

THE CERTIFICATE
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Draft only

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, lisping 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 lottt 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’.

It’s like that.

Oh man.... she’s repeated that same old story so many times to so many people that we know we will never ever met again ...

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 people’s 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 the person says what she knows they were going to say from the beginning.

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 documents file and put them all in order. There are 63 documents. Without the photocopies.

The documents file is the most important thing in our house. Most important. My mom always says, if there is a bomb or a storm or anything, first pick up the documents file.

My mom is dead proud of me. I keep winning all kinds of certificates in school. I have a whole pile of them. I have certificates for almost every subject I have studied. Because 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 she were on her own. I don’t quite see how. Sharing a house with him is so difficult. But my mother says that until the laws of countries 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.

My mom and I fought the other day. About my certificate file. I tried to switch 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 hit me. And that she was sorry

she said that my certificates didn't mean anything. She said she had been wrong. That they meant that I was easily the best in my class, in my school, in the whole district, 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 ... like I have watched it leave her body so many times when she tells our story to strangers with cold eyes. And I realised then that my mother's heart leaves when it cannot bear to hope.

I immediately had a question. And also immediately, I knew it was a question I should never ask.

So I found out for myself, 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 better than anyone in the family. I knew my 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 cello and run fast and remember better, count better, reason better, the best in my class, school and beyond... But I didn't have a certificate that told me that I was born. I didn't have a certificate to say I was from this country. And without those, none of the rest mattered.

Sometimes I get tired of the lies. I love the fact that I am in a good school. But I sometimes want to tell the teacher that what she is teaching the class about this country, and about the world, is not true.

Without these certificates it does not matter if you are a human being. 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.

This is one of those places where children's rules and adult rules begin to part.

Because 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 assure 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. Silly me. Sorry...

THE END

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The Certificate – a monologue

Based on interviews conducted with stateless children around the world, by the Institute and its partners.

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