

My Mother's Rages

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When my daughter was very young, spending summers with my parents in a small community in upstate New York, my mother's love and affection, mysteriously lacking from my own childhood, found its way into every part of her life. She and my mother were best friends, unpretentious in their devotion to one another. They took nature walks, memorized poems, played cards. After lunch it was game shows. When my daughter jumped into the pool, my mother caught her; when she hit tennis balls, my mother returned them. From breakfast until bedtime, they were inseparable. But that person who I allowed to care for my child, who did so with grace and joy, displaying enduring patience and affection, bore such little resemblance to the woman I knew as my mother, she might as well have been a stranger, unrecognizable to me. Someone who never existed when I was my daughter's age.

I couldn't speak about this. It would have sounded terrible no matter how I could have phrased it; the way my mother used to lash out, fling whatever was at hand, her emotions ready to fire. She never offered warnings for whatever set her off. No "Watch out, here I come." Her rages throughout my childhood were instantaneous, unpredictable, and terrifying, aimed mostly at me. Early on I didn't have the ability to understand why she acted that way. I don't think she understood either.

Years later I learned that when my mother was twelve years old, on a day that never ended and a night when no one slept, tragedy had changed her life forever.

Early one Saturday morning, her father, Aaron, left their tenement apartment in Manhattan to be driven in his friend's new Buick to orphaned cousins. My grandmother, along with my mother, Rose, her brother Benny, ten, her sisters Dora, fourteen, and

Esther, sixteen, endured endless waiting but with no word from the only family in the building who had a telephone, it wasn't until the next day when they read: ONE DEAD, FOUR HURT WHEN AUTO HITS POLE, *Car Sideswiped by a Speeder, Who Flees. Special to the New York Times, July 16, 1926. Aaron...44 years old, of 236 East Eighty-ninth Street, instantly killed...*

The family would still wear the outfits he designed and sewed for them, but as customary, they didn't dare speak about the tragedy. Aaron's death remained a voiceless presence, as voiceless as his children at their father's funeral.

To help support a family without a father, and her older sisters already working, my mother could no longer attend the Hebrew Technical School for Girls where she would have graduated in a year. At fifteen she found full-time work doing alterations in a fancy Madison Avenue dress shop. Evenings, she returned home and gathered her dolls from the fire escape outside the kitchen window where she had placed them each morning for fresh air and sunshine. By the time she was twenty-one, she was overseeing some ten seamstresses, many twice her age, at a renowned Manhattan interior decorating business, her sewing, design, and fabrication irreproachable. She secretly dated an upholsterer, a blond-haired, soft-spoken Hungarian immigrant. "It was the Depression," she'd say. "If the boss knew your father and I were keeping company, one mistake in cutting or measuring, we'd lose our jobs." When he proposed, she attached strings: "I have to work, contribute to my brother's tuition until he graduates Cornell University Veterinary School, so no children for five years."

No matter her talents or aspirations, my mother was hemmed in, thwarted, stopped. Even growing up, wherever she looked, she was surrounded by cement: buildings, sidewalks, stoops. She made up her mind to one day live in the country.

When she attended her brother's graduation she was pregnant. With World War II raging, she gave birth; my father barely held me in his arms and was drafted. For three years it was just the two of us. Then he returned, and her life changed all over again. She got pregnant, and I cried endlessly at the strange man living in our apartment. Perhaps I refused to take a nap or stay in my crib the day she grabbed the iron cord from the

kitchen's broom closet and struck me across my bottom. When my father came home from work, she tugged at my pajamas to show him the welts. I remember standing obediently on view.

When I was five, perched on the kitchen counter, she poured a bottle of Canada Dry ginger ale over my head. A shock of icy carbonated soda rushed down my body because I might have asked for a drink more than once.

When I was eight and my mother's sister, Aunt Dora, insisted I had said something fresh, my mother dragged me to the sink by my hair and washed my mouth out with a cake of yellow kosher soap. For several minutes I gagged on horrible-tasting mush.

When my mother came at my little brother and me with the wooden handle of the feather duster for "carrying on," of which we were regularly accused, I'd sit on my bed, dangling my legs so she wouldn't suspect I'd hidden him behind the dust ruffle. She'd whack my shoulder, an ankle. My victory for saving him.

Yet when she struck me, I didn't feel pain. And I didn't look for bruises because I didn't believe I had any. Maybe my fear of her not knowing what she would do to me next, where she would come at me and with what, blinded me to what was actually happening. Or maybe I was so filled with my mother's anger, I didn't have room for my own.

I thought if I were an excellent student, helpful at home, modest, thoughtful, caring, obedient, it might calm her like ointment on a wound, or a Band-Aid, sealing up her anger. It didn't.

Yet the woman who acted towards me in terrible ways was the same woman who soothed my nightmares after seeing *The Wizard of Oz*; taught her left-handed daughter to knit and crochet; soothed toothaches and sunburn with homemade remedies; took me to *Gypsy* with Ethel Merman on Broadway; gave me *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Ethan Frome*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Jane Eyre* when I was thirteen. I loved and feared her, and wanted to hug and run from her all at the same time.

The closest my mother came to country life was when summer's oppressive heat and lack of air conditioning made sleeping in our Bronx apartment unbearable. Under her leadership, our family of four, along with Aunt Dora, her two children, and our grandmother crammed into our cream-colored 1952 Ford sedan for the three-hour trip to the Catskill Mountains, Ferndale, New York. Between the ages of ten to thirteen, this is where I spent July and August. Unfortunately, my mother's love of fresh air and sweet-smelling grass did little to prevent her rages.

Lillian's Cottages, a *kuchalaine*, Yiddish for "cook alone," referred to the large communal kitchen and adjoining dining room shared among some ten families. My father helped us settle into our room in the colonial-styled main house, left early Monday for work, and reappeared Friday evenings, like the other fathers.

One day, at the top of a steep grassy hill on the property, me, my brother, and the summer children were setting up a pup tent my father had bought. As the oldest, I took charge. With everyone anxious to squeeze inside, I ignored the voice calling me from below. Eventually I glanced over the hill's edge. It was my mother. I raced to the bottom and in a split second the fire in her eyes informed me of my mistake. She grabbed my shoulders. "Didn't you hear me calling you?" she screamed. "Didn't you?" She pushed me to the ground. Her smacks caught my arms. "Why didn't you come?" she yelled. I rolled to avoid her punches, her kicks. "Didn't you hear?" I flung my arms in front of my face to protect my head, rolled in another direction, but she was everywhere. Women from the kitchen came running. My brother, the children, watched silently.

"Rosie, Rosie. Stop it." My aunt Dora tried to pull my mother away, but my mother was relentless. She tried again, providing space for me to jump to my feet. I ran to the main house, up the stairs, and shut the door to our room. There was no lock, so I hid in the closet, a thin curtain covering an alcove. Hurting, shaky, ignorant of my crime, I was free to cry, but wouldn't give my mother the satisfaction. *I'll run away from home. I'll run away for good after this.* I heard footsteps. A hand moved the curtain. It was my cousin Arlene, wide-eyed. More footsteps. Arlene squeezed beside me. The curtain

moved again. It was my mother. “Go downstairs.” Her voice was tight. Arlene disappeared. “Sit on the bed.” I did.

“Why do you do these things to me?” I wanted to shout at her but didn’t dare.

“It was the recipe from Mrs. Silverman’s husband, the chef,” my mother was saying as she sat beside me. “Six perfect salmon cakes browned in butter. The women watched me prepare. A special lunch. I called and you never came.”

She had trampled me, pounded my body, turned me into an embarrassing public spectacle and was offering an explanation! What did it matter? Nothing she did to me mattered anymore. I wore a bra. I had gotten my period. A boy had kissed me on the lips.

I used to think she couldn’t help herself. She didn’t know what she was doing. Her emotional blitzes were unpremeditated. Like the night she flung a pot of chicken paprikash at my father, who wouldn’t taste it because he knew it wasn’t as good as his mother’s Hungarian cooking. From behind the kitchen door I watched red and white speckled sauce and seasoned poultry ooze down our living room wall. My father disappeared into the bedroom, but I couldn’t sleep, afraid her outbursts might be catching, like an infection, and how could I protect myself?

All I ever wanted was to forgive her. I was desperate to forgive her. Over the years I searched for reasons in Freud and Jung and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, always wishing that she’d love me as much as I loved her.

The hurt she had caused was so intertwined with my attachment to her, it followed me to college, upstate New York. Her rages were who she was. I had to accept them. And though my grievances towards her neither seethed nor grew, still she was beside me—that tenacious bond.

While I was feeling homesick, my mother’s life, at forty-seven, took off. Fueled by her love of learning, her lifelong mantra was: “I’ve always educated myself.” She enrolled for her GED, passed with top scores, and was hired as a clerk in the local branch of the New York Public Library, the only job she ever had that didn’t require her to sew. She passed her driving test after five tries which freed her to go wherever she chose without my father sitting beside her, criticizing. For classes at a conservative synagogue, she

practiced between thin blue lines inside soft-covered notebooks the shapes and vowels of the twenty-two-letter alphabet. “If you wanted to read and write Hebrew, you should have married a rabbi,” my father told her. She continued her studies at Yeshiva University’s Department of Adult Education, eventually earning 112 credits.

During visits home from college, I saw changes in her as if she had made use of necessary parts that had previously eluded her. She had an ease. Her body relaxed. Her voice gentle. *I am fixed*, she seemed to say. My mother, of the obedient women’s generation, had broken free of boundaries, nameless or known, and gained an independence she had always longed for—not a graduation from high school or a college degree, but meaningful achievements of her own choosing. Her self-confidence, increasingly on view, surprised me. She joined thousands in the ‘60s Vietnam War protest at the U.N., the ‘70s Women’s March for Equality, practiced yoga when few knew what that was. Whatever resources she had summoned allowed her to overcome the mania that used to control her. That beating I received in the Catskills represented the end of her punishing me. I offered her what I had long ago decided I never would: my admiration.

At fifty-seven my mother got her house in suburbia, became a master gardener, told everyone, “I live in the country.” By then I was a divorced single parent. It had taken five years of marriage to realize that the handsome man whom I assumed would protect me from my mother’s anger and hurt was expert at reigniting both with his inflexible, controlling personality. I had unknowingly walked into the same situation from which I was determined to escape.

While I worked full time in marketing, commuting to Wall Street from Westchester, my daughter’s summers were spent learning what was important in life from what my mother held closest to her heart: family, poetry, music, artistic endeavors. When her playmates came knocking, it was “Can Rosie play with us?” My mother, the Pied Piper! Where had her affinity for children come from? Feeling especially fatigued after a day of caring for my daughter, “I’ve done this before, you know,” she admonished me.

“No you haven’t,” I wanted to say, but it was late in the day and she had long ago forgotten what I thought no longer mattered to me—her excitable episodes. It took me

another ten years until I met the right man and married him for the right reasons. I decided that my mother had made similar strides from who she was when I was a child allowing what was probably waiting inside her all along to flourish.

Throughout my mother's long life, the love between her and my daughter connected me to what I might otherwise never have known: Anger was a flexible commodity. I could release it, let it fade in the process of living, or turn it into something like gratitude or understanding. I experienced all three.

So much had come to me through my mother's eyes. Her knowledge, her fine taste, her sense of beauty have guided me to a more perfect reckoning: Forgiveness, it seemed, was less of a mad dash, more of a steady uphill climb. I had become so unobtrusively the person she had intended over the years, I barely noticed.