

The Gandhi Gene

By Rebecca Morn

DEDICATION

For Stephanie, always.

Part 1

Upbringing

The child's first year of life is unfortunately still
an abyss of mysteries for the psychologist.

Jean Piaget, The First Year of Life of the Child

Part of the reason for the ugliness of adults, in a
child's eyes, is that the child is usually looking
upwards, and few faces are at their best when
seen from below.

George Orwell, "Such, Such Were the Joys"

Memory is history recorded in our brain,
memory is a painter, it paints pictures of the past
and of the day.

*Grandma Moses, Grandma Moses, My Life's
History*

Prologue

Beginnings

Autumn, 2030 C.E.

When she tried very hard, the earliest thing Maya could remember was one particular incident when she was extremely young, less than a year old.

Some are of the considered opinion that young babies aren't really capable of forming complex memories. Maybe so, Maya thought, much later on when she was old enough to learn that what she remembered was, at best, highly improbable.

In her way of always weighing carefully all the possible alternatives and allowing that she might be mistaken, Maya did consider that perhaps she'd combined details from an actual memory with mere daydreams or imagination. Or maybe it wasn't a memory at all, but just a dream. Or something imagined enough times that it took on the apparent reality of a recollection—like those ancient defunct and disproven theories about “recovered memories.”

Considering precisely what she remembered, she often doubted this memory, but yet everything remained so very vivid.

She'd been sitting in her highchair. That part was quite clear, right down to the little Sammy Star and Carla Comet and Peter Planet stickers on the wide, white plastic tray in front of her.

The time of year was autumn, probably late, because part of her recollections included the scent of dried oak leaves and that peculiar loamy smell of moist decay that only fall breezes carried. Also, there was a window nearby, open slightly in the unseasonable warmth, and through it, her young eyes saw nearly naked tree branches, dark brown and scratching occasionally at the glass in the light gusts.

What's more, she had a tickle of wondering what had happened to the big round orange thing on the kitchen counter—the thing with glowing eyes and a happy, crooked grin. The thing that put an interesting, earthy—yet sweet—smell into the air. At the risk of adding interpretation to her memory, Maya guessed in later years that what she was missing, as her eight month old self, was the Jack-o-lantern. The face she remembered was one her father had carved, with only minor variations, every year of her childhood... Every year that is until there were no more family Halloweens.

The thing that pinned down the year though was the very clear recollection of the room she'd been in. It was a small kitchenette/family-room combination, with her chair just outside the large sink and serving area peninsula. It was atop this peninsula, a wide expanse of gray faux granite, that the Jack-o-lantern had resided until recently.

The television, which she couldn't quite focus upon fully with her young eyes, was an old HDTV set, a cheap projection model that only had the most basic of voice command controls and little household computer integration beyond the barest minimum to interface with the media services and to serve as a display for the house server. Another interpretation, but she still remembered that TV, even after it had been replaced with a newer one. One corner of it had served as a very convenient place to pull herself up, when she was just learning to walk.

Maya also remembered some things scattered here and there on the floor, the typical clutter of a family with a new young baby. A knitted, pastel-colored blanket here. Some rattles and colorful blocks there. A pad of paper and a handful of crayons on the coffee table in front of the upholstered sofa, the one with the scratchy fabric that Maya never liked laying upon because it was so rough on her skin.

All this helped identify the year, because by time there was another Jack-o-lantern, it had been on the dining room table—in a completely different house, further north of Pittsburgh, most of the way towards Butler, actually. For a time, she hadn't even been certain this other place existed until she'd checked the family photo album. Pictures from the house server archives, digital family photos, showed views of precisely the same room she remembered—right down to the scatter of toys and baby jetsam.

Those photos had shown what she'd looked like back then, too: A round little baby displaying the usual variety of baby expressions—smiling, laughing, fretful, crying. Small ears and a small, round chin. Maya was somewhat surprised to discover that her hair back then had been thin, and the blonde of pale, sun-bleached straw. Most of all, one noticed the huge green eyes with little brown flecks—eyes that even in later childhood still looked too large for her face—and which always stared directly at the camera in the most disconcerting fashion. Maya got her eyes from her mother, it was said, and Maya hoped that by time she was in her teens, they'd seem rather more proportional and... well, normal. Maya thought her mother was very pretty and hoped very much to end up looking like her eventually. Hearing that she also had her father's weak chin didn't help in this respect.

There was more to her early memory than just a place though. In one pudgy fist, Maya was gripping something. What? A large, soft-handled spoon, right? Maybe, she wasn't sure. Besides the Sammy Star, Carla Comet, and Peter Planet stickers, there were also some smears of golden-beige food on the white high chair tray. Her fingers were sticky, and so was her face.

In later years, Maya wondered if in fact this particular memory was why she never could stand having anything sticky or dirty on her hands and face. And she'd always hated the taste and smell of applesauce, to the point of nausea.

There was shouting, she remembered. She wondered why this, among all her various experiences as a baby, was the earliest she'd deem worthy to record in her developing little mind.

Her mother and father shouting. Mostly her father doing the shouting.

For all her remarkable memory at such an early age, she had no idea exactly what they were saying. Didn't have the vocabulary back then, she supposed, and so the words just didn't stick. They were just noises, vocalizations with as much sense as her own baby-talk chatter.

Angry is angry, and even in a foreign language, anybody can tell when someone else is mad.

* * *

Mom had been working, as she did most days. Slaved to the house computer, the old HDTV had a screen full of squiggles, arranged in rows on an expanse of white—words, Maya later realized. Words in sentences and paragraphs and pages. Her soft voice would be talking, and the rows of squiggles would slowly grow, filling the screen. Every now and then, she would pause, issue some commands, and the stuff on the screen would change.

Mom was writing her stories, Maya knew later, the murder mysteries which were her pride and joy. Most of the time, her mother used the voice interface, occasionally sitting, but more often pacing the room. She was a woman of about average height, about 165 cm tall. Her face was thin, with a sharp nose. She had small ears like Maya's, and because she seemed to be a little self-conscious about them, for as long as Maya knew her, she'd always worn her reddish-brown hair cut straight and reaching just to the tops of her shoulders, hiding those tiny ears. With her rather slender build, later on in Maya's childhood she'd made jokes about buying her clothes from the teen-aged boys' categories of the online stores. Given her preference for denim and flannel, at least while Maya had known her, it could just as well have been true. Her reddish-brown hair, green eyes—like her daughter's—and fair skin with a few freckles here and there all combined to betray Jennifer McVeigh's Hyland family Scottish-Irish ancestry.

Of course, Maya's father's family was also mostly Irish in origin, too, but George McVeigh didn't much look the part. He was about ten centimeters taller than Maya's mother, but outweighed her by nearly twenty kilos—about half of that muscle from high school football muscle-building, and about half a bit of a paunch from a mostly sedentary adult life thereafter. The earliest thing she remembered noticing about her father wasn't his brown eyes or his scratchy beard, nor his bland all-the-same gray/blue/brown business suits—but his receding hairline and the way it seemed to spread like a slow-moving stain, only in reverse, with the dark brown hair gradually giving way to pinkish skin (which sunburned easily). The divots above his temples just kept getting bigger and bigger... and the evening Maya noticed the additional bald spot at the crown of his head—and had lacked the diplomacy to avoid saying anything about it—had been a rather unpleasant one involving angry scowls and no after-dinner dessert.

On the other hand, her father's jaw-line beard, sans moustache, was fairly stylish for current times. Further, it did an admirable job of concealing his weak chin and many of the old dimpled scars left as souvenirs of teenage years plagued by acne that didn't respond to medication.

Anyway, whenever Daddy was off at work and Mom was at home writing, if Maya needed anything—food, changing, attention, anything—it would be provided, but as often as not, her mother's transcription never even paused as the diaper was expertly removed and replaced, or Maya held to breast to suck. Or even, as in this case in her earliest memory of all, when Maya was being fed some of her earliest soft foods.

Interestingly, Maya's mother even sometimes hauled out an old keyboard—a decade old QWERTY model—and would enter text on that, tap-tap-tapping away. Maya knew this, because occasionally her mother had done this to help keep quiet when she thought Maya was sleeping. Other times though, Mom just seemed to prefer typing over talking. Until Maya's teacher in fourth grade, she hadn't known personally anyone else who typed regularly, or with any particular skill or speed. Oh, almost everybody could operate a full-sized keyboard in a pinch, even if reduced to two finger hunt-and-peck style, but speed-typing was a dying talent for the most part.

There were several things Maya knew she shouldn't know, regarding these early experiences. When she thought about what she thought or imagined she knew, this was the source of her self-doubt. For that matter, it was the source of all the doubts regarding whether the memory was real in the first place.

She also suspected this was why she kept getting lost in the details of her memory, and all things connected to it, including stuff that reached forward through time towards present day. Partly because she didn't really want to think about what she suspected was supposed to be impossible, and partly because her earliest recollection was not at all a pleasant one.

Maya really liked the way Mom was when she was writing, of this she never had the least doubt. No, it wasn't how her mother treated her or anything, nor how she behaved or acted or anything like that.

It was how Mom felt.

A sense of focus, of ideas and words slowly shaping themselves, a flowing. Organization and careful concentration, and yet at the same time a simple joy in being creative. It was work, and the farthest thing from it, at the same time. It was a labor of pure satisfaction and artistic expression, words shaping themselves into a pattern, a plot, a coherent story.

Every now and then, there'd be some problem or difficulty, and Maya's mother would halt and pace uncertainly, chewing on her thumbnail in that way she always did when she was thinking really hard. Even these moments were okay, because the aha! that eventually followed was so wonderful that occasionally both Maya and her mother found themselves laughing together.

Maya loved being nearby when her mother worked.

How Maya could know or sense or detect these things, she had no idea. It made no sense.

Maya seemed to know other things, too. She was aware that Mom sometimes felt guilty, and further, Maya was pretty sure it was mostly about her. Sometimes Mom wondered if it was okay to be writing her stories, if instead she should be paying more attention to Maya. The guilt went further than that, but this was the main focus.

Maya truly hadn't minded the writing one bit, and wished she'd had some way to communicate this back then.

Her first words, however, were another two months away, give or take, and despite being an extraordinarily fast learner, it'd be another six months after that before she could craft fully coherent sentences.

Mom's guilt wasn't just about paying attention to Maya, though. Maya's mother had held a "regular" job up until just a few months before Maya's birth. She used to be an Actuary, a profession which, as Maya later discovered, had nothing to do with acting, or canaries, or "being

actual”—all of which had figured prominently in young Maya’s initial theories as to the nature of her mother’s old career.

No, actuaries were involved with the insurance business, rather like the way her father’s job of ‘Broker’ had nothing to do with breaking things either. In time, Maya discovered that actuaries were involved with calculating numbers related to insurance—premiums, risks, payouts, and so on. And brokers negotiated deals, as an agent, between others; in her father’s case, bundling insurance packages to be offered to groups and companies and the like. (This also explained all the old and increasingly out-of-style bland business suits in buried deep in Mom’s clothes closet.)

It sounded deadly dull to her, and knowing how her mother felt about her old career, Maya was certain it had to be even more dull than sitting in a classroom with absolutely nothing to read, which was her nearest point of personal comparison.

Back to that day... High chair. Apple sauce. Mom had spent the entire day on a creative burn, working from morning right on through to the early November dusk.

Then Daddy had come home late. He’d had a very bad day, apparently. He dropped his computer bag near the front door with a thud, and shuffled slowly into the kitchenette/family-room area. His necktie was askew and his hair—what remained of it—stood up straight in places as if he’d spent the afternoon pulling at it in frustration—which he had been, Maya was sure.

Daddy stood in the entrance to the room blinking blearily, watching Mom continue a steady stream of nonstop dictation.

Mom was so into what she was doing, she didn’t even notice him there at first. A minute passed, then two.

Daddy’s tiredness and frustration slowly transformed into anger. And jealousy. Also—in a place deep down inside himself that even Maya wasn’t sure he knew it was there—terrible sadness and disappointment. Something having to do with missed opportunities. Being left behind. Feeling like time was blowing by like a stiff autumn wind, never to return, with the darkness of winter and endings coming into inevitable view.

Words were spoken. They started calmly enough, but there was a tension so palpable, Maya just sat there in her high-chair, dumbstruck.

Mom and Daddy went into their bedroom and closed the door.

Maya knew even then, when they were in that room, sometimes they were very happy and joyful and... well, other, complicated things that she couldn't understand, save that they felt really, really excited, too. Not this time.

Mom's joy of creativity and writing had vanished even before they went into the bedroom, leaving a sick sheen of guilt and a little fear, along with a lot of shame. Daddy started talking, Maya could hear his voice, and although it started out relatively even and measured, she could tell it was tight with rage.

After a minute of uninterrupted talk from her father, Maya felt her mother begin to feel a little bit angry, too. Cheated. Sad. Disappointed.

Maya wondered if it was because Daddy wanted Mom to experience some of the same emotions he did, and so said things to try to make her feel angry, sad, and disappointed. Like he expected her to mirror him.

There was a darkness, a black feeling of hopelessness descending on Mom, and right around this time, Maya began to cry. Quietly, however—very quietly. Another of Maya's habits was she'd always been a soft crier, to the point where her parents had moved her bassinette into their bedroom for the first few months because she never woke them from her room across the hall.

Daddy was becoming more angry, due in part to Mom's lack of response... and Maya felt this, too. A sense of a knot in her stomach. A tightness in her throat and in her head. Her little jaw clenched, along with her fists. It was like she wanted to swing at something, or run, or yell, only it wasn't she who wanted it.

Mom finally spoke. Maya focused on her, then. The guilt and shame were fading... No, it was being pushed and shoved into the background, quite deliberately. The despair was as strong as ever, but it was being eclipsed rapidly by anger, a mirror to her father's ire—perhaps the very thing he'd been trying for in the first place. Maya's mother almost never raised her voice, but this time she did, working up slowly to it.

Back and forth it went, anger feeding anger. It was like a small fire—one person taking it, stoking it a little, then handing it back to the other, who in turn built it still higher, before returning it to the first.

Or like two mirrors placed parallel to one another, reflecting each other into infinity.

The knot in Maya's little midsection kept tightening, the sense of pressure in her head kept building. She knew she might've cried more loudly at this point, if not for the fact her throat was so closed off with pain and anguish, it was all she could do to breathe.

Her vision then began to fade, dimming first from the sides like the tunnel-vision of fainting. The room disappeared from view, the television, the toys and blankets, the high-chair... and finally, Sammy Star and Carla Comet, with Peter Planet fading last of all.

Maya saw her parents then, only it was like seeing them both at once, from two different points of view at once. She was inside them, in a way.

Her father was in a towering rage. His hands were clenched at his sides, and he was leaning belligerently over Maya's mother, who sat perched on the side of their bed, jeans-covered legs crossed at the ankle and flannel-sleeved arms crossed under her small breasts. Mom was very angry too, but she was also a little bit afraid, and literally shaking with the intensity of the emotions in her.

Maya could see all the details of her parents' room—the white chenille bedspread, the cedar chest at the bottom of the bed. Mom's make-up table and dresser on one side, Daddy's larger dresser and suit credenza over on the other wall.

Her father had nothing but the anger in him now, the other stuff pushed down so far that it might as well not exist. Maya shifted more of her attention to her mother, which was preferable anyway—because she didn't like feeling her father's black rage, nor did she like seeing her mother looking so upset.

The downside of this was it felt like Daddy was yelling at her, at Maya now. His round face was red, and there were flecks of spit on his lips. When his hands weren't clenched at his sides, he was shoving a pointed finger at her—at Mom.

Maya still had no idea what he was saying, but that really didn't matter.

Mom said something then, fairly low and quiet. Maya felt the words, the vibration they made, but had no idea what it was about. The emotion they conveyed consisted of anger and self-righteousness, as well as a peculiar sense that she was somehow crossing an important line in a very big way.

It must've hit home, because Maya's father stopped in mid-splutter, his eyes going wide and the color draining from his face.

Mixed feelings in Mom now, of both satisfaction and wondering if she'd gone too far.

Maya—and her mother—sensed the blur of motion first, but were unable to react or do anything to stop the blow. Her father backhanded her across the mouth, hard.

She felt the knuckle of his middle finger crushing Mom’s upper lip against her teeth, causing it to split and her front teeth to loosen slightly in their sockets. His thumb struck her nose painfully, with a deep burning sensation that would soon become the flow of blood.

Even more, Maya felt her mother’s amazed shock. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before, not ever.

Worse yet, Daddy got a look on his face like he was both scared of what he did and as if he really, really wanted to do it again.

The “do it again” part seemed the stronger of the two.

For the first time in her very young life, Maya shrieked.