

The Certificate

By Ruwanthie de Chickera

I have a few questions that no one can answer. So, I have stopped asking them.

I don't have a problem understanding things. I understand lots of things. I understand ... things better than most kids my age. My mom says I understand most things better than her.

But she says that probably because ... she can't read, you know... And, of course, because she's my mom... and all...

But hey... It's important to try and understand things for yourself. That is what I think.

Like... I think kids and adults live in different worlds. And it's not that one world has toys and balloons and colours and is full of shorter, lispier people and stuff ... no, it's like a world of different rules. One set of rules for kids and the adults have different rules for the very same thing. It's like kids are taught about a world that adults don't really, really believe in, you know...

Like we learn in school that policemen are good and the governments look after people, and that it's bad to lie and that everyone has equal rights and that every child is special and la di da...

Well, nothing about my life has been like this. It was confusing for a very long time. Then I just decided that adults lie. They lie all the time. Once you figure that out – all this makes sense.

My mom always takes me with her when she has to go to meet people to *'sort out our lives.'* This generally means a lot of time spent in queues. And a lot, a lot a lott of time filling out forms and writing letters and then telling our story.... Over and over and over again...

My mother never seems to get tired of telling our story. I am frankly just sick of it. But my mom, she knows how to tell our story – she knows the voice, the expression all of it. It's like switching a button.

'So... tell us your story...'

'Click'.

Oh man.... she's repeated that same old story so many times to so many people ...

I watch her. Her mouth speaks the words but I can see her heart leaving her body. It just leaves. And she becomes very, very small and very, very ... empty. She's been getting the same answers to the questions she has been asking for all of my life. That is more than 14 years. But she still asks these questions. She asks all of them. Every single one. Just in case one of them will be answered differently.

My mom's a clever lady. She can't read letters but she can read faces. My mother knows what someone is going to say before they say it. (maybe even before they know it). This is probably why

she talks without stopping. Because she tries to get in as many words as possible before they say what she knew they were going to say all along.

Me? I have just stopped asking the questions which I know no one will answer.

Whenever we go out to 'sort out our lives', we take our 'documents file' with us. And before and after every meeting mama gets me to count the papers in the file and put them all in order. There are 63. Without the photocopies.

The documents file is the most important thing in our house. Most important. Mama always says, if there is a bomb or a flood or anything, take the documents file and run.

My mom is dead proud of me. I keep winning all kinds of certificates in school. I have a whole pile of them, for almost every subject. Studying comes easy to me. I remember one of my certificates was for a speech I gave on my country. I spoke of this country like I belonged here... My teacher said it was brilliant. But she sounded more sad than proud and she couldn't look me in the eye.

When I was smaller, I used to make my own certificates. 'this is to certify that (XX) completed (YY) on this day.' And I would sign it. My mother got certificates for all sorts of things she did for us. My father got certificates for smiling and making jokes. This was to encourage him to do these things. My father is a horrible man. I wish she would leave him. But she says that our problems will be bigger if we were on our own. I don't quite see how. But my mother says that until the laws treat women the same way they treat men, women will always have to keep a man with them.

These are the kind of 'grown up things' that I know about.

I worry about my younger sister. I love her very much and I would not change her for anything else except that this world is so cruel to girls.

My sister is very funny. She has a very funny understanding of the world. She believes that countries are different colours. Because in the world map in her class room, all the countries are different colours. I tried to explain to her that this was not really how the world was divided. But she imagines that from out of space, if you look at the world, you really see all these different countries in different colours. She loves to tell people that our father came from a green country and our mother is from a purple country, where we live. Where we were born. She tells everyone that this is her country. My sister is still young.



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My mom and I fought the other day. I switched the documents file with my certificates file. The documents file has 63 documents – and it’s a really good file. But my certificate file now has over 81 certificates. And I am scared I might lose some.

“Idiot child, what are you doing?”

I need a bigger file mama... I got three more certificates from school this term...

The documents file!

It’s a bigger file, I need a bigger file for my certificates...

Your certificates don’t matter.

You’re saying that because you are stupid.

You are stupid. All those certificates don’t mean a thing ...

Then she hit me, and she cried.

Later she said she was sorry. She said she had been wrong. My certificates meant I was easily the best in my class, in my school, in the whole district, even in the country ... she said I could one day become the best in the whole world...

And as she spoke I saw her heart leave her body ... And I realised this happens when she cannot bear to hope.

That night... when she was busy... when she was... when my dad and she were arguing ... I found out what I already knew. It was easy. I knew the documents file and certificates file better than anyone. But I went through them both carefully. Just to be sure.

And I was right. And my mother was right. I had certificates that told me I could write and make things and play the flute and run fast and remember better, count better, reason better, the best in my class, school... But I didn't have a certificate that told me I was born. I didn't have a certificate to say this was my country. Without those, none of the rest mattered.

Sometimes I get tired of the lies. I sometimes want to tell my teacher that what she is teaching us about this country, the world, is not true.

Without these certificates you can be treated like you are not really a human being. I have seen this happening to people in the queues. I have seen it happening to my mother. She has not let it happen to me yet.

We are taught by adults to say the truth and to be kind and responsible. But the truth is that I am a human being and kindness is to tell my mother that I will be always treated like I am a human being and responsibility is to give me a certificate saying that I am a human being so that my mother and I can stop standing in queues and filling out forms and repeating our story and being shouted at by strangers and being beaten by my dad... and just stop worrying and just start living because really, really, really, all these problems will stop. They will stop for us, forever. We don't need help with any of our other problems. Any other problem I can figure out how to solve. I am not afraid. I just need someone to confirm that I am born.

What in the world makes this so difficult to admit?

I'm sorry. I asked one of the questions I promised myself never to ask.