

Labor Day

I'm feeding the baby strawberry yogurt and crooning "You are My Sunshine" like I actually mean it, when I hear a scream and a smash. A voice inside my head whispers that, this time, there very well may be blood.

"Aagh!" Ozzie screeches.

I wish my son would go away.

"Mommy!" Ozzie screams. "Help! I need you!"

He's not going anywhere.

"Julia, I just have to go check on Ozzie," I say, sliding the spoon out of her mouth and depositing it in the kitchen sink. "I'll be right back."

I start to get up; the baby's lower lip trembles. "Mama?" she says.

"I'll just be a minute." She's safe and confined in her high chair. I blow her a kiss, then take one step away; she whimpers. I make my heart a piece of steel and take a second step; she cries with all the might in her 13-month-old lungs.

Fine. I don't need more trouble. I spin around and haul her out of the high chair. From the family room comes sounds of clashing light sabers and heralding music. I glance in – there's Noah, lips a slack crescent, eyes round and fixed on the television, nothing for him in the world but this *Star Wars* movie that, thank God, he wants to watch again and again and again.

These children. They need me and they crave me and they clutch me. They throw things and they break things and they walk away, leaving piles and piles of things in their wake clumped like jagged animal droppings, down the halls, around the rooms. The house demands its share of flesh and time too: laundry to fold, counters to wipe, a floor to sweep, trash to take out, a dinner to make, a lunch to clean up from.

However. There is -- on the dining room table, amid the charitable solicitations, the Scandinavian furniture catalogue and the AT&T bill that came in the mail today – the latest issue of *People Magazine*. I no longer read novels or go to the movies. I can't muster the energy to binge-watch Netflix. But *People*, with its breathless accounts of royal baby bumps and celebrity marital smash-ups and brutal murders of innocent mothers and children, is my cupcake without calories. It's my reward for surviving another dull and still hectic and maybe even soul-pulverizing Sunday.

"I can't!" Ozzie yells. "I can't do it!"

My son thinks he can't go to kindergarten. As if he had a choice. As if any of us do. When this endless Labor Day weekend finishes, Tom and I will walk the boys the two short blocks to the elementary school. We will deposit Noah in second grade, and Ozzie in kindergarten, and walk back home with only Julia in her stroller.

Except. Every morning since his birthday in March, Ozzie's woken me up at 1:00 a.m., whispering in my ear that he's too little to go to "big boy school." All summer, he's insisted he doesn't know his letters, doesn't know his numbers, even though I have preschool art projects proving the opposite. It seems like I spent half of last month dragging him to the fence that separates the school yard from the sidewalk, force-feeding him stories about all the fun he'll have there this fall (his little hands white-knuckle

clasped around the metal chain links, his hazel eyes wide and staring at the red-enameled monkey bars, the royal blue plastic slide). And now, every waking hour for the last two days, if he's not driving his brother or sister nuts, he's making a last stand in his room, threatening to not go anywhere ever again.

But he will. He will.

"MOMMY!" Ozzie says, his voice high-pitched and narrow.

"Coming, Oz." I walk, neither quickly nor slowly, because a measured pace is a measured mind. And yet, as I round the corner, my heart gives a pound inside my chest. One day, it says, there will be a real calamity.

But all I see in the boys' bedroom is an uninjured foot poking up from the narrow space between the bed and the wall. The thing inside me that clenches, releases.

"Oz?"

"I'm down here, Mommy. I can't get up." An arm juts out and waves around.

I put Julia on the floor and she crawls over to investigate. Sweet baby Julia. So even-tempered. So cheery. A smile never far from her face – unless, that is, I try to have a moment to myself. Then it's full hysteria, all at once. Oh, Julia, our oops baby, the product of a tenth anniversary getaway that involved too much marijuana and not enough birth control. But I got my little girl, as everyone says.

I lean over Ozzie's bed and peer down. He is cramped. Face is a little red. Otherwise, he's fine.

"I was trying to get the bobble-head," he says.

"The bobble-head?" I look over at the bedside table. The L.A. Dodger with the bouncing noggin has disappeared.

“Mommy, help! Please let me up! I – can’t – breathe.”

Okay, that’s a bit dramatic, but it’s tight down there. I grab one hand and an arm and haul him up next to me on the bed. He pants and bites back a grin. I blink. Realize this was a ploy to drag me back into his room – again.

“Oz, I gotta go.” I whip my right arm under Julia and haul her off the side of the bed, where she is trying to pull to standing by using the bedpost as anchor. “No!” she says, kicking at the air. “No! No! No!”

“Mommy!” Oz flings himself onto me, his arms snapping like rubber bands around my hips. “Please stay here! I’m scared.”

He was scared this morning, yesterday, the day before that. He’ll be scared tomorrow.

I grab his twig of an arm in my free hand and twist the skin until it burns pink. An old trick from my own childhood.

Worked on my sister then; even one-handed, it works on Ozzie now. “Ow!” Ozzie springs away, rubbing his hands over the red blotch on his arm.

I should not have done that. I know. I take a deep breath. He is the child, I tell myself. Not you.

When I was a kid, when my sister Lisa or I did something wrong, my parents yelled at us. My mother screeched. My father boomed. Today, I can’t remember the words, just the way their voices raised and the walls vibrated; like living in a permanent, low-grade earthquake. If I ran outside to play without putting away my Barbies. If I ate a fistful of cherries and left the pits lolling on the kitchen counter. If I didn’t set the table for dinner. If I tripped Lisa because her Skipper doll wouldn’t go on a date with my Ken

doll, and subsequently Lisa had to go to the ER for stitches in her knee (true story). If I was really bad (knee, stitches), maybe a spanking too. I don't remember trouble ever progressing beyond that point.

These days, my parents like to tell me *they* never had these kinds of problems with *us*. And even though a white line still bears witness on Lisa's right leg, just below her kneecap, I fear this is true. I fear this entire child-raising enterprise is too vast, far too vast, for my limited grasp. I'm treading water in a bubbling sea of chaos, and some days I think I can hear the whole world yelling at me to get it together, now.

My parents, who are very busy with their golf games and their volunteer work cleaning up the Santa Monica Bay, don't babysit. This though we live in El Segundo and they live in Brentwood, a thirty-minute drive down Los Angeles freeways. "I never had any help with you guys," my mother says.

Instead, they call with advice. Be tougher, they tell me. You let these kids get away with murder. So sometimes I yell. Sometimes I spank. In my hands, it never goes well; they just act up more. Then I'll switch gears, do what the parenting experts who come to speak at the preschool advise: listen; reflect their concerns back at them; calmly deliver timeouts.

It's Sunday of Labor Day weekend. Tom's at the office working on a brief. As usual. I've tried it all. As usual. And here I am.

"Come here, Oz," I say.

He shakes his head, no.

I plunk down on the bed, body heavy as a crate of Legos, and let Julia slip back onto the floor.

“Why, honey?” I say, squinching back a pair of hot tears. “Why are you scared?”

He chews on the edge of the pillow sham, eyes trained on me. This boy of mine. This beautiful boy of mine -- long eyelashes that he got from my grandfather, cheeks strawberry red from hot feelings, just like my mom when she’s upset, auburn curls scrunched atop his head that mirror the ones bobbing from my scalp to my chin. His baby photos could double for Lisa’s. He’s all my side, this one. Well, except for his dad’s pea green eyes. And that grin that could charm the socks off a cat, provenance all his own.

I lean over and – just for a moment, until he yanks away -- press my lips against the top of his head, inhaling a pungent whiff of sweat and baby shampoo.

“I can’t read!” he says, slapping his hands on his legs as if that settled the question.

“Oh, Ozzie.” We had this same discussion yesterday. I lean back against his pillow. “No one knows how to read, sweetie. That’s why you go to kindergarten.”

He crosses his arms, all sticks and knobs, over his chest. “Noah knows how to read.”

I sigh. The logic of a five year old in a panic. “Of course he does. Noah’s going into second grade.” I wrap my arm around Ozzie’s shoulders, stroke his wavy brown locks with my hand. “Everyone feels that way. And everyone learns how to read.”

My boy’s breathing slows. His shoulder sinks into my arm. If time was forever, I could stay here all day and night, me and Ozzie, holding and talking, kissing and laughing. If all I had to do was Ozzie, what a mother I could be.

“Mommy?” Ozzie asks, turning to look at me. “I’ve got an idea!”

“Yes, honey?” I smile, ready with reassurance.

“I don’t go to kindergarten – and *you* teach me to read!”

Honestly, I’d rather shoot myself.

“Oz,” I say, “everyone has to go to –”

“Aaaagh!” He flings himself off my lap and onto the ground. I feel the corners of my mouth pull downward and a bubble of something sour rise in my throat. Then my eye catches the bedside clock, and I remember the magazine waiting on the table. This day will be over soon, I remind myself. Just get through. Get through.

The cover promises salacious new details in the shocking drama of Brad and Angelina’s custody battle over their six kids. I’d thought if any celebrity couple had it all together, it was them. Now it seems he was abusive to the children. Or maybe he just drinks too much. Six children! I’m sure it could drive a parent to all kinds of things. If I get back to my chores, I should still have time to find out the sordid truth before I have to start dinner.

I allow myself a small smile, both for what awaits me and what I manage, over and over again, to avert. “Don’t hit the baby,” I warn Ozzie’s flailing elbows as I grab Julia and head for the kitchen.

“Mama!” Julia presses tight against me and burrows her face into the crook between my neck and shoulder. “Mama! Mama!”

I hug her back with arms so well-trained at baby cuddling that they have no other choice but to clasp. I purse my lips and plant them on her cheek and press, but inside I’m thinking, “Just four more years of this.” And then I’ll ... what? At this point, to be honest, I don’t know that I’m qualified for anything beyond being room mom and wiping crud off soft body parts. Me, who graduated Phi Beta Kappa. Me, who was the top metro

reporter at the second-best paper in Houston. Me, who once had lunch with the editor of the best paper in Houston, because he was trying to hire me away (but I couldn't go, because Tom had wrapped up his oncology residency and accepted a job here in LA; plus, I was pregnant with Noah). How did *I* become *this*?

I'm just prying Julia off me and back in the highchair when the phone rings.

"How's everything going?" Tom says.

"Check it out," I say and hold the earpiece at arm's length so he, too, can experience the melody of clashing light sabers, Julia banging her spoon on the high chair tray and the faint, distant hum of Ozzie's screams.

When I put the phone back to my ear, Tom's saying, "You're at the end of your rope, huh?"

"Duh!" Julia says. She puts her palms on the tray and tries to push it away. "Duh! Duh!" I unlatch the tray and place her on the floor. She smiles up at me, so happy.

I don't know how he could imagine I was anywhere on my rope rather than at its tail end. "When are you coming home?" I say.

"Well, I've still got at least a couple hours more on this. But I think I can make it home in time for dinner."

I bite my lips, in case they plan on saying something.

"Don't be mad," he says.

"I'm not mad."

Why would I be mad? Why on earth would I be at all upset that he gets to work on what's essentially an essay in a quiet room in a skyscraper for hours by himself, while

I'm still wrapping up a toddler's lunch, serenaded by our maniac child screaming from across the house?

We sit in silence for a moment.

"It's not like I *want* to be here," he says, and I only put his words together afterwards, because at the same time, I'm saying, "Well, do your best. I gotta go."

Then I hit the off button on the phone. Because the only thing worse than being all alone with all of this is discussing with my husband how he's not.

"Momm-ee!" Ozzie cries. "Momm-eee!" I slam the highchair tray back into place and sink my face down on it.

I need to finish straightening up this kitchen. I have to fold the whites load in the dryer. Soon, it will be time to start on dinner. I see the trash can is practically overflowing and, with an impulse that falls between thinking and reflex, unlatch the cabinet below the sink to pull out a white plastic bag.

"Momm-ee!" he says. "It's important!"

I have a friend who takes time outs. She locks herself in her bedroom and lets them pound at her through the door until she feels calm enough to emerge.

"Momm—ee!"

"Coming, Oz," I call back. I should scoop up Julia. But she's banging away on the Tupperware she's pulled out of her special kitchen drawer, left un-baby-proofed for her benefit. I lay the new trash bag on top of the full container – I'll only be gone a moment -- and walk away with the silent steps of a cat across a lawn, so my daughter won't even realize I've gone.

He's standing in the middle of the bedroom with one hand clamped on his crotch and the other pointing to his bed. I don't need to look at the "o" shape of his mouth and the widened eyes. I don't even have to look at the bed, though I do and sure enough, there it is, smack in the center of the duvet cover, the round wet circle of urine, spreading, seeping.

He's done it again. This makes the fourth time in two days – Ozzie, the kid who has not worn a diaper in two-and-a-half years, is now letting loose like an unplugged fire hydrant. It was the bathroom floor yesterday afternoon and evening ("I couldn't make it to the toilet!"). Then this morning he wet the bed. Again, could be an accident, but the pee was warm when I threw the sheets, the blanket, the mattress cover – everything, in fact, but the duvet -- in the laundry. Now I am going to have to drag the duvet out of the cover. Wash them both. Stuff the duvet back in again. There goes *People Magazine*.

"Mommy! I had an acci--"

"Goddamn it, Oz!" I say, grabbing him by his shoulders.

He startles, then laughs at me.

"Goddamn it," I say, shaking him.

He laughs harder.

"I can't *believe*," I say, shoving him off the bed with both hands. The back of his head whacks the floor. He rubs it, then laughs harder.

"You think this is funny?" I dive after him, but he leaps up and dances away, giggling. "You think this is *funny*?"

I lunge and grab the sleeve of his shirt with my left hand, with my left hand, because my right hand is raising up, and he's trying to pull away, fear flickering in his

eyes and I think good, yeah, I'm getting to you now, and my hand pulls back like a slingshot, the rage is popping like corn in a microwave, I feel tall and powerful and *seen* and I let the hand go, whoosh, it flies forward, a blur of skin and polished pink nails until it collides with Ozzie's cheek.

There's a cracking sound of skin on skin. Then a gush of blood.

I stare at him, wondering how his face got covered in crimson. He stares at me, eyes filling with tears, a river of red gushing from his left nostril. Fuck – a bloody nose, too? How the fuck did he get a --

Shit. It's bleeding, all over his shirt, dripping onto the carpet. I need to stop this. Now. I glance around the room, snatch a dirty shirt off the rug and press it to his nose.

“Oz. Jesus. Hold still.”

I am the worst mother I know.

“Mommy?”

Someone should slap me across the face, back and forth and back and forth, until I bleed and bleed and bleed.

“Mommy?”

I put my arm around his shoulders, lightly enough to give him the option of shrugging me off. But he leans into me, and I want to shower him with kisses of gratitude. Which is what I do.

“Mommy?” I look down, but it's not Oz who's talking. My gaze creeps across the carpet, over to the doorway, and up the legs and torso of the little boy standing there, his thick-fringed eyelids opened wide.

“Noah?”

He blinks, on his face a question I have no intention of answering.

I clear my throat, because I am going to sound normal. “What’s up, honey?”

“Oh. Mommy? The movie’s over.”

“Uh, that’s nice,” I say. “Noah? Can you leave us alone for just a minute?”

“But Mommy,” he says, starting to step forward, his eyebrows pressing together, soft brown eyes darting from me to Ozzie and back again, “what happened to –”

“GO!” I sound more like a shotgun than a woman.

Noah skedaddles back to the den. Someday, I will pay for this obedience of his, I am sure. The terrible things he will level at me one day.

But for now, I crumple to the floor, pulling Ozzie with me. I hold him tight on my lap, my little boy, wet with pee, sticky with blood. I consider my anger, like a lion I keep in an unlocked cage. I really should lock the door. I really, I guess, should shoot it dead. But I don’t know how to get a gun.

“Mommy?” His voice is muffled by the t-shirt. I pull it away and thank heavens, the bleeding has stopped. “Mommy, can’t I just go back to preschool?”

“Oh, sweetie,” I say, hugging him against me again. “You’re too old for the preschool now.”

His eyes tighten and his mouth pulls into a hard line. “Mommy,” he says. He pops off my lap and regards me from a few inches away on the rug. “You hit me.”

The words sting. No, they hurt. But then I shake my head, as if I could toss them off like water from my hair. A slap isn’t a hit. A bloody nose isn’t a slice in the skin. This is not the thing that starts with an A and gets authorities involved.

“Ozzie.” I cross my arms over my chest, twitching fingers pressed beneath either bicep. “It was wrong. I am sorry. And you are going to school next week.”

He throws himself to the floor, rolling back and forth like a paintbrush coating a surface, screaming, “I hate you! You hit me!”

I’ve failed at so many things in my life. I failed to put away my Barbies, to wipe cherry pits off the counter, to do my chores without being asked. I failed to stick with my career. I failed to make peace with motherhood when I ended up at home. I failed to hold back my temper enough to not trip Lisa. I tried even harder today to cage my lion but I failed at that, too, and now I’ve gone and smacked Ozzie so his nose bleeds. My life is a wasteland of defeat. I wish for only a quiet corner to curl up in and disappear from the disappointed world.

But goddamn Ozzie keeps goddamn yelling. From my mother and my father, I had to take it. From him, I don’t. I clap my hand over his mouth and press hard. His screams reduce to a muffled cry, and I feel relief start to trickle through me as control U-turns back into my grasp. But then my son, without even a moment’s hesitation, bites down on my fingers.

I yelp and pull my hand away. Only red marks; like me, he doesn’t break the skin. My hand smarts and I’m gasping for breath or something like it. I never yelled at my mother like this. I never bit my mother. Never *dared*. This is my particular realm of spectacular failure.

I only realize I’m about to hit him again when he shrinks away from me. Then I feel my arm in the air. Then I see my hand, flat and open and ready to strike.

I drop my arm to my side. I flap my hand around, as if it's coated in lava I can shake off.

Now Ozzie's sliding his body towards me, kicking at me with his feet, his small heels landing pointed jabs at my shins, yelling, "Get out! Get *out!*"

I stand there, my lion unsatiated but so rattled it can't muster a growl.

Julia. Wait a minute: Julia. "Hold on, Oz," I say, making a dash for the kitchen.

But there's no Julia there, only dozens of Tupperware pieces strewn across the floor and in the middle of them, a white plastic trash bag, sitting up. It's pitching sideways, and something inside is punching and saying, "No! No!"

But how did she get ahold of a trash bag, I think stupidly. Then I remember: I left it on top of the trash can, right where a baby who likes to pull to standing could grab it in one swoop.

"No!" says the muffled voice. "No! No!"

"Julia!" I leap and pull the thing off her. She looks up at me, frowning and panting, her blond hair mussed and the barrette askew.

"Bad bag!" she says. "No good, Mommy. Bag go bye-bye." Just to be clear, she points at the garbage can.

I dutifully stuff the offending bag deep in the already full trash. Then I lean against the kitchen counter. "Oh my God," I say, my legs like splintering toothpicks, my shaking hands clutching the tiles for support. "I am so sorry, Julia."

This one wasn't even supposed to be. But now she's here and there's no me without her. There's no me without any of them. That's the goddamn tragedy of the whole thing.

“Mama!” I look down at the baby through a miasma of tears. “Mama! Pick up! Pick up!” She’s holding up her arms, her need for me like a billboard across her pleading face.

That’s the thing about little kids. Even when you crash and careen, even when your ego leaves your parenting clobbered and shellacked, still, you’re needed. These days are awful and long and demeaning. And within them I am wrapped in circles of smothering love.

Wait... Ozzie ... I listen, and hear nothing. In my house full of kids, I hear nothing. I reach down and grab that baby girl of mine under her armpits – dense, yielding armpits that jigsaw into my open hands – and I pull her into me, pressing one arm underneath her bottom, the other across her back, just as she likes it, not a molecule of space between her body and mine. Together, we walk slowly, heel-toe, heel-toe, careful not to make a sound, back through the living room and down the hall to Ozzie’s bedroom. He’s where I left him, on the floor, still wet with pee and sticky with blood, curled up around his favorite stuffed Superman doll, fast asleep.

Then we peek in at Noah in the den. He’s sprawled out across the couch, another Star Wars DVD on the tube, and I will not even interrupt to ask which one of the six it is.

I will not change Julia’s diaper, though she must surely need it, or return to the endless mess in the kitchen. I will not snatch *People* off the dining room table.

No. I carry Julia into our room and plop her on our bed, rubbing her back until she falls asleep. Then I curl up beside her and cry. I cry for my days that don’t end fast enough. I cry for my family that’s always one daddy short of complete. I cry for my lion who is not the release he should be. And I cry for Brad, who probably tried to tell

Angelina that he didn't mean it, whatever it was he did, that he was just overwhelmed, this life is really too much, and she didn't believe him and so now it's over and he's all alone.

When I wake up, the shadows lie long across our room. From the end of the hall, where Ozzie's room is, someone is calling my name. My actual, first name. It's Tom, and I can hear in his voice that he's seen things.

Good. I roll off the bed, rubbing my eyes.