

# A GATE AT THE STAIRS

## LORRIE MOORE

Until a couple of weeks ago, I had never heard of Lorrie Moore, I am ashamed to admit. But I was introduced to a short story of hers during a recent writing workshop and later, having googled her, I discovered that her new book has adoption as one of its themes. She is described on the cover as “The best American writer of her generation”. I am in no position to comment on that, but her writing - deliciously metaphoric, witty, insightful – certainly had me enthralled.

A book about many things - life and the voluntary surrender of personal liberty in post 9/11 America, dealing with the loss of a brother killed fighting an unnecessary war and the story of prospective adoptive parents in their search for the perfect baby.

The story is told from the perspective of college student Tassie Keltjin, employed by the couple to be the baby's nanny. Present throughout the meetings with the natural mothers, she notes her distaste at Sarah's (the adoptive mother) use of the word “birthmother”. “*Birth mom*. It was one of those faux-friendly terms invented by the adoption business itself.” In response to the usual drivel about “cute” adoption stories, she says “It didn't sound that cute. It sounded odd. It sounded like it had the sharp edge of a weird lie poking into it”. Empathy towards the natural mother is also present, something that is long overdue in any mention to adoption. Bonnie, the natural mother, was a talented skater, and this had been passed on to her daughter Mary-Emma. Tessie remarks: “She had inherited Bonnie's ability to skate. An now this is what Bonnie would miss: someone to skate with who wasn't doing it out of charity. Someone she could teach to skate. It seemed, momentarily, a loss like several limbs.”

Later in the novel, it turns out that the adoptive parents, Sarah and Edward, have taken on false names. In reality, they are Susan and John, who had parented a son called Gabriel. During a drive along the turnpike, Gabriel “with the name of an angel but obstreperous and four years old” wailed, screamed and started hitting his father with one of his shoes. John's solution was to unstrap Gabriel and throw him out of the car, on the highway, wearing only one shoe. They tell him to go and wait at a picnic area, driving off into the distance, hoping that this will punish him sufficiently. Unable to stop the car, he is forced to drive a few miles to the next exit, turn around and come back past the picnic area. Whilst driving on the opposite side of the highway, Gabriel sees his mother waving to him, and steps into the highway. By the time they have made the U turn in the car, Gabriel was lying on the “muddy median...his eyes open and there was a spasm at the mouth; she threw her coat over and beneath and around him like a bunting”. Given suspended sentences, they changed their names, and decided to adopt.

I am encouraged by the fact that a major writer in America at least hints at the dark side of adoption in a novel that will hopefully be read by millions. It is a novel about loss, about uncomfortable truths. Thank you, Lorrie!