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The Road Back

Written by Liz Harris

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The Road Back

Extract

Liz Harris



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Prologue

London, early August 1995

Amy stood under a large black umbrella and stared at the tall, Victorian, semi-detached house on the opposite side of the road; the house where she'd begun her life, where she'd been cast off by the woman who'd given birth to her.

She put her hand into her pocket and pulled out a yellowing piece of paper. Holding the crumpled paper close to her chest to protect it from the rain, she read again the first of the words printed on it: her birth name, Nima Carstairs; the name of her birth mother, Patricia Carstairs.

She looked back at the tall house. She'd lived in that house for almost six weeks. Six weeks was no time at all compared with her years in Primrose Hill, where she'd lived before and after she'd married Andrew, but it was an important part of her life. She'd been someone else when she'd lived in that house: she'd been a Nima. And she hadn't been wanted.

Nima. What sort of name was that? Who would call their daughter Nima?

Her eyes were the eyes of a Nima; people were always remarking on her eyes. But apart from her eyes, would she have looked different, or liked different things, if she'd stayed a Nima? She'd not been able to stop asking herself those questions since the moment that morning when she'd first opened the letter that her father – her real father, the one who'd brought her up and loved her – had left for her to read after his death.

In his letter he'd written down the name of the home for unmarried mothers where she'd been handed over to him and his wife. Her eyes had filled with tears as she'd read that that day, thirty-two years ago, had been the happiest day of their lives. He'd gone on to say that he felt she ought to have a way of tracing

her birth parents in case she ever wanted to do so, and he'd tucked her Adoption Order into his letter. She'd felt very strange as she'd unfolded the order and seen the name that her birth mother had given her.

She'd always known she was adopted, but she'd had a happy childhood, loved and protected by her adoptive parents and loving them back in return, and she'd never felt any need, nor any desire, to find out about the people who'd given her away. Instinctively, she'd known that looking for her birth parents would hurt her mum and dad, and she wasn't going to do anything that would cause them unhappiness. Her birth parents had never been interested in her, and she wasn't interested in them.

The thrill she'd felt when she'd first read her name and that of her birth mother had taken her completely by surprise. She'd had to sit down.

For the first time ever, a powerful wave of curiosity had swept through her. Why had her birth parents given her away like that? Her mother had carried her for nine whole months – how could she have parted with her? She had carried her own baby for fewer than three months before her miscarriage earlier that year, but she'd been overwhelmed by grief, and so had Andrew, and they were still grieving. What kind of woman could ever give her baby away? What kind of man could let her?

She'd read her father's letter again, her vision blurred. He'd known her so much better than she'd known herself, and he'd wanted to help her do something he believed that one day she would want to do. And her mum must have agreed. The letter was dated two years earlier, just before her mother had died. Her father must have asked the solicitor to give it to her after they both had died. It had been their final act of kindness to her.

She'd read his words again, and had known instantly that she had to go at once to the house where she was born, no matter how bad the weather.

She folded the Adoption Order, put it back in her pocket and stared again at the house in front of her. The rain was bouncing off the grey tiles of the pitched roof, cascading in sheets over the edge of the eaves and falling on to the sloping roof of the bay window that flanked the heavy, dark blue door.

Her eyes on the house, she gripped her umbrella tightly, stepped into the road and walked across to the other side. Her boot hit the kerb and she looked down. The broken reflection of the house swirled in an oily puddle that had pooled in the gutter. A black sump reflecting another world. She stared back up at the house.

Day was fading fast, but there was no electric light in any of the rooms; the place looked deserted. She probably shouldn't have come on such a dismal day as this, but she had, and she wasn't going to stop now. She stepped on to the pavement and made her way between the moss-stained brick gateposts, past the squat stump of a tree that lay behind one of the gateposts, to the stone steps that led to the front door.

A shiver of nervous excitement ran through her as she went up the steps: her pregnant birth mother had walked up those same steps almost thirty-two years earlier. And she'd walked back down them again a few weeks later, leaving her baby behind, leaving Nima.

Why?

Reaching the narrow porch, she glanced at the tarnished bronze plaque next to the door. The house was clearly being used for offices. She put her ear against the door and listened hard, but she couldn't hear anyone moving around. Her heart sank. They must have left for the day.

She took a step back and looked along the front of the house to the sash bay window surrounded by chipped white masonry, but she couldn't see into the room. Large droplets of rain hit her forehead and she moved back under the porch.

A button on an intercom next to the plaque told visitors to

press for assistance, so she pressed the button and waited. The buzzer reverberated in the silent interior of the house. Reluctantly, she turned to leave. She'd have to come back another day, and make it earlier in the day.

A sound came from behind her. She spun round and saw that the front door was open and that a young woman in jeans and a cream polo-necked jumper was standing in the doorway.

'Can I help you?' the woman asked.

'Gosh, you made me jump!' Amy exclaimed. 'I thought that everyone had gone home.'

'There's only me at the moment, I'm afraid, and I'll be off shortly. But if I can help you at all, I'd be happy to do so.'

'I don't know that I need actual help. To be honest, I just wanted to see inside the house. I don't even really know why. My name's Amy Stevens and I've just found out that my birth mother stayed here when it was a home for unmarried mothers. I badly wanted to see where I started life. I don't suppose I could have a quick look round?'

Seeing the woman hesitate, Amy took the Adoption Order from her pocket and handed it to her. The woman ran her eyes over it and returned it.

'Come on in,' she said, opening the door wider.

Amy walked into the house.

A long, dimly lit hallway stretched out in front of her. Octagonal marble tiles, inset with small black squares, covered the length of the floor. At the far end of the hall, a greyish-white staircase led to a shadowy landing. The dark green walls of the hall were broken up by modern, semi-glazed doors, each with a plaque on the front. A large, gilt-edged mirror was fixed on the wall to the right of the front door.

Damp hung in the air. Amy shivered.

The woman laughed. 'I agree. It's not the most cheerful of buildings. But it's a job, and the people who work here are a great bunch, and that's all that matters. I expect you'd like to wander

around on your own. You can go anywhere that's not locked. Let me know when you're ready to leave, will you? I'll be in the room over there.' She pointed to a door on the left.

'Of course, I will. Thank you.'

She looked around her. A sense of depression crept over her at the thought of having started life in such a cold, bleak place, and a lump came to her throat. She swallowed hard and took a step further into the hall. Her foot slid on the tiled floor. Glancing down, she saw that water was dripping on to the floor from her damp umbrella. There was a metal rack under the mirror, so she went and slotted her umbrella into it.

Straightening up, she caught sight of her pale reflection in the mirror. Turning back to the hall, her eyes wandered from one door to another. All were closed. Despite the woman's words, she had an uneasy sense of being an unwanted intruder. Her eyes strayed back to the mirror.

The person staring back at her was interesting, rather than pretty. To Andrew, she was beautiful, she knew, but really her face was a little too round, a little too wide. Her long, dark brown hair hung straight, and that narrowed her face a little, but she couldn't disguise her wide mouth. Andrew always said that when she was happy, her smile took over her whole face.

At the moment, though, she wasn't smiling; her eyes were glistening with unshed tears. Narrow, almond-shaped and heavy lidded, they were the eyes of a Nima, not of an Amy. Did they come from her natural father, whose name she didn't know, or could they have come from her birth mother, the woman called Patricia Carstairs?

She walked slowly to the foot of the staircase and looked up at the dark landing. She had probably been born in one of the rooms up there and then handed over to someone else. Why, oh why, had her mother given her away, and why hadn't her father stopped her mother? What were they like, her birth parents?

Chapter One

London, March 1951: Patricia, aged 7

The clock on the mantelpiece above the cast-iron fireplace ticked loudly in the silence that filled the back room of the small brick house in Belsize Park Gardens. The fire had been set, but the paper and coal were unlit.

Patricia sat very still on the wooden chair that had been placed in the centre of the room, her knees together, her fingers intertwined in her lap. His lips pursed in a line of displeasure, Major George Carstairs paced from one side of the sparsely furnished room to the other. Finally stopping squarely in front of his daughter, he stared down at her, his eyes cold.

'And how, exactly, do you account for your failure to prevent your brother from hurting himself?'

Patricia glanced up at the tall figure in front of her. Her fingers twisted nervously, and she looked back down at the floor.

'Well?'

'I did my best, Daddy,' she said in a whisper. 'I was reading my new book to James and he just fell over. He was sitting at the table, playing with his soldiers while I was reading to him, and then he fell on the floor and hit his head. I didn't know he was going to fall over. I'm sorry …'

'Being sorry isn't good enough, Patricia.' Her father's chill tones cut across her words. 'It's nowhere near good enough. Your duty is to watch your brother's every movement, to see that he doesn't put himself in danger. Yet reading was more important than looking after your brother. Your instructions were quite clear. Was it asking too much to expect you to obey them?'

Patricia's eyes travelled over the patterned rug that covered the dark-stained boards on the floor of the front room and came to rest on her father's black shoes. They were polished to an

ebony sheen. The last thing he did every night before he climbed the staircase to the bedroom that he shared with her mother was to polish his shoes.

'Look at me! Well, was it?'

'No, Daddy.' Her voice shook as she met her father's eyes. 'But I did do what you said I had to do if James fell over, like I always do. I wasn't afraid when he made that noise. I undid his shirt collar and looked for his tongue. And I put a penny in both of his hands. It's not my fault that his head hit the table. I didn't know he was going to fall down.'

'Not your fault, girl?' her father spat. 'You were alone with him! If you'd watched him more carefully, you'd have known what he was going to do. I cannot be here every minute of the day – I have to bring money into this house – and your mother has work to do in the kitchen. It's your job to watch your brother when you're not at school, but you didn't do that. You chose to read.'

'I promise I'll watch him much better in future.'

'I intend to make sure that you do just that. I'm going to teach you a lesson that will make you take your duty to your brother more seriously.' He took a step closer and leaned down towards her. 'I will not tolerate such laxity. Do I make myself quite clear?'

She nodded, staring up at him, her eyes wide open in anxiety. A movement of air brushed against her cheek and she sensed someone come and stand behind her. A hand rested lightly on her shoulder.

'I'm sure that Patricia did her best, George,' Enid Carstairs said, her voice shaking. 'It was obviously an accident, dear. You know how James often falls without any warning. You can see how upset Patricia is about the whole thing. She would never let James hurt himself if she could help it. She's a good girl, and she does her best to look after him.'

'Her best has been found wanting. Wars are not won where soldiers are found wanting. Patricia must learn that.'

He ran a slender finger slowly down the thin black line of his

moustache.

Her mother's hand pressed more heavily on her shoulder.

'She's only seven, George. I've put a small dressing on James's head. It's only a little cut – nothing to cause alarm. He's vomited and he's now sleeping peacefully.'

'Every hurt that he suffers is a cause for alarm, Enid.' The Major's pale grey eyes didn't leave Patricia's face. 'Our focus at all times must be on helping him to get better. Patricia is old enough to understand that.'

He turned abruptly and walked towards the door. 'Follow me, Patricia,' he ordered without looking back. His footsteps echoed on the hard lino as he made his way along the corridor to the front room.

She burst into tears.

Her mother bent over and hugged her. 'Don't cry, darling. You know it only makes him worse. Just do as he says and go after him.'

'But it wasn't my fault, Mummy.' She clung tightly to her mother.

'I know that, sweetheart, and deep down so does Daddy. But you'd better go to him now, there's a good girl.'

'You go to him.' She clawed at her mother's arm, her face wet with tears. 'Tell him I'll be very good in future. I'll watch James all the time, I really will. I'll never read my books when I'm with him. Tell him, Mummy. Please.'

Enid pulled Patricia's hands away from her arms and stepped back. 'I have to get the tea ready, my dear. Go to your father or you'll make things worse for both of us. Go on now.' Tucking some stray strands of grey-flecked brown hair into the loose bun at the nape of her neck, she turned away and hurried out of the room.

Patricia gripped the sides of the seat with her hands, her knuckles white.

'Patricia!' she heard her father call. 'I'm counting.'

She gave a sharp intake of breath, slipped off the chair and ran towards the front room. The door was open and the Major stood waiting, a wooden ruler in his hand.

Enid perched on the edge of the bed, her eyes on her daughter's sobbing back.

'I wish I could have done something to help you, Patsy darling,' she said, pulling the blanket up over her daughter's shoulders. 'I did try, but you know what Daddy's like when he's angry. Please stop crying now. You'll make yourself ill.'

Patricia pulled the blanket over her head and cried more loudly.

Leaning forward, Enid gently uncovered her daughter's face. 'If you turn over, darling, you'll see I've brought you your tea, and I've given you our last piece of chocolate. You can have tea in bed as a treat, if you like. Then get some sleep.'

Her sobs slowing down, Patricia rolled over on to her back. She stared up at her mother with red-rimmed eyes.

'He hates me. Daddy hates me. He's always hated me.'

'Nonsense, darling. He loves you.'

'No, he doesn't. He loves James and he hates me. It's because he didn't see me when I was a baby. He saw James when he was a baby, but not me. That's why he doesn't like me.'

Enid stroked Patricia's long, blonde hair. 'You're wrong, Patsy – he does love you. He's just not good at showing it. It doesn't matter that he wasn't here when you were born. He's had the past five years to get to know you, and he knows what a lovely little girl you are.'

'Does he hate me because James is ill?'

To be continued ….