

Negative Space – From *Negative Space and other stories* (buy it [here](#))

There is an eerie calm in the doctor's office. I have been waiting for fifteen minutes. The nurses bustle about quietly at this early hour with a muted sense of urgency. They seem to share the knowledge of a secret emergency. Sandy had mentioned the possibility of a long wait when I requested this urgent appointment. Dr. Shah is on call on Wednesday, she had said. I don't mind waiting. I have my journal for company. I wonder how many babies Dr. Shah has delivered in her twenty years of practice. I open the pine green cover of my hard-bound journal to the first page, ignoring the silky bookmark that invites me to write. Today I feel the need to read. I start at the beginning.

March 12, 2001

Shankar called to say they have reached Mumbai safely. Nandu behaved like a perfect angel. Why did he say "behaved like an angel"? Nandu is an angel, my very own six-month-old angel. An unfortunate angel separated from his mother. I can't believe I let Shankar take my son away from me. Actually, it's not Shankar's fault. There are practical reasons for taking this step, to take Nandu to India to be raised by his grandparents. I understand the logic but it still doesn't feel right.

What else could I do? I had no choice but to return to work three weeks after giving birth to Nandu, to slog at this lousy post-doc job in order to support the three of

Ranjani Rao

us. Why can't Shankar watch Nandu? He is the father, after all. He uses the excuse of completing his thesis. There is no funding for him since his advisor has left the school.

Meena Aunty used to take care of Nandu very lovingly. But since she moved away, poor Nandu had been shuttling from one daycare to another. He had not had a single week of good health in the last three months. The pediatrician said we should consider surgery to insert tubes in his ears if he gets another infection.

Shankar's parents had offered to take Nandu right from the beginning but I could not even consider that option then.

Now here I am, all alone, while Shankar drops Nandu off with his parents in India. I think I made the right decision for Nandu. I tell myself that it is for only a few months.

I know Shankar's parents will be doting grand-parents. He is their first grandson, after all. But I can't help wishing it was Amma who was taking care of Nandu. I hope Amma is watching him from her heavenly perch, sending the same comforting waves to soothe him as she still does to me. Did I do the right thing, Amma?

March 30, 2001

It is just Shankar and me now. The apartment, although still as cramped as ever, feels empty. How can the absence of a baby who joined us only six months ago create such a hole in our lives? All day I think about him, wondering what he is doing at each moment. "He is sleeping," says Shankar, "It is night in India." He is technically correct, of course. But, I mean it figuratively. Can't a mother wonder?

Ranjani Rao

April 30, 2001

They tell us Nandu has become used to the heat and humidity. He is sitting up now. It is amazing, my tiny little Nandu who could barely hold up his head, is now viewing the world from an upright position. He likes to chew on hard things, spoons and keys, practically everything he can get his hands on! I hope they don't let him put unclean objects in his mouth. They probably don't sterilize anything. What if he falls sick?

May 13, 2001

It is two months since Nandu last saw me. Does he even remember me? I torture myself with the question, even though I know that it was I who agreed to this arrangement. He is eating soft rice these days and trying to crawl. I wish I had a picture to visualize his activities. His favorite adult is my father-in-law who makes funny faces and gets toothless belly laughs in return. I wish I was his favorite person. Am I not entitled? I am his mother after all. Or am I?

May 28, 2001

Shankar was supposed to complete his lab work by now. Done by Memorial Day, he had said. But now he says his results don't make sense. When will he finish his experiments? It will take him at least three months to write up his findings. After that he will have to defend his dissertation. At this rate, I may have to slave in this laboratory forever. I can deal with it. But, what about Nandu?

Ranjani Rao

Ranjani Rao