

# *The Rocking Cradle*

JUNED SUBHAN

*for Sharon Marriott*

It was bizarre when it happened to them, like a sign of something else to come, as if it was only the beginning, as if they should have foreseen it, but didn't, and were foolish not to.

It was in the stuffiness of their untidy bedroom on the ground floor, in the sweaty, sultriness of it, whilst it was thundering outside in the middle of August—hot, humid air billowing through the trees, the jagged flash of lightning, the sound of rumbling—that Joseph and his wife Marcia were squabbling on their bed, clawing at each other, snapping their teeth, making grunting, squawking noises like beasts. Marcia tried to slide up over her husband to strangle him, squeeze his throat tight, till he was unable to breath and would choke. They were exhausted from arguing, which had started early in the evening at Marcia's parent's home, where they'd gone for supper. Marcia had worn a long, satin dress whereas Joseph wore a plain jacket, slacks, his bronzy hair brushed back, and at the dining table when Marcia's mother was laying the food on the table—roasted duck, steamed vegetables, pancakes, and shrimp dumplings—they swatted flinty remarks at each other. It began subtly but progressed into something more crude, sadistic. They shouted at each other across the table whilst drinking blood-coloured wine. At one point, Joseph stood up and grabbed the table with one hand and with the other, he pointed at Marcia with a fork in an intimidating way as if he were going to

stab her with it, or throw it at her face like a spear. He'd only clenched his teeth, the table shaking a little. He sat back down, and Marcia's parents were shaken but silent throughout it all—Marcia's elderly father quietly seated in the corner, his eyes fixed on his plate. "I can't believe you insulted my parents like that!" Marcia said in the car, a grey Lincoln, on their way home. "You're not getting away with this!" Joseph didn't reply and he glanced at the sky, watching the flares of lightning erupting behind the clouds.

Their bodies turned glowingly red. Marcia's pink lipstick was smudged and her lips were bulging. Her gown was crinkled up above her waist. Joseph was perspiring, and he was holding his wife, shaking her—their sticky bodies slapping against each other like hunks of wet meat, and he was aware that his body was losing its taut definition, as if dissolving. Marcia was afraid that she might fall over and knock the lamp over, and break a part of her body—her neck might snap in two or she might end up with a twisted ankle. "What's wrong with you!" Joseph bawled, and she was on the verge of tears, telling him how vile he was as a person, that he was a son of a bitch, a rogue, an ungrateful bastard. He was about to pull her dark, curly hair when they heard a whining—was it a baby? The cries of a newborn baby? Marcia turned her head, spit dripping down the side of her cheek. She pushed Joseph away from her, kicking him in the groin with her knee. He curled up in a fetal position and groaned. "You pathetic bastard!" she said, flattening down her dove-grey gown which was ripped. "Look what you've done! What's the matter now, you can't move!" She slipped out of the bed, and Joseph was exhaling rapidly, an intense pain slivering up his spine, then receding.

Marcia walked to the end of the bedroom. She distinctively heard a weak mewling along with Joseph cursing in the background. The wooden floor was cold beneath the soles of her feet. She yanked open the thick, crimson curtains which she'd handmade herself, spending hours sewing pieces of fabric together, pricking the tip of her index finger with the needle. She saw the darkness outside, the heavy rain pattering down on the glass and the reflection of her own face—smeary and ill-defined. But looking down, she saw it, a tiny little creature brushing up against the French window—what was it? A raccoon? A ferret? A cat? A puppy? It was drenched in rain, its fur matted and Marcia was startled by it. Joseph continued to curse her though his throat was sore from all the shouting.

She unbolted the French windows and the sluggish, putrid smelling wind hit her face. She was stippled with rain. Without hesitating she quickly plucked the creature up from the floor and held it in her arms. She still couldn't tell what it was exactly. It was small with a truncated tail and she stroked it, running her fingers through its knotted, grimy fur. "How did you come here, sweetheart?" she said gently. Marcia shut the French windows and she felt the creature's heart beating rapidly, she felt it pressing against her skin as if it were terrified. It seemed to almost cling to her, as though it knew instinctively who she was and didn't want to be separated from her.

"What on earth are you holding!" Joseph said. He sat on the edge of the bed, bent forward. "What ugly thing have you dragged in from outside!" and the creature growled as soon as Joseph said that, perking its head up, its ears twitching and its eyes widening into two big, radiant balls as it stared fiercely at Joseph, snapping its pointed teeth,

claws peeking out, but Marcia wasn't scared by it—she patted its head and it calmed down and ceased growling. The creature squirmed in her arms, tickling her. She laughed, which made Joseph angry—how could she have brought something so hideous, so unsightly into the house and titter, saying in a cooing way, “Oh, hold on now, are you hungry, have you been starving my poor thing, has no one fed you?” As she was stroking it, he became even more incensed when he saw that it was rubbing its paw on her breast, over her nipple, which was pasty and visible under her gown.

“Throw that ghastly thing back outside!” Joseph sputtered, licking his cracked lips. “Why did you bring it in?”

Marcia chose not to answer him. She ignored her husband and imagined that he wasn't near her. She patted the creature with a towel, drying it, and it hummed as she wiped its tail with the towel, and Marcia was mesmerised by its peculiarity, she was unable to take her gaze off the creature. But Joseph had always deplored animals, mainly the ones people chose to keep in their homes and show them love. He got up from the bed, marched up to his wife and seized her by the arm, frowning at her with his dark, droopy eyes and said, “What do you think you're doing! Did you hear what I said?” He was unnerved by being so close to the creature and the way it glared at him. Joseph noticed that its nose was curved with two tiny holes to enable it to breathe through, but the more he looked at it, the more tense he became.

Suddenly, he tried to grab it off her. The creature leapt out of her embrace, hissing. “Leave it alone, you bastard!” she screamed. “Don't you dare do anything to it!” The creature darted under Joseph's legs,

across the room, Marcia was astonished at how fast it ran, and it bumped into the wall, then hid under the armchair. They were both pursuing it and she grappled with him, until Joseph fell flat on the floor. His nose bled and his left hand was grazed—four straight slits—where the creature must have clawed at him when it jumped out of Marcia’s arms. “I told you not to touch it!” she said, stepping over him, to the armchair, where the creature was curled underneath, shivering, its eyes dilated and its breathing hoarse. Squatting on the floor, she extended her arm, but the creature moved back a little, and she said softly, “Don’t be scared my baby, I won’t hurt you. Nothing’s going to happen to you.” She stroked its ear to comfort it, to reassure it that she meant no harm. It came to her and she held it close to herself, and kissing it she felt a stab in her stomach knowing that it was scared. “No one will ever do that to you again,” she said. She left the bedroom, and Joseph heard her walking up the stairs. Unsteadily, he rose from the floor. His nose had ceased to bleed.

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And what she vowed she wouldn’t do, Marcia did, violating the promise both she and Joseph had made together, the promise they said they would keep until their deaths—she remembered the day she’d made the promise, clutching onto Joseph as if she were terrified, saying it over and over I won’t, I won’t, I won’t. But she inserted the rusty key into the door. She’d forgotten where they’d hidden the key, and she rummaged around in the storage cupboard where she found it sealed in an old manila envelope which was folded. The door creaked as it opened. Joseph could hear it from downstairs, because the Room was directly above their bedroom. The creature twitched, flicking its

tail. Marcia inhaled and held her breath, her heart beating forcefully as she gazed at the Room.

It was dark; she switched the light on, then walked in. The Room was totally bare, apart from a wooden rocking cradle in the centre and a chest of drawers in the corner. The window was boarded up; no sunlight could seep in, and it was draped in red curtains that she'd stitched together. The Room felt airless to her and the floor was covered in dust. Her heartbeat quickened as she drew close to the rocking cradle. The creature exposed its claws, but her breathing returned to normal on seeing that the cradle was empty. There was only a white blanket spotted with dark blood. She placed the creature in the cradle—its claws were hooked on to her gown, it didn't want to let go of her—but she stroked its head, pulling the blanket over it, and it soon fell asleep.

"You promised you wouldn't," Joseph said angrily, standing outside the Room, about fifteen feet away from her. He'd cleaned his nose. "Do you remember *what* you said?"

There was silence.

"It's gone to sleep," Marcia said, turning the light off. "I don't want you to go near it." It was as though she were warning him, warning him of the consequences if he did.

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Joseph saw his wife become enraptured with the creature the day after it arrived, and the way she cajoled it and held it close to her chest, made him shudder. It was an odd animal. He couldn't work out what it was exactly, if it was male or female, and where it had come from or why it had come to them. Sometimes, it could be mistaken for a cat

because it was no bigger than one, or it could have been a wild cub of some kind, he just didn't know. It had thick, soft fur which would curiously change colour from blue-grey, to black, to golden-brown and only its tail was striped. It didn't bark or mewl but sort of whined and hissed. It had no whiskers. Its teeth were fang-like—thin and pointed—and its eyes were of indeterminate colour but they were large and intense, and they shimmered like two moons. However, it was its paw-prints that really mystified Joseph as they were of no particular shape.

Marcia wasn't perturbed by not knowing what kind of animal it was. "What a funny thing you are," she said, the following morning when the thundery weather had settled and she took it out of the cradle. It was wide awake and playing with the blanket, licking the spots of blood as if it was trying to draw the dry blood out from the fabric. Marcia had to snatch the blanket off the creature. It looked at her in a leering way. She took the creature in her arms to stroke it and kiss it. It stirred and made a quiet, droning sound and rubbed its paw over Marcia's chin as she nestled her face in its chest. It had a musky smell and she loved touching its fur. She fed it a tin of tuna steak on a saucer, and sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, his head sore from lack of sleep, Joseph noticed how the creature ate so viciously, burying its mouth in the food, tearing it to pieces as though it was trying to disembowel something, shaking the fleshy chunks, then licking the saucer clean with its purple tongue. "Oh, my sweet baby," Marcia said, taking the saucer from the floor and giving it a bowl of cold milk. "You must be so hungry. Do you want some more tuna?" The creature nuzzled up against her leg. Marcia searched

in the drawers, but there wasn't any tinned tuna, so she gave it a plate of sliced roast chicken which it happily ate, along with the milk.

"I'm taking the boards off the Room in the window, it's time there was some light in there," Marcia said while Joseph was washing his cup in the sink.

He was about to say something hateful to her when he caught the creature glancing up at him, growling, exposing its teeth. The marks it had scratched on his skin had turned dark green, and it stung as the hot water poured over his hand.

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Over the next few days, he quarrelled with her, asking her repeatedly why she unlocked the door to the Room, the Room they swore they wouldn't speak of, the Room where a certain part of them was buried and where Joseph wanted it to stay buried once he'd locked the door. "How could you put that repellent thing in the cradle!" he said, and his abdominal muscles were stiff, his face flushed. Unwaveringly, his eyes were fixed on her—on her neck which he knew he could split like a twig. "And why have you taken the boards off the window!" It was Joseph who'd nailed the planks of pine-wood on the window, it was his idea. He watched Marcia closely as she stood near the edge of their bed.

"It has nothing to do with you," she snapped. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. *It's staying with me!*" and that's how they referred to it—the *creature* or *it*, because it was nameless and because Marcia wanted to keep it that way, for as long as it suited her.

Marcia opened the bedroom door, and the creature was there, walking up and down the doorway, wiggling its tail. Joseph guessed



that it had been there all along, that it had been listening to them arguing, listening to their words, listening to him curse. She picked it up, giggling. She held it in the air, her arms extended upwards, saying, “You’re so beautiful, I hope you never leave,” but its gaze was fixed on Joseph. It scowled at him. She cuddled it as if she were about to breastfeed it, and it was clawing at her blouse, and briefly, Joseph remembered how he and Marcia would make love regularly and feverishly—their desire for each other was raw, he knew it had been, it almost besieged them, sucking them in. Still, in the back of his mind, in the dark pit of it, he heard the cradle creaking, he saw it swinging and as the creature looked at him, Joseph felt that it could see through him, that it knew everything—that he was to blame and not Marcia.

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Rather than sleeping with him, she would sleep with the creature, in the Room, lying with the creature on a mattress on the floor, huddling it close to her breast with a blanket over them, or she’d sing to it while rocking it in the cradle. The creature would playfully growl or unsheathe its claws and Marcia would snicker and say, “You don’t get tired do you? Always wanting attention! Oh, no, no, that’s bad, stop it, stop it I say!” She’d tickle it, rubbing its fur, enthralled by the soft, silkiness of it. The creature would poke her with its nose, or lick her with its wet tongue. It never seemed to venture out, nor did it leave her side. Once, after squabbling with Joseph and he’d struck her but missed her by an inch—he’d wanted to drag her down onto the bed and push his weight down on her body to wound her—there was a raspy noise outside their bedroom and it was the creature. Joseph

saw that it had grown and was fatter and he ended up being kicked out of the bedroom. His face burnt with the thought of the creature sleeping with Marcia in their bed, in his bed.

Joseph knew he had to get rid of the creature. He could phone the local animal authority and request that it be taken away, but no, he would get rid of it himself, he would kill it because at least then he'd know for sure that it was dead and would not return. He was sick of seeing the creature, sick of it being bathed by her in the bath, sick of it being coddled by her, sick of it prowling around the house, eating his food, sniffing at things, scraping the upholstery. He was certain it had urinated several times on the carpet in the livingroom, though Marcia would disagree. Joseph had made one failed attempt to kill the creature. He tried to smother it with a large, stuffed pillow while it was asleep in the cradle. He'd peeked into the Room then entered cautiously, walking as lightly as he could, his heart beating fast, but as soon as he was about to thrust the pillow down over it, the creature woke up. It leapt out and hurtled out of the Room, as if it sensed him, as if it were aware of Joseph's intentions. Fortunately, Marcia didn't suspect anything. "How did you get out of the cradle?" she said, mystified, when she found it in the kitchen, tearing at a turkey sandwich Joseph had left on the table. "You are getting big aren't you! You were so skinny when you first arrived here!"

The scars on his hands hadn't faded. In fact, they were more visible than before, something furry growing over them like fungus.

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Joseph thought—would poison do the trick? It didn't matter to him that Marcia would be upset, or sorrowful for weeks, that wasn't a

source of worry for him; he'd be able to take care of that, no problem. Mulling over it, he thought it'd be best to mix the poison in its food during the night when both Marcia and the creature were asleep and by the next morning it would collapse after Marcia fed it breakfast. There were sachets of rat poison in one of the kitchen drawers— Marcia had bought them from the local convenience store in case they had a future rodent problem. He found the sachets in a bag, yet when he mixed the poison in the creature's food—in a special porridge of diced red meat, pig's intestines, liver and oats Marcia handmade herself with a beefy stock and kept in the refrigerator—he saw the creature beside him after he shut the refrigerator door. It was snarling at him, its eyes dilated. It made him jump. Joseph didn't hear it come into the kitchen and didn't understand how it came out of the Room. He had seen Marcia tuck it in the cradle, hadn't he? He had a nervous, guilty look on his face staring at the creature, and almost unconsciously he took the porridge out of the refrigerator and poured it all in the trash can. The creature then turned round and left, wagging its tail.

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He had to burn the creature, he decided abruptly. It seemed to Joseph that was the only way to get rid of it, for once and for all, even if it meant burning his house down. He would use kerosene and sprinkle it around the Room and into cradle, then set it alight and make sure he shut the door so the creature couldn't escape. And Marcia? What if she were caught in the fire? He'd help her get out, or he'd leave her, he didn't know which, but the creature was his priority.

Joseph left the house in the evening, without telling Marcia

where he was going—they hadn't spoken to each other all day. She was busy knitting a woollen blanket for the creature and was singing to it, patting it as it circled round her, rubbing its mouth on her legs, and Joseph thought it was about to sink its teeth into her and rip her calf muscles off. The weather was gusty outside and he drove out of town to a hardware store where they sold cans of kerosene. Along his drive there, he stared at his scars. He imagined the creature curled up on Marcia's lap, rolling on her or being rocked in the cradle as she tried to put it to sleep, touching its fur, and then the cradle on its own, empty, and yes, Joseph knew what loneliness was like, the way it seeped through skin, into the veins and congealed in the bones, the way he and Marcia lay indifferently, side by side in bed together, both aware of what they were reluctant to speak of—the Room, the cradle, the red curtains—but he would finish that, and why shouldn't he?

It was raining in sheets on his way home in the night. He bought one can of kerosene, though he was tempted to buy more. It was thundering and his wipers made a squeaky noise, water splashing off the window. Joseph became angrier and angrier as he reached his neighbourhood, his face was contorted, and he grew restless, the Lincoln sliding to the edge of the road. Then, without predicting it, he saw the creature or was it someone else's cat and not the creature?—straight in front of him, its eyes beaming at him, and rather than put his foot on the brake pedal, Joseph pressed the accelerator by mistake and veered off the road, almost bashing into a lamppost. Breathing hard, his face flushed and sweating, he managed to ease the car back on to the road on a lower speed. Parking the Lincoln in the driveway, he looked behind him. There was nothing there.

Holding the can of kerosene, he entered the house through the back door, into the kitchen, as softly as he could. He didn't want Marcia to know he'd been gone, not that she would have cared. He hadn't switched the lights on. There was a gnawing, dull pain in his lower abdominal area. His throat was tight. He went round the corner, to go down to the basement, to hide the kerosene. With jittery fingers, he opened the basement door; it squeaked a little. He paused for a moment, wondering if it were the creature on the road, and if it were, how had it gotten outside, unless Marcia let it go, but she never allowed that, always wanting it to be near her. Then, he felt something brush up against his legs. It was the creature, staring right at him unblinkingly in a ripple of moon-gleam. It unfurled its fizzing mouth, exposing its pointed teeth, its eyes as thin as blades. He felt an instant panic—it was going to leap on him. The creature scraped its claws against the laminate floor, and Joseph slipped back, huffing. The can of kerosene flew out of his hand. He tumbled down, smashing into the antique cheval mirror propped up against the grimy wall at the bottom of the staircase. His face was shocked, narrowed, white. He crashed onto the ground with a crack in a spray of shimmering, broken glass, his neck twisted, flakes of glass crushed into his head. His breathing was thin and before his last breath wheezed out of his lungs, Joseph felt a soft tongue lapping the blood off his cheeks, his lips.

Marcia's heart thudded when she heard a loud, shattering sound. She had nodded off and had finished knitting the blanket. It was past ten o'clock. The creature walked into the livingroom, noiselessly. It leapt onto her, knocking the roll of wool off her lap. "Hey, where have you been?" she said smiling, and the creature yawned, unfurling

its mouth. Marcia noticed how red it was like beetroot. "I hope you've been behaving yourself. Have you eaten the food I left for you in the kitchen?" The creature looked at her directly as if it were stumped, and it licked its paws in long, slow strokes. How strange you are, Marcia was thinking to herself. There was no way she could be separated from it; she didn't know what would become of her if it were to disappear. "I'm so thankful you're with me," she said. "You know, it's about time we gave you a name, hey? How do you feel about that? You'd like that wouldn't you, to have your own name?" and the creature grinned. "Oh, did you hear that terrible noise?" she said. "Was that you? Did you do something bad? Shall we go and see?" She got up from the armchair and holding the creature, Marcia went into the kitchen, turned the lights on, and peered round the corner. □