

Rage

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I was just getting a few things – milk, salami, bread, juice, pasta, detergent, honey. The line was long when I got to the checkout area and you could sense a kind of unease amongst the people waiting, it would've been natural enough if I, too, emitted some kind of small sigh or groan. But I thought: How would that help the situation? Do I want to be kind of person who shifts impatiently from foot to foot and rolls their eyes, someone who breathes down the neck of the person in front of them? Did I want to be uncivilized? The young girl up at the cash register was trying to balance a phone between her chin and shoulder – Hello, can anybody help me out, there's a lot of people here... as the goods kept streaming towards her. Someone'll be here soon, she said, into the air. A woman behind me groaned and demanded to know whether the staff was planning on letting us stand here all day? That same moment, a dark-haired young man came crashing towards us and squeezed between the chewing gum rack and partition to find his place at cash register number two. I quickly lifted my basket and started moving my groceries over to the free conveyor belt. Oh yeah? said the woman behind me. So you're standing *here* now? I turned around. What? She was shorter and thinner than me, no need to be scared. I was just wondering, she said, pointing to the other line, since you were just standing right *there*. Did she really want to argue about this? I didn't answer, but made a note of the contents of her shopping basket – soda and white bread and frozen dinners and other unhealthy stuff. I put my own groceries on the belt while her gaze burned a hole in my back. I worked fast, felt like I had to be done here as quickly as possible.

Suddenly she dropped her basket down on the floor. It hit my foot. Ow! I said, you need to watch where you put your stuff! Sorry? she said loudly and gruffly, what are you talking about? and I regretted saying anything at all. This was what she wanted obviously, to argue. It's fine, I said, just relax. She stared at me, enraged. A couple of bags as well, I said to the young man at the cash register as he held up my milk carton in one hand and the scanner beeped in the other. He nodded, put the carton on the belt, and it sailed onwards. Next to me, her mouth had opened again and she continued: so you're one of those *charming* and *articulate* women then, one of those people who thinks they can talk and talk their way onwards and upwards. Smiling and sucking up and being sweet to everyone the one moment and being rude and disdainful in the next. I tried to meet the eyes of the young man at the cashier. I wanted him to intervene, to say it's not okay to talk to people like that in his shop, but he didn't intervene, he didn't say anything. And she was so angry. Remember that you're younger and faster, I thought. I paid at last and hurried to the end of the checkout area to gather my groceries, looking for some fellowship in the eyes of the other people in the store. Surely one of them would roll their eyes and smile in resignation? She didn't want to let me go just yet, even now that it was her turn to check out. Tell me, she continued, is this how you usually talk to people? Is that how you behave towards your children? I pointed at my foot. It hurt, I mumbled. Pardon? she said. I didn't hear you? You slammed your basket on my foot, I said, and it really hurt. Aww, she said. But don't you see how much pain *I'm* in? She pointed at her legs, and maybe there *was* something about the way she was standing, but I didn't quite understand... did she have a disease I ought to have noticed? Sorry, I said. There you go, she said. That's better. Thanks. I nodded. I hated her, I hated her, I hated her. I searched again for sympathetic glances from the other people in the shop. Didn't they see what I was subjected to?

The woman was crazy, cruel, and I was today's innocent victim. Was there no solidarity in this shithole? I walked towards the door. I was so angry, she didn't deserve to get away with this, to behave this way, so self-righteous and hateful. I bet that she'd never give up – this was her character. The more she talked and scolded, the angrier she became. There was a rage that rose and roared within her, irrational and reckless and unstoppable.

I suddenly felt dizzy. I had to put my bags down and crouch down in the middle of the parking lot, and there I sat, with my eyes shut, trying to breathe calmly. Cars backed in, mopeds started up and drove off, seagulls screeched, a helicopter buzzed across the sky, concentrate, concentrate, breathe – breathe, an ambulance wailed in the distance, or maybe the police, even better, couldn't they just come and get me now. I surrender. Are you okay? asked a voice. I shook my head. Should I call someone? No thanks.

What if I was wrong. What if it was me, not her. What if the people in there saw something entirely different from what I saw, what if the whole situation had several possible interpretations, what if I was really like she pointed out. Smiling when it would benefit me, but otherwise acting horribly towards whoever got in my way. How did I actually address people. How did I behave towards my children. What kind of person was I really?

It's so easy to wake up and tell yourself: Today, I won't smoke, I won't swear, I'll move more gracefully, I won't eat sugar or even fat, today I'll smile, put grapes in their lunch boxes, greet strangers, donate, today I'll focus at work and be a nice girlfriend, a normal person who tidies up the cupboards, pays bills, a considerate person who takes each child aside after dinner and asks them about their day. How was it. What did you do. Who did you play with. Where did you go. Was it fun. What did you have for lunch. Did you go outside. HI! Can't you hear that I'm talking to you?!

It's so easy to go to bed and tell yourself: Tomorrow I'll be more patient.
Calmer and kinder. I won't get angry if they don't do what I want.

I confided to the doctor that I woke up sad and went to bed sad and cried all the time. It feels like I've lost sense of who I am, I said. Everything I thought I knew about myself is falling apart. Falling... apart... the doctor typed, staring into his screen. How many children do you have, and how old are they? he asked. Three children, almost four and just turned eight. And the third? he asked, facing the screen. No, I said, two of them are almost four. He shoved himself away from the desk and rolled towards me slowly. And you think it's strange that you're worn out? he said. I know what you're going to say now, I said, that it's common to be a bit tired when they're young children, especially if you have twins, but this is different. In what way? he said. It's dark, I said. It's unpredictable and getting worse. Do you think about dying? said the doctor. I nodded. For example of cancer or in a fire, I said. But not suicide, I assured him. I'm too cowardly for that. He looked at me for a long time and slowly steered his chair back to its place in front of the screen. I think you need to take a depression test, he said, and called out to the front desk, saying that this patient was probably going to take longer than initially expected.

Let's say that it was possible to reverse the whole thing. That I could meet you for the first time, on the street or at a dinner party, late at night, in a garden. Yes. A garden would make it easy. Then I could start talking to you in that certain way, for example by taking my wine glass outside and standing next to you and regarding what you were regarding, a fig tree, and when you raised your eyes and looked at me there wouldn't be an uncertain bone in my body, and I would first ask, calmly and kindly, with a little nod to the tree, if it weren't amazing that such fantastic plants could flourish and bear fruit on this side of the globe, and when you'd answered, probably in depth, about how climate change makes it possible for tropical plants to survive in what was formerly an Arctic climate, despite everything, there are some upsides on our road to disaster, then I would continue. I've been waiting for you, I would say. And I would be completely new to you, a woman it was impossible to say no to. Come with me, I would say. I'm home alone right now. You would smile at me and ask me to wait. Then you would get your jacket and discretely thank the host. Outside, we would open the door on each side of the taxi and get in. And from there everything could start over again.

But how do you know when something begins? Are there moments of such clarity that they cut through time and split it in two, one before and one after? *The moment I came into the world. The first time someone held me in their arms. The evening I killed a frog. The first time someone said I was beautiful. The morning I looked at myself in the mirror and saw that I'd gotten breasts. The night my daughter was born. The morning you and I met each other. The eggs that loosened. The milk that trickled out. The first time I found a gray hair. The first time I screamed at my child. The first time I hit him.*

No, wait. Why am I saying that, that *I hit my child*. Because I need to know how it sounds, because I need to know how it feels to say something like that in the past tense, as though it actually happened? I didn't *hit* my child. I slapped at him with a towel that was soft after being washed and I missed anyway. And I didn't break his fingers in the door either, they're fine. Swollen, but fine.

The first time I lay next to you, I started to cry like I've never cried before, nor since. I cried because I hadn't met you sooner, I cried about my age, about your age, that we had been walking around, each in our imperfect life, without knowing about each other, I cried for the years we would never have, I cried for the person you'd been without me, the person I was afraid I would be with you. Who are you afraid you will be with me? you said and took my face in your hands. I don't know, I said. Can you be a bit more specific, you said. I'm afraid of losing this, I said. What I am right *now*, at the beginning, that the good in me will disappear. Why would it? you said.

I didn't *hit* my child. There's a difference between slapping at someone with a soft towel and hitting them. Lie still, I'd said to him several times, shut your eyes, I'd also said, it's late. You have to sleep. Now. He got up out of bed anyway. He walked over to the door anyway. I'd already given him several chances, I always give them so many chances, now Mommy's been nice, I tell them, now you have to show me that you can be nice too. Children have the right of codetermination; it's important to show them that what they do and say or don't do or say matters. We'll get through this together. So: be nice. Okay, Mommy, they say then. Yes, yes, yes. Yes. But it isn't enough to just *say* yes all the time, you have to *act* nice as well. You have to show. **THAT YOU CAN HEAR ME.** The adults must, in turn, be clear about what differentiates acceptable and unacceptable behavior. You have to draw clear boundaries. I didn't necessarily mean to threaten them with consequences. I meant to definitively demonstrate that you went too far here, sweetie, now you've been messing around long enough, now you're going to give up. Mommy is getting terribly tired of all of this, Mommy is just a person, too.

Why is my grip so firm. Why do I get so angry. Why does one thing happen then the next then the next and then the impossible. I want to be gentle, safe, calm. Feed, comfort, dry, carry, iron, cuddle, wash, hug, comb, tuck in. Where does this voice come from, these movements – pull, drag, tug, draw, push, dump, lift, throw, crush, threaten, shout, roar – don't think, hold on, defeat the resistance, do – don't think. What latent reactionary patterns exist in my body? Who programmed me this way and how do I sneak past it?

I'm so afraid of my hands.

Now, you have to stop with this eternal gloominess. Children aren't porcelain dolls, they can handle seeing that life isn't just fun and games. You can't walk around pretending everything is harmonious and happy all the time to spare them experiencing negative feelings. How will they learn to handle their own emotional fluctuations when the time comes? No, there's no crime in shedding a tear or getting a bit frustrated.

A bit frustrated. Don't you see how they jump when I enter the room? Don't you understand that soon their delicate bodies will place the outbursts into a system: that and that and that were maybe not an accident or a one-off after all, the one who waits will see, everything can happen again, pull your fingers close, lay still, shut your eyes, don't despair your mother.

To be completely clear about what happened: It had been a long day and a tiring evening and he was refusing to lie down. I'd given him several chances, yet he kept getting out of bed. I. Am. Not. Tired. And then he stood there on the floor with tiny bunched fists and glowered at me and said no to everything I asked him to do and eventually I said that I don't give a damn anymore, go somewhere else, you're keeping your brother awake, I don't want you here. Then he stomped out of the room and I closed the door behind him. No, I didn't quite do that. I didn't close it because it wouldn't close, why wouldn't it close, I shoved, I lay the entire weight of my upper body against the flat of the door, where was the resistance coming from, was it something on the floor? A sock or a toy? Why wouldn't the door close even though I put my weight on it, what was really happening, what was he screaming about, what is it? I shouted, WHAT IS IT NOW? and then I saw it, why didn't I see it right away, why didn't I understand it, why didn't I consider it, there were his fingers in the crack between the door and the frame and I was the one squeezing them, I was the one who still hadn't stopped putting weight on the door even though I heard him screaming, why was my head working so slowly, why weren't my nerves sending the message to my hand that was still clinging to the doorknob, LET GO! I shouted, MOMMY! he screamed and my fingers finally let go and fumbled after his, blue, dark red, brown, he pulled his hand to his chest, he kept screaming, louder and louder and wilder, he would never stop if I didn't stop him, BREATHE! I roared, you have to breathe!

Afterwards, I sat on the floor next to his bed and stroked his forehead, he was still hiccuping, whimpering himself to sleep. My poor little boy. I stroked and stroked. Forehead, hair, forehead, hair, cheek, hair, cheek, forehead. Then his eyelids fluttered shut, my lips fell into the little groove at the top of the bridge of his nose, the soft spot between his eyes. He tasted of salt.

You say, *relax*. You say that children are robust creatures. You say that I make a too big a fuss about everything. You say that I have to stop being so unforgiving towards myself. You say that I can't sink into the depths because of each little thing. You say *these things happen*. You say that I couldn't have known that his fingers were right there, right then. I say that no, I couldn't have possibly known, but what if there is something in me. What if deep down I'm no good at all. What if the woman in the shop was right, that I behave horribly, absurdly, out of control. What if my children will carry all of this with them throughout their lives. What kind of person am I really? You lower the roof of the greenhouse carefully and push your fingers dirty with soil and fertilizer through your hair, you say: I can't answer that.

Eventually I find myself in so many versions that I truly don't know. I was the one who peed on the obstetrician. I'm the one peeling potatoes. I'm the one who still kisses you occasionally. I was the one who played violin, fast and difficult pieces, I was the one who bowed and received applause. I'm the one who washes clothes, separating colors from whites. I'm the one who hums while I do it. I was the one who taught myself to kill garden snails between my toes. I was the one who told my parents that I loved them. I'm the one who reads aloud for my children, who slams the book closed and tells them to be quiet, otherwise we'll just drop the whole thing. I was the one who took care of my sister, opened the door to the loft when she'd cried long enough so that it seemed real, I was the one who felt good when I comforted her. I was the one who loved animals. I'm the one who stops the car and opens the doors and undoes the seatbelts and threatens to drive away from my children. I'm the one who stands in the middle of the kitchen floor roaring at them, I'm the one who shakes them, I'm the one who hulks over them on the floor, I'm the one who is so angry. I didn't use to be so angry.

Come on, I say, it's time for a snack now, sit down and be quiet, what do you want on your toast? Nothing says one and I'm not hungry says the other and butter says the third. Everyone's going to eat and everyone will have a spread on their toast, I say. One, two, three – what do you want? Brown cheese, yellow cheese, pate, fish, jam, sausage, butter, they say over each other, one at a time, I say. And butter isn't a topping. Jerk, she says. Butter isn't a topping, I calmly repeat. So there will be two slices with brown cheese, two with yellow cheese and two with sausage. No! she shouts. Yes, I say. I slice the bread and fetch the toppings from the fridge and butter the slices and cut and count. Two slices, five, six. Jerk, jerk, jerk, she says, and soon they're a choir, Mommy is a jerk, Mommy is a jerk, Mommy is a jerk. THERE! I say patiently, smiling and smacking the plates down on the table in front of them, the plastic cups and the milk carton, there, I repeat. Now we eat. Who wants milk? Me! says one and Me! says the other and Soda! says the third. Now, now, I say, it's Tuesday, no one's getting soda. Do you want milk or water? She stares at me sullenly. Then it'll be milk, I say. I pour glasses for all three and lean back, it's good now, everything's going fine. Then I remember the coffee on the counter behind me. I push the chair out, get up, turn my back to them and pour the steaming black liquid into a mug, take a careful sip, sit down again, and scotch my chair in. I spot the white milk across the whole table, her upside-down cup. What are you doing? I say. I turn my back for three seconds and you do *this*?! She crosses her arms. I didn't want milk, she says. And so you think it's okay to do something like this? I say. Her face is red, her brothers are quiet, they keep chewing, they look at me, one attempts a small smile. Always! I shout. You always manage some nonsense if you don't get exactly what you want! You don't understand anything, she mumbles. You're such a jerk. Her brothers nod. Jerk, Mommy is a jerk. That is the

rudest thing I've ever heard! I shout, I can't believe that you're behaving yourself like this and even getting your brothers involved! Get out! Go up to your room – NOW.

The first time my voice hardened this way, I was startled. Who talked like this? Where did this come from? Now that's enough! Give it up. I can't stand this anymore, do you hear? Do you hear? God dammit, fucking shit! I hissed. Then she went quiet. A few drops of milk ran over her cheeks and back towards her ear. My words echoed in the room, an old echo, I didn't remember.

I would never use physical force with her. That was the line. Couldn't she just sleep. Couldn't I just feel a bit less weary. A bit happier. Couldn't she just scream a bit less, eat when she's supposed to, not struggle against everything, not bite off my nipples – fuck!

No, I wouldn't say that I shook her, I didn't shake her *like that*, it wasn't serious or very aggressive in a way that could result in any after effects.

But then one Wednesday morning I'm standing there with one kid in one arm and one pulling at the other and one who refuses to put on her winter boots, she wants to wear sandals, so go out then, I say, go out in the garden and see how cold it is and how slippery it is, but she just stands there and stares at me, defiant. No. It's not cold. Then I turn and put the second kid on the floor next to the third, then I'll focus on you two instead, I say. We need to put on your snowsuits, do you think we can manage that? No, they don't want to either. Sweeties, I say. Can you please help me out? They shake their heads. No then, I say, and I fling the snowsuits and scarves and hats at them, the little bodies almost disappear beneath layers of wool and nylon, then you can get ready yourselves, I don't care! Mommy! she shouts at my back, you can't hit us! That. That it's enough. I descend on her, what are you saying, I hiss. I'm standing here and trying to get three kids out of the house in the morning and no one is helping, not even you, the biggest one, and you start talking about hitting? What is wrong with you, really? It hurt them, she says and points at the two heaps behind me. Hurt?! By their own soft clothes?! And then I'm suddenly next to her and grab her arms and hold her tightly, now I am so FUCKING UPSET, I say, by what you are always saying to me and always refusing to help, can't you just try to behave like a normal child instead? CAN'T YOU?! No, she says, and then I shake her, now that's enough, I say. NOW. THAT'S. ENOUGH. And finally she's quiet, finally everyone is quiet.

Later they're laughing and running and playing and hollering around my legs again, three bodies that are doing something and needing something and wanting something and saying something and crying for something and asking for something and arguing about something and here I stand, in the middle of the kitchen floor, with an enormous ladle in one hand and a pot of boiling water in the other and SHHH! I snarl, can't you see that I'm making food, don't you see that I'm COOKING? but they don't see and they don't hear and they don't stop and what can a poor person do, I can't take any more of this! I shout, please! Play somewhere else! I scream, and when they still don't listen I stomp on the floor and lash out at them with the ladle, SHH! GO AWAY! YOU ARE WORSE THAN RATS! GET OUT!

Blood thunders through the muscles, the pulse rises, the ears roar, the stomach ties up in knots, the lungs constrict, the mouth gasps for breath, the body doesn't think, the body just is, the hands don't mean to do anything, the hands just do it. Do, do, do. A little body and a much bigger body on the floor. But then suddenly your voice is in the door behind us, jeez, you say, what's going on here? I have no idea, I pant and let go of the little figure beneath me, he's refusing to clean up after himself, he's refusing to do anything, there's absolutely no one in this house who listens to me anymore, what am I supposed to do, I don't know what I should do. Daddy, he snuffles. Lie there, I say. Your dad can fix this. And I get up, without looking at him, without looking at you, this can't continue this way, you say, no, it can't, I say, now it's your turn to get him to listen. The door slams behind me.

But everyone has been a tiny, innocent dot, even me. A dot, I wasn't flushed down the toilet, I didn't slide down someone's leg, I was neither unlucky nor unwanted. I grew bigger. A visible bulge in my mother's stomach. I was born five weeks early. I was a bundle, a voracious mouth, I was so nice when I was small. Winsome. I smiled at strangers, laughed freely and toothlessly. I slept beneath the table, I slept in the car, I slept on the beach, I was so calm, you could take me wherever you wanted. I was pleasant and good. Three kilos of soft mass, ten kilos, twenty, still one that my mother would hold, smell, kiss. So irresistibly delicate, impossible not to enclose in the heart.

Number one slid out of me, and mostly resembled a mussel's innards. Down the inside of the thigh, down, down, along the leg, a lump that lay between my feet and seemed to want to melt into the dorm room's wall-to-wall carpet.

Why? Don't you want children? Do you not like children? Are you not ready for children? Do you think that it's ethically justifiable to think like that, to get rid of what isn't convenient, just like that – gone, do you really think that a child will ever be convenient? Don't you have a guilty conscience? Aren't you going to think about the child? That never was? How old would it be now, two, five, nineteen. Or maybe you don't think of it as a child at all? Don't you know that they already have feet and hands and fingers at week ten, did you not look properly after you washed up and put on your pants back on and deemed yourself innocent?

I *wanted* number two. That's the infinitesimal difference between sliding down onto a wall-to-wall carpet and coming into the world. I *wanted* to have her. And for a while I wanted her dad, too. But then I didn't. Then it was suddenly just her and I. She had her own smell, I don't remember it anymore, something like cucumber and salt water. She had her own heat, a glowing stomach, the skin on her neck, her cheeks, her hands. I had plenty of time. When she was at her dad's I pressed my face into t-shirts and sweaters size 98, 104, 110, Goodnight, I said to the duvet, the stuffed animals, the blanky, the pillowcase that lay curled in the corner. When she came back I feigned normality and continuity but to no avail – she caught me red-handed every time. Mommy why do you stare at me like that. Mommy stop laughing. Mommy let go. Mommy I can't breathe.

Eventually you get used to most things, eventually everything will get better. Eventually you learn to deal with things off and on, off and on. The weeks with, the weeks without. Eventually you don't grieve anymore or miss anymore or count the days anymore or dissolve into a puddle of bad conscience. Everything will be alright. There are worse things to worry about than a child that comes and goes. Eventually, all the troublesome thoughts and potential horror scenarios will sink into the chasms of the body and disappear, there's space for so much, there's room for everything. Pick up your feet, don't mess around in the mud, keep swimming. And by all means, don't take your feelings of inadequacy out on your surroundings.

Stop playing with your food, I say to her, eat properly. Or is this dinner not good enough for you? Taste the meat at least. In this house, we taste everything and in this house, we sit in our chairs until everyone's done eating, that's how we do things *here*. In *this* house. Do you remember what we say when we leave the table? Can you take your plate and cutlery and put it on the kitchen counter? Can you please respond to me when I ask you something? HELLO! Do you not hear me talking to you? Is this how you learned to behave at your dad's?

Is this the kind of mother I want to be?

You thought plants and humans could be compared. You stuck your fingers in the flowerbed and said I had to stop worrying about weeds that only existed in my own head.

We're visiting a friend. Red juice cascades over the table, the chair, her dress, drips down onto an expensive wool carpet on a freshly finished wood floor in a lavish Swiss-style villa, SORRY! she shouts, shrinking back, but sweetie, my friend says, it's just juice, relax, hon. SORRY! my daughter repeats, I didn't mean to, the tears are already on their way out, she's looking at me, her cheeks are blood red. My friend gives her a squeeze and strokes her hair, don't cry, my darling, this is nothing to despair over! In this house we make messes all the time, a little juice doesn't hurt! No, I say, a little juice doesn't hurt, right, sweetie? She looks at me. I didn't mean to, she whispers. I smile. Of course you didn't mean to, I say, everyone knows that.

All those years I was unstoppable, immortal. Riding my bike wasted through the city at night, the in front of me back of a boy perhaps, perhaps not. Staggering into side streets, stumbling around in the backyards, falling down giggling onto strange beds. Did it ever occur to me to thank life for still running through me when I woke up. Did I ever take my perfect skin, or theirs for that matter, for anything but granted? Did I ever think that the time spent exfoliating thighs and upper arms, shaving legs carefully, staring at a drop of water trickling down the inside of the shower cabin, would be taken from me. Apartments, lovers, jobs, places. It all came to me, every possibility was open to me. Gold in them hills.

No, but it isn't true. De nostalgiske fragmentene lyver. Det føltes jo ikke sånn da, ikke i Kyoto, ikke i Berlin, ikke i Helsinki. Ikke i Paris. Look, and look carefully. Der ligger jeg i sengen og gråter, i trettende etasje med balkong og utsikt over byen, ett rom og kjøkken som jeg har leid i fire måneder fordi jeg kan, fordi ingenting eller ingen holder meg tilbake fra å gjøre det, fordi jeg når som helst tør foreta meg hva som helst. Bli fransk for eksempel. Bestille kaffe og bakervarer om morgenen, på et stadig mindre fremmed språk, til damen bak disken endelig anerkjenner forsøket og skyver en ekstra croissant i min retning. Ned i den brune papirposen. À la maison, Mademoiselle. Be someone else, be new. Men hjertet slår så tungt og truende i brystet om natten, jeg drømmer ikke, jeg faller ned gjennom lakenet og madrassen, metallbunnen, det syntetiske teppet, plankegulvet, bærebjelkene og takplatene, ned gjennom etasjene, ned, ned, ned uten ende, i mørket, og når kroppen rykker til i fallet, når jeg våkner fordi jeg roper eller omvendt, når alt knyter seg og jeg tror jeg skal dø, vet jeg ikke hva som gjør meg mest redd, lyden av mitt eget skrik eller erkjennelsen: No one will need me in the morning, no one will miss me in a very long time.