



FROM THE AUTHOR OF SONGS ABOUT GOD

THE RULE BOOK

F O R M O T H E R S

Ericka Clay

The Rule Book for Mothers

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THE RULE BOOK FOR MOTHERS

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SEEDLINGS

The worst thing about anyone is being a child
and knowing everything about love
and nothing about the loss of it.
So, when you're two people
and the little things fester
like the way his eye twitches
when words skip through your teeth,
you think about the tomorrow,
how this is just a blip.
How love plants deep like
little seedlings in the ridge of your spine.
But you don't even think
about watering them
with tears.

LOSS

We are all

That little girl
Whose mother
Dies,
And the loss
Is potted,
Another
Good plant
Set in the sun
But won't
Turn its face
To drink.

LITTLE BUD

It's budded
and blooms
at the most
unfortunate time.
And when people
look at you,
they think of church
breaking your soul
and society tangling
its fingers in your hair
and men kissing at your mouth
and women scouring you off.
But you, little bud,
aren't evil. It's just
an evil thing that's
birthed, stretching your gut,
and we all have those things
that threaten to break through
and swallow
what
we
are.

THE GARDENER

Sweet,

Simple,

Little girls

That love You

But we all know

That's like planting

And watering a lie.

A strong stalk,

Born sky high,

And I've been

Made to cut it down,

Unroot what's rooted

And to hide my heart

When she comes

To hate me.

DAUGHTER

When we were on
The bridge
I saw our lives
Like a flash bulb
Light
And God's
Great hands nowhere
To be seen.
Your scream was
Set to the tune of
My angry fingers
Seeking revenge on
A wheel that could
Rip us infinite,
Scraps of metal
And concrete
Like a beautiful cosmos
Built by no maker.
"Take her away" was
Written on my mind.
But I ask you now,
Who else was there
Elbowing out that inky
Phantom
And its silk-strung voice
And the bursting nebula
That lit my pupils
Like your smile
Lights my heart?

SUPER GIRL

She flew

Into all forms,
A pecking order
That started with
My
Mother's coiled heart
And ended in her unraveled
One.
And all my time has been
Spent braiding
And knotting
What's come
Loose
And only
When I look down
Do I realize
The world has
Removed
My fingers.

OR

Here's what will happen:

You'll hate me for a lifetime

Or

A moment.

And I will visit you at the church

where you work

or in the prison

near my house.

And you will love God

or learn the world according to Satan.

And maybe you will have children

or know the ways of an untrained womb.

And maybe you'll be happy on your own accord

or shear every inch of yourself to wear another woman.

And you will remember all my sins

and stack them up against me.

Or you will love me

and let memory rot

and forget the day I screamed

until both our throats ran dry.

THE RULE BOOK FOR MOTHERS

Look,

this is the way
a mother should
be,

hair combed
and the teeth
slick from the minutes
it takes to brush
them
and showered skin
that smells
like apples.

And she's never hurried
almost lethargic
in her sanguine
fashion.

The skin that smells
like apples
and the teeth
slick
to the touch
should never
have the harsh
scent of glass bottles,
old man's Jack,
V is for vodka
or the ever-telling
red wine stain.

No, mothers
should be like

the time
I saw that woman
with the baby shoved
snug against one hip
And a happy face
clutching the other
And she looked
like a painting,
breathing,
walking,
talking,
through
Target.
And loving
those children
Like love
never comes
at a cost.
Like love's
a drug you drink
until it stains
your teeth.

WHEN WE GO TO THE BUTCHER

When we go to the butcher,
I'll hold your hand so hard
my memory will seep
through your pores
and you'll be looking
down on your little eyes
and little nose
and two lips glued
tight into a cherub's smile
and you will hear my heart
at your ear
and the way it says, "I'm sorry."
When we go to the butcher
your father will be sitting
at my right and at my left,
an empty place where fear
resides, and if I could
be a something better.
we'd never be riding
in the first place.
When we go to the butcher
remember all those times,
but not just the good.
Remember me, a little
monster,
a fly off the handle,
hellish time of a girl
turned woman
turned something
turned and pickled

with fear's empty space.
But when we go to the butcher
also know about my brave
little heart.
How courage is what lights
it a-thump.
And alights yours, too,
with my hopelessly
hopeful prayers.

POSTPARTUM

Nine months
to flesh you
out and then
I lose
my
mind.
But
I've
been
finding it
piece
by piece
until all
the edges
align.
Give
me another
nine, and
watch
the
lost
socks
reappear,
and then I'll
be smiling
happily
until
your cries
can
reach

my
ear.

HUMAN

Gnaw me out
and watch my bones
go hollow
Then take
the baby
and turn her eyes
to the flutter
in my flesh
from the light
wind, "a breeze"
you called
it with your
hand doing
its puppet dance
the night
the moon
looked
Feral.
"No worries"
were to be
on my mind
or lips
so you could
sing your song
in my virgin
ear
when all parts
of a lost soul
are dirty,
don't you know

that?

And don't you
know the baby
has baby eyes
for only a moment
until her tongue
makes a muscle
and her teeth
take too gnawing
which is
the human
way,
like cursing
in traffic
or making puppets
of the ones
you love
most.

EVOLUTION

Here's your
march
of time
and evolutionary
progression
but burning
your offspring
and tasting
the sharp note
of blood
when nobody
loves you
is like a sweet
reminder
that your
death
is the only
real truth
you know.

WILD EDGE

Between sex
And death,
Cecilia chose
The latter
And that was
Always
the music
That played
At my heels.
Sex or death.
Sinner or saint.
No in between.
But can't you
See?
It takes a lifetime
Of bad memory
To untangle our
Legs,
Smooth over
The edges,
And no amount
Of "I'm sorrys"
Will kill the story
"You're forgiven"
has played
On my heart.

KNUCKLE-DEEP

Hope

is the fickle
thing
I carry unbuckled
in my chest
and tell
the girl about
because I don't
want her to
know the hard parts
written in the dark.
But who am I to keep
her from crawling,
digging knuckle-deep
into the path
God's carved out
for her
with His
sharp-ended
ray
of
light?

SPINNER

I've got two minutes
but only show you
one
and you think
of me
as your world
ever-revolving,
and I
let you have
those thoughts
because
I'm chicken
and lock
all the doors
to the lives
I've left
behind.

MICROSCOPE

Memory is a godly thing,
a sea-like thing,
that brings you in
or
spits you out
or
takes you under,
or
drowns your sense
until you think
that moment he loved you
was the whole organism
on a cellular level,
and you look at it
now and then
when all is quiet,
trying to name
and label the parts.
Trying to find yourself
in the building blocks
of something
long dead.

GIFT

I want you

to know
the inside
of everything
I've never
seen.

But I know
how your hands
react to new,
oily fingers
manipulating
each edge
until everything
is worn down
and your gift
is just another
part of your scenery,
dirty car
and screaming kid
and ungrateful
sight
of a life
with no
bow.

STICKY

You want white
horse
dreams
and freedom,
and adulthood
should go hand
in hand
with those
but instead,
you'll get
the sticky
bottoms
of unwashed
glasses
and
the tired
in my eyes
every time
you close
yours
to your
sink full
of
dishes.

GIRLS

There will always
Be two
Or three
Packed like
Sardines
Hating you
For your
Beautiful skin
And cutting you
To watch you
Stop the bleeding.
There's never
A good time
To look them in
The eye
Until years later
When you realize
That little rocks
Make terrible
Hearts
And little
Minds
Make terrible
Friends.

IT'S ALL RELATIVE

To what?

Maybe to the fact
that you're the pretty
girl for such a small
and simple time
until you turn your head
and see that pretty
is mitotic,
standing before
your eyes
like the pretty
girl you used
to be.

UGLY

There's your face
 Cheek to my skin
 And nobody even
 Knows the shade
 Of all the colors
 Bleeding into
 The hollows of your
 Cheeks,
 But I feel it goes
 Beyond the white
 Of my outsides
 and the grainy
 Hash of my
 Innards.
 If I had
 All the beauty
 In the world,
 I'd spoil it
 By losing my name
 and Yours, too.
 And as our breath
 Mingles,
 You taking
 Everything
 From my reach,
 And all I have left
 To touch
 Are the hollows,
 those colors.

HAPPY

My biggest
fear is
your
happiness.
Not your
sadness,
loneliness,
gut-rotted,
madness,
but the misconception
that content
is equal
to unloved.

LION HEART

Two things they wanted
me to know
about God.
One, that their heel
was on His throat,
The second,
That their heel was on mine.
And I never thought of the second
playing into the first
or having
anything to do with God
at all,
but see,
Girl,
how my two
fingers
find your
pulse
when your
face goes still
and all hope
is placed
on layers of
pleura
and a God
who won't
be
tamed.

CLOSET

Find your
dark,
worn space
inches deep
until your feet
and head
are shrouded
and they can't
find you
to ask about
the milk,
or the long lost
sock,
or their uncle
who is ringing
the doorbell.
Your lungs
will consume
such shadow
and remind
you of the time
you were slave to it,
when the light was
a momentary thing
but mostly
for people
who loved
to dance.

DANCE

All these songs they loved me with.
You've never heard
Such ridiculous noise.
And that's why I've
Always loved
Your father.
Pointed
With words
You can't
Dance
Around.
Quiet until
He isn't.

BARE

Typical girl,
Worst thing
Ever to be.
But you can't
Untrain your veins
And useless brain
And all the girl-like
Things you've been given.
You can't re-work
Your parts.
You can only choose
To bare your teeth
Or bare your sentences.
Guess how many times
I've failed at
Each.

HER

I've looked

So many times

For Her

That you would

Think my whole

Life

Was a glance,

A furtive stare,

A glare at the sun

And all the faces

That haunt me,

But really it's a pastime

I carve

To keep

From failing.

Whom?

I never really know.

NEEDLE AND THREAD

We're journeying
Through
something,
not just a time
and space-like
nothing
but something
that needles
the string through
my skin
and yours
and our neighbor's,
pot-bellied
in his Pontiac,
forgetting his
hand holds
the ability
to wave.
I used to think
in terms
of severed
scraps of
fabric,
all of us,
scattered
heartbeats
and useless
religions,
and I
blended

my theories
and forced
them
through
the straw
to make you
drink.
But then you kept
talking
to Jesus
three-years-old,
in your bedroom,
in a house,
where Jesus
wasn't asked
to live.
How did you
meet Him?
What did He say?
And could
He thread
our rusted needle
and mend
us the way
your tender
heart
had hoped
us
to be?

FUTURE GIRL

It's never your
face I see,
but who you'll
be ten years
in the future
when you think
of me as the person
you need to call
and sometimes
do.

DEAR AVA,

I hope

This

Finds

You well and

The kids

And Jack

Are safe

And happy

And set

To swimming

In the beautifully

Blue pool.

The picture

Was lovely.

It looks

Like a long

Shard of glass

And that bird

Reflected,

Hovering up high

Reminded me of the one

That swooped

And ate your

Newborn butterflies

That hatched

From that kit

I bought you.

I should have

Paid more attention

But butterflies

Are a nasty thing
To own.
How's the cat
And that gerbil
That I'm always
Afraid the cat
Will eat?
Is Lucille
Still eating
Her fingernails
Like you always used
To do and might still?
Funny, the dedication
taken
To shredding
And imbibing ourselves.
I'm well.
The postman
Asked the other
Day
About your father
And I said, "Still dead,"
But no smile on his face.
What a waste because
He looks a little
Like
Dicaprio in Gatsby
And a smile
Would do him good.
Me, too, I guess.
But not to get down
And out.

Have to keep the spirits
Up.
Have to keep on keeping on.
Sometimes, I talk to God.
And dare him to listen.
I have to get on
Now,
And I know
You're busy with the
Glass shard pool
And Jack and the kids
And all the minutes
That feel
Like hours
Until your glass has
Spilled
And all you see
Is your damp
Eye hovering
From
above.

LIFE

It's not all bad.

I think that's the joke,
The ba-dum-dum,
The punch line
That punches
A heart
When your eyes
Become new eyes
And you can finally
See,
Trained to know grief
On such an
Intimate level.
But you smile,
Because
You know
The humor in it,
You know
The ending,
So special,
And sometimes
When you verbalize
It,
You lose your audience,
But not always.
There's always that one
Person,
The back row watcher,
Legs sprawled,
Face weary,

And you finally

Remember

Who

You've always

Been

Playing

For.

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