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# Rule No. 8

by Caroline Bruckner

**Rule No. 1: Never cry** where Father can see it.

There were eight candles on the cake. I blew them out in one breath. Mother ran her hand through my hair, but I pulled away. I was counting the hours. "When is he coming home?" I whined. It didn't matter so much that he wasn't here now, if he would just come home today. Just this one day.

"Later, darling," answered my mother dutifully, but she looked away when she said it.

"A doctor needs to be at the hospital," my mother continued as she offered me a second piece of cake. "They need him at the hospital."

\* \* \*

**Rule No. 2: Be a big girl.**

I forced my hands to be still. I forced my hands to not reach out to touch him, the miracle of him. He had come home late that night. I had not slept. I had been waiting for his steps at the door, for his key to turn in the lock. For the air to change the way it did when he was inside the house. I stood at my door watching him undress and brush his teeth. He did not see me. I could tell he was tired, so I didn't will him to look at me. Poor Father.

\* \* \*

**Rule No. 3: Be strong.**

He was gone again when I woke up. It was like that sometimes. We didn't see him for days. I couldn't bear to think of how tired he must be. Of what he sacrificed for us, for all the sick people at the hospital. I felt my mother watching me, but I only looked down at my new blue shoes. I pretended sometimes that he was sitting in his chair, newspaper in his lap. Sometimes it felt so real I turned to tell Jonas off for making so much noise, to tell him to stop crashing the tin cans together when Father was trying to get some rest.

\* \* \*

**Rule No. 4: Put things back where they belong.**

I was allowed to take down the encyclopedia in Father's study if I put it back in the exact same place before I went to bed. My mother irritated me by never being careful enough when she dusted and aired the room. I went behind her as she wiped the desk with a damp rag, and I made sure the heavy marble pencil holder and deer-bone letter knife were never off place by more than a fraction of a millimeter. He liked to have his things in order. There was a pride in that. I would not beg to sit in his lap. His well-ironed trousers could crease, and that had to be avoided. I could not endure his having wrinkled trousers, even if he would have

invited me to sit on his knee. I sneered at other children who climbed into their father's lap, behaving like little babies.

\* \* \*

Rule No. 5: Do as you are told.

I could be quiet for a long time. He read the newspaper while lying on the sofa, but I knew he was secretly snoozing. I pretended to read a book. I liked being close to him, to hear him breathing. I willed him to look up and see me, to see how good I was, reading the book.

"What are you reading, my dove?"

"I am learning about all the blood vessels in the body."

"Clever girl," he said and got back to his newspaper. My heart swelled then, and happiness was everywhere, in my legs and in the chair I was sitting on and in the dust in the carpet.

\* \* \*

Rule No. 6: Don't walk too close to the river.

I could walk the path by the river and be home in ten minutes flat. But, since that kid Einar slipped and fell into the ice-cold water last winter and drowned, Father wants me to go through the village. I am not as stupid and clumsy as Einar. I would not slip and die even if I ran down the path, but I didn't want Father to worry. He had enough to worry about at the hospital. I wondered sometimes how it felt to be dead. Mother said Einar looked down at us from Heaven. But, Father told me not to listen to her stories about people living in the sky. When you were dead, you were dead. He should know: he was the doctor. When you were dead, everything was black. Just black.

\* \* \*

Rule No. 7: Don't ask too many questions.

It was when I saw the dead bird that I knew something was not right. I unlocked the gate and locked it behind me and walked up the gravel path to our front door. The bird must have tried to fly through the window, fooled by the reflection of the tree in the glass. It was a chaffinch. Lying in the snow with its neck broken, it looked sad. I had to think of all the skeletons of the other birds I had buried. Behind the cherry tree at the back of the house, there was an animal cemetery. I prayed for the animals I buried, even though I don't believe in God. I had to bury the chaffinch, but first I needed to tell Mother I was home, and I needed to get my bad gloves. The door was locked. In my entire life, the front door to our house had never been locked.

"Klara!" came a voice behind me.

I didn't have to turn to know it was Aunt Margaret at the gate. Aunt Margaret was our neighbor. She had a wart above her lip with a hair growing out of it, like one solitary whisker. She was not my aunt at all.

“The baby is coming; she has gone to help with the baby!”

Aunt Margaret was nice. She smelled of cookies. I liked going over to her house; there would always be something or other baking in the oven.

“I need to bury the bird!” I shouted back. “A chaffinch.”

She came through the gate, huffing and puffing. “I don’t understand why you don’t put something up to scare the poor birds away,” she scolded.

“I’ll come over when I’m done,” I called. I would have to bury the bird with my nice gloves. Or, maybe, I’d take them off.

“My Hans has a terrible flu. Your mother told me to drive you to your father.”

I remember three years ago when my mother lost her tooth, and we drove to the city. That was the only time I had ever been to the hospital. I had to wait in the car outside. I remember staring at the three-story building with the many windows, imagining my father in his white coat helping the poor sick people. I imagined the grateful faces as they thanked him for saving their lives.

\* \* \*

Rule No. 8: Don’t turn back.

Oscar, Aunt Margaret’s bald husband, didn’t talk much as we drove the motorway to the city. I wanted to button up my coat, it was cold in the truck, but I didn’t dare move. I liked sitting high up above everyone else, looking into the cars driving next to us. The people looked small, and that felt good. I didn’t like that Oscar coughed every few minutes and clicked his teeth as if thinking over something he had planned earlier. I had heard about men kidnapping children, but Aunt Margaret wouldn’t allow that, I thought. A red car passed, and a boy sitting in the backseat looked up at me and stretched his tongue out. *I am going to see my father at the hospital*, I thought, and I wasn’t angry at all with the rude boy. I let my hair swing in front of my face. *I don’t see you, boy*.

“I’ll help you,” Oscar finally said as he stopped the car in front of the hospital. He came around and opened the door for me and held my hand as I jumped down.

“Thank you,” I said, looking at a dirty spot on his rough blue workers’ shirt. My father would never have worn a shirt with a stain on it. He was, of course, not a farmer.

There was quite a crowd in front of the entrance doors. A man with a broken leg came hobbling down the stairs. A woman with a tube in her neck. A boy with a bandage round his head. I thought, *I am going to see my father. He saves people’s lives*. I smiled at them. It almost felt as if I had saved them.

“Are you the doctor’s girl?” The nurse had nice curly brown hair, and I liked the way she said “doctor’s.” “Come with me,” she said and turned on her heel.

We walked down a bright corridor with many doors and then turned a corner. There were no windows here. There were framed drawings, obviously done by kids, in a neat row on the bright wall. On the fifth drawing, there was a girl with big wings.

“You are lucky to have a dad like the doctor.” The nurse turned and smiled at me, and I smiled back, feeling my backbone go all warm. “He is so good with the children,” she added then. I wondered how many children this woman had, and why my father had met them.

“Don’t go near the doors. Wait here. I’ll get him for you.” She pointed at a red plastic chair in a corner, then turned to talk a minute to another nurse passing.

I sat down. If I sat on the edge of the chair, my feet almost touched the floor. There was a candy wrapping stuck under the leg of the chair. I looked at my woolen stockings and saw how they were all wrinkled up at my ankles. Anxiously, I pulled them up at the knee and made them look all smooth and orderly. I wanted to be clean and cute. I tore my hat from my head and combed my hair back with my fingers. I didn’t like when my hair was in a frizz around my face. I sat with my hands still in my lap and waited. *He’ll take me around to see his patients, I thought. An old biddy with shaking hands will give me a sweet. Then, we might drink hot chocolate in the café by the entrance. Maybe he will hold my hand as we cross the street to where the car is parked.*

I looked over to the nurse, willing her to hurry before I had counted to three. She, at once, turned and opened the big doors. For a second, a wave of shrieking and laughter swept out at me from the other side.

The clock on the opposite wall showed two minutes after two.

I felt so dizzy and weak I could hardly turn my head to read the sign above the big doors. I looked down at my hands tearing at my hat. I willed them to stop. There must be a mistake. The nurse must have taken me to the wrong ward. I got up from the chair and slowly started walking back the way I had come. I thought I’d better go back to the entrance hall and wait there. Father would, of course, be waiting by the doors for me, glancing outside, wondering why I had not yet shown up. I liked that I would surprise him by coming from the other direction. I would wave at him. We would visit the sick old people and have hot chocolate. I walked steadily down the hall and almost turned the corner.

It was a strange thing my feet did. I was not allowed to turn the corner. I willed my feet to move along, but they did not want to move. I thought of grass and running joyfully over it, and still they did not hear me. I stood there for a minute watching a piece of chewing gum stuck to the floor. I knew then I had to go through the doors. “At the count of three,” I said loudly and turned on my heels.

When I was small, I used to lie in my bedroom in the front of the house and listen to the cars passing at night, feeling deep inside myself for the right number. *The fifth car passing will be his, I said to myself, starting to count. One. Two. Three. Four.* Sometimes, an hour could pass. *Five.* My heart stopped a beat waiting for the car to slow down and turn into the driveway. I knew it would be him.

When his car finally parked under the big tree, I ran to the window, leaning against the glass, feeling the cold on my forehead, knowing how close he was. Then, I would count the steps up to the front door. There were twelve steps, always twelve. I was

waiting to see him. At step ten, I could see his face briefly in the light from the front door. Mother always kept it burning; we kept the light on for him. I used to imagine him coming straight up the stairs to my bed to kiss me good-night. He would stand for a moment leaning over me, taking in the wonder of me, his little girl sleeping. He would look close to see if I had been crying, then stroke my cheek gently, once only, to not wake me up. "My dove," he would whisper. "Sweet dreams."

He never did come into my room. Not once. Every night I was awake, waiting for him. *He is too tired, poor Father*, I used to tell myself over and over, lying in the dark room. *I am a big girl, and Father is too tired.*

I saw him as soon as the doors opened.

A girl with a dirty ponytail was sitting in his lap. She was laughing and pulling at the stethoscope he wore around his neck. He ruffled her hair and tilted his head back as he smiled.

There is a moment of utter incredulity before the mind can accept something it had thought impossible. I was chilled. I could not breathe. I wanted to run. I wanted to run all the way back home again. Back to the dead bird. No, way back before the dead bird, even. I wanted to run all the way back to school, where I would have lingered in the yard for half an hour making snowballs instead of hurrying home the way I had.

The doctor turned, smiling, and then the smile disappeared. He looked at me in the doorway. He did not see the pieces of my broken heart on the floor.

\* \* \*

Rule No. 9: There is danger everywhere.

A sharp stone and a slippery patch of ice. A frozen mushroom buried under the snow. A dark staircase in the middle of the night.

The day I had decided to be the day was a Saturday. I woke up and heard them turning in their beds in the next room. I had slept well, and I felt strong. I did not dress. I went down the hall, quiet as a mouse. I carried the box in my left hand. I did not look around, even though I could feel my mother stirring as I locked the door to the bathroom. I willed her back to sleep before I undressed. I folded my nightgown neatly and then stood naked in front of the mirror. It was important to be naked. The item in the box had been chosen carefully. I opened the lid of the old cigar box. The chaffinch was lying on a bed of straw. It didn't stink so very badly. "My dear," I whispered to the dead bird in my magic voice. "Today is the day, my dear."

I placed the box on the lid of the toilet and then knelt down in front of it. The tiles were cold and hard. I watched the bird for a moment. I watched its deadness. The round eyes looked as if crying. The little beak was half open. "We won't sing anymore, little bird. Little dead birds don't sing."

I never doubted I would succeed. One after the other, I plucked the feathers and stuck them into the skin of my arms. A thought came to my mind, a thought of

putting my nightgown on again and going back to my room. A thought of Mother frying pancakes and running her fingers through my hair. But the ache in me was too strong. There was no avoiding it: there was no way for me to go on.

The clouds were moving quickly across the sky. A sharp wind hit at my naked skin. As I stepped up on the windowsill, the sun shone straight into my eyes. It was a good sign. I held the chaffinch in my right hand, showing it the world one last time. I smiled out over the garden. I smiled at the old cherry tree and the gate and the meadow beyond. I smiled at Aunt Margaret's house and at the river, and I smiled into all the hearts sleeping. A cold smile it was. I thought about Einar, that silly kid, who had accidentally fallen into the river and died. If you are going to die, don't be so sloppy as to do it accidentally. I thought about Father and how he would be really happy. I thought about how he had looked with them, his back straight and his movements easy and his face bright and caring. Then, I thought about how tired he seemed at home, at home where I was. I looked at the trees in the distance moving and then at my feet, half inside and half outside.

I felt safe. I pressed the bird into my heart until my fingers felt sticky. And then I sang. I sang as I let myself fall.

Would I have not done it if I had known?

I would never again dress and walk around by myself. I would never again know how it felt to live without pain. To run down the gravel path. To jump into the ice-cold river and swim to the other side.

I had fallen, and my life had fallen with me. My body was destroyed, but something was also healed. He cared for me then, at the hospital. He saw me, finally, because he knew why I had done it, why I had jumped out the window. My mother cried. But Father, he smiled.

\* \* \*

Rule No. 10: Love conquers all.

They were slow, our days. Some days we had lunch in the garden. He carried me

out then, even as I got older. I would fall asleep in the sun, listening to the insects buzzing and the birds chirping while he read one of his large books, sitting on the bench next to me.

“We’ll always be together, Father, won’t we?” I whispered just as I was about to nod off.

“We will, my dove. We will.”

