

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Family Planning

Karan Mahajan

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**FAMILY
PLANNING**

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

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Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781409075219

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Vintage 2010

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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First published in Great Britain in 2009 by
Chatto & Windus

Vintage
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

www.vintage-books.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:

www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780099523291

*For my loving parents,
Veena Mahajan and Gautam Mahajan*

FAMILY PLANNING

Karan Mahajan was born in 1984 and grew up in New Delhi. A graduate of Stanford University, he now lives in New York City.

CHAPTER 1

QUESTION HOUR

OBVIOUSLY, MR. AHUJA—Minister of Urban Development—couldn't tell his son that he was only attracted to Mrs. Ahuja when she was pregnant. That he liked the smooth, alien bulge of her stomach or the tripled heartbeat when they made love, silently, shifting over each other. That the faint fetal heartbeat ran under the speeding pulses of man and wife, calming him, holding him back from instant climax. Or even more fantastically, how, at times, he could imagine the unborn eyes of the fetus watching him, pleading for another sibling—begging, sobbing, moaning through the parched throat of his wife . . .

It was morning and Mr. Ahuja waited at the bus stop with his eldest son, Arjun. The sun swung over Delhi like a fiery wrecking ball, the entire city exploding with mirages and reflections that hurt the eye, Marutis and Toyotas and Ambassadors glittering by at top speed in their metallic finery. Clouds heaping in cumulus shelves overhead. The chalky pavements dizzying under eddies of dust. At least Mr. Ahuja was in the shade, under a tree, with Arjun. The middle-aged minister was becoming hard of hearing—the traffic on Modi Estate Road came to him like the indistinct whirr of a waterfall—but oh yes, he *had* heard Arjun's question. And the question was *Papa, I don't understand—why do you and Mama keep having babies?*

The boy had been as discreet as the bus stop would allow. He had waited for his other siblings—Rita, Sahil, Rahul, Varun, Tanya, Aneesha, Rishi—to leave. And then he had walked up to his Papa (Papa who insisted on seeing off the eight of his thirteen children who attended school every morning) and popped the question with the abruptness of a coin-toss in a cricket match. The words were said—Arjun turned away jauntily, thrust his fingers into his torn pockets, and scratched his hairy thigh. His white school pants were too short; they rode up around his ankles.

Now, both Mr. Ahuja and Arjun saw the Delhi Transport Corporation school bus floating on a cool mirage of leaking oil and blazing road. Time was running out.

In the end, all things considered, Mr. Ahuja decided he could not let the bus win. So he said, “Son, I told you about the Yograj Commission findings, correct? Then? You know I’m not a fanatic, but findings were hundred percent clear. We need more Hindus in India.”

“So I’m—we’re—just a political cause for you?” asked Arjun, twisting his neck to peer sidelong at his father.

“No, son. But you know how it is—these Muslims have so many wives, and their families keep growing, and what are we Hindus—”

“Do you even know my name?” Arjun asked.

“Son!”

With a tragic swing of the schoolbag, Arjun boarded the bus and was gone.

The bus accelerated heavily onto the road. The children leaned into the aisles; their water bottles swung in the air, briefly unanchored, sloshing. As Arjun scanned the lolling heads for a seat, he wished he had learned to mutter under his breath (*Goddamn politicians want goddamn Hindus goddamn fuck fuck*). Then again, the skill was practically

useless in his house where even the most regular conversation with his half-deaf Papa was—to *Papa*—a muttering under the breath. What luck, though: the only vacant seat was next to Aarti. She was a girl from the neighboring Convent of Jesus and Mary—a girl he liked enough to brave the usual heckling that burst from the back of the bus when he talked to a girl, even though he was sixteen. Today, the hecklers seemed hungover. Aarti closed the *Pradeep's Physics Guide* she was reading and they began talking. They talked about this, that, Bryan Adams, this, that, Bryan Adams's evergreen classic "Summer of '69," wasn't he wonderfully throaty, had she seen the new Bombay concert video, and what about that superb line when he said "Standing at your Mama's porch you told me it'd last forever it was the summer the summer of '69," what was he talking about, his lost childhood or his gained virility?

But really, Arjun wished he could tell her how he hated the daily morning bus-stop ritual, all eight kids trooped out onto the sidewalk by a man who couldn't hear anything, the eight kids now splitting into opposing factions and groups with the fickleness of politicians—each faction a campaign of shrill voices and stupid triumphs such as determining who could chuck Rita's water-bottle farthest across the road without cracking the windshield of a car—and all this ridiculous brouhaha expiring the minute the buses arrived and dragged the kicking, screaming mobs away. But the family was not a mob. The family was a solar system. The family had planets and satellites and the occasional baby that burned its way in like a mewling meteorite. As the oldest child by four years (the other children were separated by only nine to twelve months in age), Arjun had by now played every role in this evolving system: Pluto, the Sun, Jupiter, everything but a satellite, really. He replaced Mama as head-honcho when he was thirteen and she was

recuperating from a difficult pregnancy, ten kids orbiting around him, tripping over their laces to get a piece of him, waiting for him to proclaim judgment on the crooked fixture of their ties—and now? Now he was Pluto again, cold, on the periphery, unimportant. He still had to read nursery rhymes to the four babies and soothe his pregnant mother by whistling filmi tunes, but otherwise he was trapped with twenty-four other probing eyes spinning around him—eyes that saw him only as a big threat to their personal nutrition at the dinner table.

Arjun was the biggest and ate the most. He had no privacy in the house and hated that. For instance: last night, for exactly 1.67 seconds, at 23:35 hours Indian Standard Time he had walked in on his parents doing it in the nursery. There in the cleft between the three cribs on the pinkish floor lay Mama on her back in a polka-dotted nighty, Papa bubbling uncertainly beyond her huge stomach, the papery jaws of his pajamas famished around his ankles. The four babies in their cribs were screaming; Mr. Ahuja twisted his head in panic; Arjun stumbled back into the corridor. The impression he retained was less a photograph and more a rash: the negative of his own skin blazed and exposed. Immediately, he was crazed with questions. How did Mama and Papa still have sex? How did their two lumpy bodies stack up, each one lost in the vast, flabby expanse of the other's skin?

Was this sex or—swimming?

He'd always imagined they had sex when all the children were at school.

Maybe they did, thought Arjun. Maybe they were at it again.

The thought annoyed him, and as revenge on his parents, he told Aarti on the bus: "Speaking of which—did I

ever tell you about my band? We recently covered Bryan Adams songs. B-side sort of stuff, you know?"

"Really?" she asked.

"Yaah. You should come and watch us!"

They passed over a series of flyovers, and the driver heroically hastened the ancient bus down the slopes. These overpasses were Papa's concrete humps, Arjun realized. Flyovers were being constructed all over Delhi as part of Urban Development Minister Ahuja's plans to rid the city of traffic lights and reinvigorate traffic flow: even now, a number of flyovers lay incomplete, their two rising slopes frozen in midair like tongues that failed to touch.

He wondered what tongue on tongue felt like.

"I'd love to," said Aarti.

They arrived at school. "See you later, okay, bye!" he said, swiveling his heels toward the gates of St. Columba's, and she said nothing, only looked him in the eye, and that was a good sign, Arjun wanted to slap himself on the back, God, she was so pretty! With her slightly upturned nose and the way she pretended to be so interested in everything you said, the two dilating pools of her eyes so large and brown and patient! How she sat most days in the bus with her hair listing on her left shoulder, a notebook pushed out at right angles to ensure Arjun maximum readability (she liked playing noughts and crosses, Flame, Hangman, unabashed vestiges of junior school), the pen poised in his direction like a microphone, her bra strap straining through the tight fabric of her shirt—man. Her glances were like doodles—swift, often harmless, and entirely charming; every configuration of those eyebrows, mostly jesting, could distract Arjun from the distinguished antics of afternoon traffic. He feasted daily on her handwriting. He liked the sheer *fatness* of it. The sharp

blue ink electrified around bulbs of white space. He could go for a spin in those letters.

But now the giant cross of the chapel loomed over him. He suddenly wished he hadn't lied to her about the rock band. But it had seemed like a good idea at the time. And, he supposed, it was the one thing his spying parents and siblings didn't know about him.

He was a rock star.

CHAPTER 2

MR. AHUJA'S RATHER UNMANAGEABLE SECRET

ARJUN WAS LOATH TO ADMIT IT, but he had his father to thank for the extended flirtation. The construction of flyovers had landmarked the city with pillars of rubble and rusty MEN AT WORK signs and mesmerizing shivers of arrow-sharp steel pointing skyward; a bus ride of eight minutes now took a wondrous fifteen. But Delhi believed itself to be crawling out of a chrysalis. The Super Prime Minister had declared a genocidal war on traffic lights. The opening of flyovers was second only in excitement to India-Pakistan cricket matches. Commuters bravely accepted the temporary congestion and looming phallic shadows as collateral for development.

Only Mr. Ahuja and a handful of his juniors at the Ministry of Urban Development knew they were wrong.

Delhi, quite simply, was fucked.

Mr. Ahuja rapped the teak table in the study with his knuckles. The beautifully detailed paper model of the Flyover Fast-Track, New Delhi, Circa 2018 vibrated, and a few dinky cars crashed off the model flyovers onto the cardboard pavements below.

The room sounded hollow. Mr. Ahuja felt unbearably lonely in his study. The mechanics of the whole thing were vaguely amusing: no matter how deaf you were, you could

hear the dull plunk of hollowness. His awkward “encounter” with Arjun in the nursery last night and then at the bus stop in the morning had left his stomach feeling raw. All through his walk back home, he’d wished he could talk to the boy. The loneliness only compounded his problems because his first impulse when he felt at all uneasy was to plunge himself into the midst of a crowd, to feel the flitting glances cleanse him like the random water-jets of a sprinkler, and right now there was no crowd to speak of, only the giant expanse of the study, the pinnacle of his career hardening before him in teak wall panels and carpeted floors—empty. He hated emptiness. He hated it here in his study and he hated it in his office. He was never happier than when he was at the helm of his colossal domestic factory—loading the children into his Toyota Qualis and driving them to India Gate for a midnight ice cream, watching twenty-odd eyes affix to the prized fruit hanging on a tree in an orchard, feeling the hot cluster of their bodies behind his back like a small army—all to the dismay of his bodyguards who were supposed to shelter him from crowds. His two bodyguards had no work. They had stopped accompanying him to the office in his second year. Now he grieved for their absence. He grieved that he had given them up—that assiduous pair of Balwant Singh and Ram Lal—to a shabby domesticity, that he had let them become *maids* in the house, washing and drying the truckloads of dirty clothes the children shed daily with the alacrity of porno stars. Sometimes you could see the two men sitting beside a large slab of marble at the back of the house, on their haunches, smoking bidis, flogging pairs of wet jeans against the rock, and the sight would arouse sympathy in Mr. Ahuja. At these moments, he would feel the temptation to embezzle ministerial funds for a washing machine—a temptation that flared upward from his groin and culminated in a facial grimace, but no, he never gave in. He knew this: Mrs. Ahuja was *obsessed* with washing. If

he ever bought a machine, she would end up staring at its window all day, hypnotized by the knots of clothes unfurling under curtains of detergent.

Wasn't it like that with TV already?

At least the TV was in the nursery where she could also watch over the children.

Mr. Ahuja needed to change channels. He lay back in his chair, hunched forward, and coughed violently into his red silk tie. The act was comforting: the silk tie was the only object of clothing that escaped Mrs. Ahuja's washing and *therefore* defined him, breeding and sustaining a microcosm of smells and germs and saliva (he often fell asleep in his office in the weeks after a difficult campaign) that he'd encountered over his long and varied career as a politician. The tie featured a repeated pattern of cricketers playing straight drives. He coughed again into the cricketer closest to himself, rolling up the tie as if to dam in the germs. He loved the tie; it drew him from his introspection, he could smell it and be whisked to a better time. The tie was his most loyal companion, his pendulous sycophant, his brief reprieve from the lazy, flowing kurta-pajamas that he'd started wearing ever since he became a politician. But he loved the tie mainly because it was a birthday present from his first wife, Rashmi. Rashmi: Arjun's mother, dead. No one ever spoke of Rashmi in his household, and how could they?

Arjun didn't even know he was Rashmi's son. None of the other children did either. Mr. Ahuja had done his best to keep this fact a secret.

Yet, today, when Arjun had taunted him at the bus stop, when Arjun had cheekily asked *Why do you and Mama keep having babies?* he'd wished to say *Are you aware that you didn't even walk in on your real mother last night?*

Luckily, he'd had the foresight to use Muslims as scapegoats.

In this he had become like all his colleagues in the party.

Now he simply felt dejected. Mr. Ahuja stood up and paced. His ratty Bata shoes plowed a soft ravine through the powdery blue carpet. He pressed the buzzer lying on the table with his pinky (his preferred weapon of choice for reprimanding and demanding) and walked over to the window. He saw his own reflection in the tinted glass and tried to ignore the sights of Delhi that lay beyond his watery visage. His face was a succession of comforting curves; not a handsome face, but one that could appear perpetually interested, the brows raised on a pivot of white hair above his nose, the cheeks retracting into an intelligent angularity when he spoke, the eyes small and intense, yet not beady. Here was a man who could appear dire in his earnestness, a forty-three-year-old with a paunch whose face was still gaunt and young with stubble. He withdrew a little from the glass, holding his gaze. It had always amused him as a boy, that if you brought your face closer and closer to a glass, you would stop seeing your own reflection; eventually you'd be so close to your ghost in the polished surface that you could look through its eyes. And because you shared eyes, you couldn't see it. You could only see the city spread out ahead of you, a palimpsest for the cities to come, a teeming, fertile ground where one could sow concrete and watch it sprout into strange, often hideous shapes.

And what did one see when one was close to someone else's face, making love? What did one see beyond?

Mr. Ahuja knew: it depended completely on who you were making love to. With Rashmi he had seen nothing beyond— just a blackness, a black cricket field full of black cricketers, the four towering stadium lights blessing every cricketer with not one, not two, but *four* shadows; each

cricketer appearing, from a height, like a tiny wad of flesh affixed to the center of a shadowy quadrupranged compass, and then he and she would be standing high above the field and the lights would go off one by one and then they were alone, circling above the pitch black, together. The cricketers would disappear. The compasses would disappear. There'd be nowhere else he'd rather be.

And with Sangita—perpetually pregnant, constantly fertile Sangita?

Sangita with her still-peculiar odor of mothballs and Tiger Balm? With her body oiled from the constant attentions of the massage-wali? With her thick left hand always pressed against the small of her back? Her old-person groans? Her almond-milk breath? Her chin acne? Her belly button upturned proudly? Her stomach fabulous and fragile, all at once?

Yes. That was the problem. With Sangita, you couldn't get past the details.

Worse, Mr. Ahuja had never really tried. But thinking of Sangita had turned him on, and in a sudden rejuvenation of passion, he exited the study, walked to the nursery, knocked on the door, and entered.

The nursery was a large whitewashed room with ten cots—three of which were full at present (Vikram: two months, Gita and Sonali: eleven months)—and the permanent fixture of Mrs. Ahuja sitting in the center on a stool, knitting. She was forty years old—the type of forty that led people to comment “You look too young to be sixty.” Her head was covered with a dupatta and she looked up for a brief instant. She was tall and had an imposing bun of black hair. She always wore gray saris during the day. The matronly cloth revealed a sideways curve of stomach cleavage. Streaks of silver hair fell across her face; her mouth was tightened into a hyphen in the manner of a

woman who is terrified of her own luscious lips (only she had tiny, thin lips). A fan creaked overhead; the actor Amitabh Bachan muttered imprecations from the TV.

The TV was placed in front of the window, an alternative natural light. Mrs. Ahuja hated natural light. The room smelled of saliva and Johnson & Johnson baby powder.

Immediately Mr. Ahuja started bellowing. "What was Arjun doing here last night? Why was he coming here, tell me? I thought I told you he doesn't need to look after the babies. He's a grown man now—he shouldn't be jumping from his bed the minute a baby makes a noise, correct? Are you listening?"

He hadn't initially intended to bellow. He'd meant to get on his knees before her and whisper inanities into the smooth rotunda of her stomach. But being back in the nursery, he'd been struck afresh by how perfectly horrible it must have been for his son to stumble upon his parents sprawled out on the floor, and his thoughts sputtered into puffs of irritation. He was his dark, bitter self again. He saw the reality of the situation in the form of a newspaper headline: MINISTER AHUJA PROPOSES NEW BILL FOR SEX EDUCATION ON THE *FLOOR* OF THE *HOUSE*; BABIES TO BE *EXPOSED* AT YOUNGEST AGE POSSIBLE.

"I am listening, ji," said Mrs. Ahuja.

Mrs. Ahuja did not raise her voice, partly out of habit, partly out of resignation, mostly on purpose.

Mr. Ahuja, not hearing, continued. "Accha. Also, tell Shanti I want her to make me khichdi to take to office. I need to eat light food for lunch. Everyday these buggers at functions make me eat bloody heavy Kashmiri-type food."

"Ji, Shanti has left."

"Where has she gone?" Mr. Ahuja scowled. Then, in a graceful arc from irritation to affection, he lifted up baby Vikram and started cooing.

“Home, where else?” said Mrs. Ahuja, casting off a stitch from her needles.

“Why did she leave so suddenly?”

Mrs. Ahuja mumbled, “She threw away the towels.”

“So she was *fired*?”

“Yes, ji.”

Mr. Ahuja sighed. He put Vikram back in his crib and tickled his stomach. Then he turned to Mrs. Ahuja. “Darling, what is this you’ve done? Please explain this to me. What crime has she committed against you? Sangita, it is because of women like you that the servant-types will one day have a union. Whenever you feel like you fire them. Then you make my son do the work instead. You’ve made Arjun into a maid.”

“The maid is not listening,” Mrs. Ahuja offered. “Today she tried to throw the towels I keep in the almirah.”

“Arjun did this?”

“She, ji.”

“She who?” Mr. Ahuja threw up both hands.

“The maid.”

“You and your pronouns. Which one is this now?”

“Shanti.”

“I thought she was fired.”

“She is,” said Mrs. Ahuja. “Because of towels—”

“Hai Ram, Sangita. I’ve seen those towels. They’re completely ruined. They’re moth-eaten. They’re rough. They *should be* thrown away.”

“Okay, ji,” said Mrs. Ahuja, rocking a little on her bamboo stool. “I was only trying to maintain the hygiene. You only said we needed the hygiene.”

“HYGIENE?” coughed Mr. Ahuja.

“Ji, when I am going to do toilet, after I have used mug sometimes there is still some cleaning required on buttocks. For that I am using towels. Hygienic it is—”

“How many times have I told you: you don’t DO THE TOILET? You GO TO THE BATHROOM!”

“Sorry—”

“What sorry, Sangita?” said Mr. Ahuja. “My children are all speaking like you now. Please. Firstly, either speak Hindi or speak English. This in-between thing is stupid. None of this nonsense. Get rid of the towels. Bring the maid back. I don’t have time for this. And I thought I told you to throw these away,” he said, pointing to the oranges that sat on the windowsill. “These oranges—look at them, Sangita—they are all green. That is mold. That is bad for these babies breathing. Do you know that? Already all of them have asthma? Please, no more trying to save on these things.”

“Okay, ji,” she said. She wiped her hands on a napkin. A pyramid of scrunched napkins lay on the plate behind her. “I’ll give them to Shankar’s family.”

Shankar was their servant. Miraculously, he’d been their servant for a decade. All the other servants—and as a minister, Mr. Ahuja could have had an entourage of domestics—were dismissed within days of their hiring.

Mr. Ahuja intervened. “Do no such thing. And please—I don’t want Arjun to do anything today. No diaper changing, no massage, no baby exercises. I need to talk to him today.”

“Okay, ji,” she said.

Then, hesitating, she gestured toward the household deity—the TV—and said, “He died.”

“ENH?”

“He died,” she said in Hindi. “Wo mar gaya.”

“*Tomorrow, kya? Eh?*” he said. “Sangita, why would I say *tomorrow* when I am saying *today*? I want to talk to him

today!"

Mrs. Ahuja gave up.