. He told me he would come again and explain a few more things.

I didn't follow his advice although it was well-meant. And I got pregnant again.

Ehmet was only too happy. He refused to worry, even when I ventured to tell him that it was enough now and that I was scared of the future. "When your eyes are full of tears I want to drink them," he said. And he did.

How many times did he drink my tears? I can't remember now.

The pain of childbearing became so familiar that I stopped feeling it. Or else, it was so constant, I couldn't remember a life without it. I still smiled, although I saw my looks fade into a pale fleshiness, my once oval face become chin-heavy, my light brown eyes limned with care. Long strands of hair remained in the brush or disappeared into the shower drain. My belly hung down in a shapeless sack. Only my breasts remained full, to the great joy of Ehmet and the babies. I sometimes felt as if I was only alive to feed or to pleasure others. But when these thoughts became too hard to bear I would close my eyes and breathe in the jasmine I had planted on the balcony, the fragrance taking me back to long evening walks along the beach, when fruit-sellers would call out their song and the moon stained all the shadows white. Young, stupid, afraid of everything except the future. When in fact it is the future you should always be afraid of.

The fifth pregnancy, though, was different. It was lighter, the usual morning sickness hardly lasted a week, and I felt a kind of strength coming from it that I hadn't felt before. I thought I was getting used to it, that my body was helping me through the long months. Now I know it was the child itself that was helping me. A warm blood ran through my flesh. I kept Ehmet from touching me by telling him that the doctor had warned of a possible miscarriage. He was so scared of my losing the baby that he controlled his terrible urges. At least to the extent that he contented himself with my hand and left my body alone. I sewed and knitted the baby's clothes, somehow sure it would



be a daughter. My first. I imagined she would be my own, totally unlike her father, not as demanding as the others, the little crying, whining, shouting, commanding things. She would lie quietly in my arms or in her cot and when she saw me, she would smile. Like me. With light brown eyes and dark chestnut hair and oval face. Not square-jawed little men with savage eyes.

And it happened exactly like that. It was a girl. She was born quickly and quietly. So quietly that I thought my heart had stopped as I listened for her first cry. When it came, it was frail and thin, like a birdsong. I was completely overwhelmed, my heart and breasts overflowing with an abundance of love. I held her to me and offered thanks for her. When I looked at her, I was mesmerised.

She had clear skin, pale pink, her hair was golden on her tiny head, her lashes long, her fingers delicate like newborn coral. She was like the babies described in fairy tales. I knew, before she opened her eyes, that they would be golden too. The nurses exclaimed and laughed, saying they had never seen such a beautiful baby.

And I felt she was not wholly mine, that I would not have the right to keep her.

Ehmet and the boys were fascinated. They had never contemplated such a fragile and exquisite thing. They tiptoed around her cot as if she were a sleeping princess, which perhaps she was. People came to see me in the hospital; it was like a miracle birth, which perhaps it was. But when we were alone, my little girl and I, I told her about my dreams. And I told her about my sorrows. She alone would know. She looked at me gravely with her golden eyes and she understood everything.

When we went home, for the first time I was in no hurry to leave the flat. I stayed with her, tried to finish all my other chores to be able to take her to my bed and lie there, looking at her. The other children seemed to feel my need to be alone with her, for they became a little less noisy, a little less quarrelsome. I felt I was living in a dreamland, an oasis I had reached in the middle of the desert, and that for once I was allowed, here, to listen to spring. I called my daughter Zarrah, to remind me of our hometown. Her little body filled with my milk, her cheeks grew rounded, her hair grew quickly, and the colour did not change, remained pale gold. I dressed her in the most exquisite clothes I could make, satin and taffeta and silk trimmed with lace. She was so beautiful that I kept delaying the time when I would have to invite the neighbours and our friends to see her. Ehmet, who wanted to show her off and who doted on her, kept pressing me to organise the feast, but I pleaded tiredness, I said the baby would be upset by so many people, I said that the season was not right, I told him to wait for another month, and then another, and then another.

The days flew past. The baby was so quiet that I hardly ever heard her voice. She would remain in her cot with her eyes wide open, absolutely calm, as if waiting. She looked at the light, followed a bird's flight, and did not seem to be aware of anyone else except me. I sang to her, songs of my past, I remembered my childhood with the sun glazing my skin, and suddenly this place looked terribly drab, terribly sad, and not right for bringing up a miracle child. I began to think of home. I knew there was no way that Ehmet would agree to go back, and with so many children we would be too much of a burden on the family. Still, I dreamt of home and refused to consider raising my daughter in this place. She trusted me.



I even began to think of going back on my own to Ezzara. Leave them all behind, Ehmet and the four boys, as if I didn't care for them when in fact I did love them. Of course. I was perhaps a little crazy. I could only think of protecting her from the eyes all round. I didn't want anyone to see her. It became very important to keep her away from everyone. The world was full of dark eyes.

But Ehmet finally put his foot down. He chose a date for the feast. When I tried to protest, he refused to listen and made love to me more roughly than before. I didn't tell him I suspected that I was pregnant again. I gritted my teeth from the pain and hoped he would remove the baby from my womb. I watched for blood in my panties. I prayed for blood in my panties. I am ashamed to say I even went as far as trying old wives' remedies. Nothing worked. My womb was like a concrete bunker. It held on to the child and nothing could break through. And I would have to expose Zarrah to the greedy, probing eyes of neighbours, friends, and Ehmet's colleagues.

Again, I went through the motions like the gears of some fantastic engine. I prepared everything, meatballs, stuffed vine leaves, seafood pastillas, three large legs of lamb that cooked for five hours on slow fire in a heady juice of spices and honey, and all the sweets that Ehmet thought his guests would like, including the awful gazelle horns. But I took no pleasure in the lacy pastries, in the smell of saffron pistils, in the warmth of my fragrant cooking. I wanted it all to be over so that I could take Zarrah in my arms and dream of her future. Nothing else mattered. Still, the meat stewed and the fish fried and the rice steamed. I kneaded and rolled and churned and sweated. A drop of blood fell into the couscous sauce: I had bitten my lips without knowing. Before, I would have thrown everything away and started again. Now, like an evil witch from old tales, I smiled at the thought that they would eat my blood.

The day went in a haze. People came with gifts. They smiled falsely, spoke stupidly, and looked at Zarrah longingly. I saw their faces change when they saw her. Surprise, wonder, admiration. And envy.

I had covered her hair with a lace bonnet. At least, they would only see a tiny part of her. But the women, dear God, they moved the coverlet away, they lifted her little dress, they pawed at her plump limbs, they caressed her cheeks, they wouldn't leave her alone. They wanted to touch her and to see her and to hold her. I wanted to scream.

Ehmet's boss was there. He came with his wife, a thin woman who looked older than him. She wore expensive clothes and jewels. She brought a beautiful dress for Zarrah and a large potted plant for me. An orchid. I put it on a table where it took up all the space. I tried to show some pleasure although my head was aching and my teeth chattering with fear. He shook his head when he saw me. "Jamila," he said, "you'll have to stop this some day." His wife smirked: "Why should she? Some women are made to have children. That's all they are useful for." I knew she was mocking me, but I only wanted them to leave.

"Can we see her?" she asked. I felt the panic growing inside me like a fever. "She's sleeping," I said.

"We'll only look at her," she said. Ehmet rolled his eyes furiously at me.

I had to take them to my room. Zarrah was lying in her cot, but she was not sleeping. When they bent over her, she looked at them seriously, as if she knew who they were. They both stayed there



a long time. I was leaning against the wall in order not to fall down. Then, the woman put out a hand and moved the little lacy bonnet away from her head. Her hair shone golden in the light.

The woman turned towards me.

“I can see why you don’t want people to see her,” she said, and left.

Later, when all of them had gone, when the kitchen looked as if it had been hit by a storm, when Ehmet was sleeping on the living room sofa and the children were in their rooms, I went back to my room and picked Zarrah up.

I stayed with her throughout the night. By morning, I had to tell Ehmet. She was long dead by then.

Time passes, that’s a tired truth alright. There were more children. Five more. Ten in all, minus one. All boys. Little Ehmet lookalikes, full of energy and life. None had golden hair and eyes.

I lived on. I coped. Built our life on this one lie. Of Zarrah, nothing remained. Except for the huge orchid the woman had given me, and that kept on flowering year after year after year, birth after birth after birth, the stalk bending and swaying and sagging under the fat, juicy, fleshy, monstrous flowers that would not die.

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**Ananda Devi** is of Andhra Pradesh descent and was in Mauritius. At the age of 15, she won a prize in à Radio France Internationale short story competition. She went on to study at the School for Oriental and African Studies in London, where she obtained a PhD in Social Anthropology. In 1977, she published a collection of short stories *Solstices*. After spending several years in Brazzaville in the Congo, she moved to France in 1989, the same year in which her first novel *Rue la poudrière* was published. This was followed by more novels: *Le Voile de Draupadi* in 1993, *L’Arbre fouet* in 1997 and, in 2000, *Moi, l’interdite*, which received the Prix Radio France du Livre de l’Océan Indien. Her novel, "Eve de ses décombres", won the Prix des cinq continents de la Francophonie in 2006, as well as several other prizes. It was adapted for the cinema by Sharvan Anenden and Harrikrishna Anenden. In 2007, Devi received the Certificat d’Honneur Maurice Cagnon du Conseil International d’Études Francophones. She has since won other literary prizes, including the Prix du Rayonnement de la langue et de la littérature française of the Académie Française.