

# The Imperative Mood

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**Y**OU ASK YOURSELF an awful lot of questions.

Get a bit overwhelmed and scale it back, settling on just one question to start with. Decide to take things one step at a time, in bite-sized chunks, so as to absorb it better.

Start at the beginning then, with the big question. Ask the big question.

Ask if this is real.

Ask how is it possible for this to finally fall into your lap, like that, as if by chance. Wonder how long she'd been sitting on it, this information, how long she'd been withholding it.

Abandon that line of inquiry. Realise that it will only lead to bitterness and pain and so let go of it, focusing only on this new revelation, this piece of information that you have, finally, after all this time. Breathe in. Remind yourself that you're an adult, a competent, successful adult, and that thinking petty thoughts about your parent is childish.

Think petty thoughts anyway, but only for a moment or two.

Tell yourself sternly to get over it.

Ask why. Ask yourself why, over and over and over again, staring at that crumpled up piece of paper in your hands. Put it down on the coffee table in front of you and smooth it out, carefully, lovingly. Look at it.

Look at those scribbles, the ink creased by the wrinkles in the paper.

Reach out with one fingertip and touch those little black

marks, wonderingly, almost reverentially, and realise that finally *this* might be able to answer those questions.

Think back to all of those teenage years and the rows and the bad behaviour, the grudge held against the world, always, obstinately, wearing it on your sleeve like a badge of honour, a chip on your shoulder that will never go away.

Think of how hard you worked, feeling you had to prove yourself more than the others, and then how badly you misbehaved, overly sensitive to every hiccup and every slight, undermining all of the time and energy put out. Remember the way your mum's face looked, all mottled and red and angry, when you stumbled home late and slurred something insulting at her. Remember that and look at that little piece of paper that could hold all of the answers.

Ask yourself, harshly, if you'll have the strength and courage to do this.

Ask yourself if it'll be worth it.

Think about that.

Pace back and forth, your feet eating up the space in your apartment.

Think of what she said, when she handed the paper over, those acid words that burn in the back of your mind. Remember the tone and the shape of her mouth as she'd said them, I did this for your good.

Decide that yes, it will be worth it, yes, yes, how could it not be.

Decide to do it.

Decide to do it right now.

Sit down. Stand up.

Look around. Take a step, then stop. Breathe, then don't. Hold your breath. Longer. Hold it still, until there's that feeling in your chest, until you're gulping in your throat, until that obstinate feeling, the need for oxygen, rises like a bubble and pushes into your mouth, then breathe in again and exhale, slowly and thoroughly.

Decide to not do it right this minute. Wait until your heart beat has calmed down.

Make yourself a cup of tea. Drink it standing up at the sink,

gulping down the burning liquid until your tongue goes numb and you can't feel anything anymore. Dump it down the sink half-finished.

Sit down. Stand up. Fidget.

Circle around the phone, picking it up then putting it back down. Look at that piece of paper, even though you already know those numbers off by heart.

Pick up the phone.

Lose your bottle and have your fingers punch out a familiar number, squeezing your eyes shut against your cowardice.

Order Chinese, as a bribe or a punishment it is hard to say, spicy black bean beef and noodles, and hang up the phone.

Pace. Then stop. Look around. Then don't.

Pick up the phone again. Dial the number, fingers shaking. Hold your breath. Hold it until the hammering of your heart begins to fill your ears, then let it go. Crash the phone back down so you don't have to listen to its empty ringing.

Don't cry. Stand up. Open the window. Feel the cold wind on your face; look to the horizon, at the city lights, and think of the people behind those lights, and wonder about them. Think of them and wish you could meet them. Yearn to meet them.

Yearn to meet him.

Slam the window shut. Fetch a jumper. Ignore the silent phone. Decide you don't need this. Decide to be empowered, uplifted, independent and strong. Decide that you don't need this, no, you don't need this, your mum must be right, and anyway you have your own life and your job and your friends and your hobbies, a whole, full, joyous life built up brick by painstaking brick and entirely and completely without him.

Let yourself wish, just a little, that he would have been there whilst you did all that building.

Try to remember if there's ice cream in the freezer. Remember that yes, there's definitely ice cream in the freezer. Check the flavour of the ice cream.

Make a face when you realise the box is empty with only a few curls left clinging to the plastic container. Remember that it was all eaten when you hosted your birthday dinner party a few weeks ago.

Crave ice cream, that sweet, cold treat on the tongue.

Call the Chinese place and ask them if they could add ice cream to your order. Swallow back tears when they say yes.

Pace the kitchen. Pick up a fruit from the fruit bowl then put it down again.

Consider calling your mum, then change your mind, knowing she did not approve and would not want to be involved.

Breathe in deeply.

Pick up the phone again. Dial the number again.

Wait.

Wait some more.

Breathe.

Hyperventilate.

Panic when the phone is picked up. Hang up. Bury your head in your hands.

Hear the doorbell ring. Answer the door.

Put the ice cream in the freezer to keep it cold and pick a film to watch before dishing out your Chinese.

Sit on the sofa and balance your plate on your knees. Put the plate down and unplug the phone then curl up again and pick up the takeaway. Eat. Try not to feel like a coward. Do not succeed. Try harder. Find good arguments to argue your case. Feel bad anyway.

Plug the phone back in.

Eat the Chinese, barely watching the film, eyes lost in a far-away daze. Think, as you sit there, that if you don't do this, you'll regret it forever, especially after all the time and effort put into convincing your mum to cough up the information. Put your plate down by your feet when it is empty and, dreamily, pick up the phone again.

Let your fingers dial the number.

Hold your breath.

Smile.

Say hello.

Listen to the voice at the end of the telephone. Hear the waver in the tone, the tremble behind the words and feel, suddenly, overwhelmed, taken by a great crashing wave that lifts you in

its embrace and carries you forth, without even so much as a by-your-leave. Grip the telephone hard, so hard that your hand starts to tremble a little, and bite your lip, and take in a breath that is half-gasp and half-sob.

Hear the garbled explanation and don't even try to unpick it, just let the words flow over you as you listen to her voice. Listen to her voice and close your eyes and try to picture her, her face and her eyes, the shape of her face and the colour of her hair, whether she pouts like her mother did and whether she would have your jawline or even maybe your eyebrows.

Hope for her sake she doesn't have your eyebrows; they would look too harsh on a woman's face.

Hear the question but don't understand it, not yet, it is too big and too much and, dumbly, in a numb tone, ask her to repeat it. Listen to her as she has to pause, you know to swallow back tears, before she can ask you again to meet with her.

Say yes.

Say it again and feel the catch in the back of your throat.

Say yes.

Say yes, yes, you would love to, of course, of course you would love to, you want nothing else, nothing else could make you happier, and before you colours swim as your eyes fill with tears, relief, joy and pain all mingling together.

Hear her little bubble of wet laughter burst on the other end of the telephone and grin absurdly; grin at nothing as you clutch your telephone and stare at the smudged colours and listen to your daughter cry and laugh and laugh and cry on the other end of the telephone.

Inquire about the details, location, date and time. Feel relief that she is not far, only an hour and a half by train, and arrange to meet at the weekend in the town that is between the two of you, so that it is equal and fair, not one person having put forth more effort than the other to come to the meeting, so that it starts off on an equal footing. Feel pleased at that. Hear the relief in her voice, that she won't have to do all of the hard work and heavy lifting. Agree on a Saturday at two in the afternoon. Mention a tea shop you know, where you've been before and that you know quite well, where you're sure to

enjoy the strong, black coffee, no stinting on the quality of the beans there, and the cakes are good too, not to forget the pub next door for a small jolt of liquid courage should you need it. Recommend the almond and blueberry frangipane tart, if she gets there before you. Hear the smile in her voice as she says that she loves blueberries, and frangipane, and tarts.

Say goodbye, no, not goodbye, but see you soon, see you very, very soon, and hang up the phone, feeling elated.

Think about your daughter. Think about your daughter and speculate, because she must be, oh, all of thirty-two now, and consider that it is just like her mother, just like her to keep that wonderful girl from you all this time.

Dwell bitterly on that for a moment, on that bitch, a cunt through and through, you had said it enough times and you were right enough, she was that and more besides, to keep a father from his daughter. Blame her for the psychological damage it must have caused. Feel sorry for the girl, to have to do without you all this time, and promise yourself you'll make it all better, now you're here and now you know and now you're going to meet her.

Go back into the kitchen and pick up your glass of beer. Drain it. Celebrate by pouring yourself another, because this is a special occasion and you want to celebrate it, and you will celebrate it, goddammit, black looks be damned.

Take a swig of beer, refusing to be cowed by her glare.

Ignore the acid remark about drinking on an empty stomach on a week day. Rise above the observation that tomorrow morning will be difficult. Be very patient and calm when she asks who was on the phone and why you look so pleased with yourself, like a cat that got the cream, like a fat, useless cat that's found someone else's mouse, so smug and licking your lips.

Tell her that it is none of her fucking business when she sticks her nose where it doesn't belong. Tell her to keep out of it when she insists, repeating who was on the phone, who was on the fucking phone, tell me, tell me, you bastard, who was on the phone.

Tell her when she rounds on you to just put dinner on the table, for God's sake. Tell her that she's making a fool of herself.

Wrinkle your nose when she opens the oven and a gust of black smoke wafts out. Slam down the empty glass of beer and cross your arms, because of course, of fucking course the bitch would find a way to ruin this special evening, this wonderful, precious event, of course she would sabotage it by burning dinner. Tell her so; reproach her with her passive aggressiveness and tell her you won't stand for it, not anymore, that you've had enough and that you don't know why you stay with such a useless, fat cow who can't even cook chicken without burning it.

Pour yourself another glass of beer, the can nice and cold from the fridge, chilling your fingers, and drink it, leaning against the counter as she cries. Study the bottom of your pint glass thoughtfully as she sobs, before becoming impatient with her artificial tears. Tell her to cut it out. Say it to her again, cut it the fuck out, and say you mean it. See her eyes widen and her gaze go to the pint glass and see her nod and gulp and wipe away the tears with her sleeve and set about putting the dinner on the table.

Nod. Grab a fork and spear a potato that you eat straight away, the fat running down the metal, burning your tongue and lips, saying good, that you can't be bothered to have another fight tonight, all right, that you've had a long, shit day and that you've just had some good news and that you want to celebrate in peace, goddammit, in goddamn peace without someone nagging and pecking at you and burning your dinner.

Sit down at the table and take another potato. Watch as she busies and bustles around the kitchen, all messy, curly hair and unmade face, the skin ageing, the sad little pouches of the cheeks pulling down and creases around her letterbox of a mouth, pulled up shut tight in a small, thin line. Look at the chicken and declare it to not be that bad, only burnt on one side, look, the other's barely charred. Carve the chicken and set the burnt bits aside generously, telling her they can go in the stock tomorrow. Smile indulgently when she nods and pats her face dry with her napkin. Look away politely when she pours

herself glass of water and takes a gulp so that she can take her tablet more easily.

Spend the rest of the evening pleasantly enough, in the quiet and confident expectation that Saturday would go down as smoothly as the pint you're nursing.

Stare at the blueberry frangipane tart in front of you, all neat and pretty on its square, white porcelain plate. Finger the matching jug of cream that came with it, dainty with its pattern of bluebells and daisies and the little cap of yellow risen to the top of the liquid. Consider pouring it on top of the tart and watch it coat those purple little buds before bursting them with the attack of the fork but decide against it, pushing the plate away from you a little so that you won't be as tempted, because you don't want to start without him.

Wait.

Wait impatiently, your fingers playing with your necklace and tugging at your earrings. Pull out your compact to check your make up. Put it away again. Pull it out again and grope at the bottom of your handbag until you find your lipstick. Purse your lips and, carefully considering the cupid's bow reflected back at you; smear on the lippy, careful to get the edges. Press your lips together tightly, moving them back-and-forth a little so that the colour will be evenly distributed. Consider the effect in your reflection. Decide that it is perfect. Close the compact with a sharp snap.

Nab the waitress as she walks by and ask her if the clock on the wall is correct. Nod miserably when she tells you what you already know, that yes, it is correct, thank you very much, it is quarter-to-three. Ignore the look of pity she throws you when she sees the heavy make-up and the untouched tart and instead order another cup of tea, a special treat this time, a London Fog, please, and to hell with the calories, you need the comfort, the vanilla syrup like a warm hug around your chest.

Look around and realise everyone else in the coffee shop are in couples. Resent their happiness bitterly.

Have a wild bubble of joy rise up in your throat and threaten to strangle you when a man walks through the door. Settle



down in your seat when his eyes sweep over you without recognition and go to another table, arms spread in a hug, his face lighting up. Pull out your phone and play on it until the burn of the humiliation has subsided a little.

Glance at the clock. Repress the jolt of anger when you see that five whole minutes have gone by. Look at your tart and consider digging into it since he doesn't have the decency to show up on time, the miserable bastard.

Pick up the cream jug. Put it down again. Cross your arms and sigh. Fidget.

Smile automatically when the waitress brings the cup of tea. Pick up your spoon and carefully harvest on the lip of the cutlery a nugget of vanilla scented foam. Savour it, eyes closed. Make it last.

Flinch when a gust of cold wind from the door envelops you. Open your eyes and see him, see him finally, standing there, muffled in a big, green coat, tartan scarf around his neck, his face flushed red from cold.

Recognise him instantly. Raise your hand to wave at him and call him over.

Hesitate, hand in mid-air. Watch him as he looks around, his eyes screwed up into shallow slits in his big red face, the nose almost a beak in profile, burst capillaries visible from even where you're sitting, and he's swaying, he's actually swaying as he's standing there, looking around the teashop to find you.

Smile awkwardly when he sees you and lumbers over. Panic when he reaches the table and extends both arms in the expectation of a hug. Offer your cheek instead and choke a little when he leans in close to kiss it and you can smell the booze on him.

Sit back down, that awful stiff smile on your face, and feel relieved when the waitress bustles over to take his order before either of you can say anything. Nod and keep smiling when he squints at your mug and plate and mumbles that he'll have the same thing as her, the exact same thing as his daughter.

Try to ignore that feeling inside. Comment on the cold weather outside and try not to launch yourself across the table and grab both shoulders to shake him, repressing the scream

inside you, why are you so late why why why. Smile and ask about his journey. Try to keep smiling when he leans over and puts his hand on yours and the stink of him washes over you. Try not to look disgusted.

Fail. Watch the hurt in his eyes when he takes his hand away and mumbles something about meeting friends in a pub. Maintain the fixed rictus on your face when he peers at the clock and says something about losing track of time. Nod and pick up the cream jug, pouring it over the tart, regretting not doing it earlier, when it would have tasted sweeter whilst you were still in the happy bosom of expectation, and not buffeted by the cold winds of reality.

Pierce the fluffy golden top of it and bring the forkful to your mouth, nodding as he talks and talks and talks, going on about his life. Try not to dwell on the fact that he asks you nothing, not even your job or whether you're married or have children of your own, nothing about your life and your past and your present and your future.

Let the increasingly garbled words wash over you. Finish the tart and the London Fog and order another cup of tea, Earl Grey this time, thank you, ducking your head at the waitress' knowing look of sympathy.

Point at his tart, forgotten at his elbow, and hook it towards you with your index finger as he continues to unravel the chaotic fabric of his words. Pour the remainder of your cream onto it and start to eat, looking at him flatly and nodding occasionally.

Say nothing. Chew. Sit in silence.

Think.

Look at him. Notice the wear on the elbows of his jumper, the shine on the collar of his shirt, the dinginess of the scarf and the way the pattern clashes with his coat. Purse your lips disapprovingly at the shaving rash on his neck. Be faintly disgusted by the bags under his eyes, the jowls at his jaw, the broken web of red beneath the skin. Finish your food and wipe your hands on the napkins provided in a pernickety gesture, crumpling up the disposable item before dropping it onto your plate.

Look at the time and make an excuse, rising and gathering

up your coat, pulling out your purse to abandon several notes on the table, far more than is needed to pay the bill but whatever it takes to get rid of him and to get out of there relatively unscathed.

Ignore the bruised look on his face.

Walk, pulling on your coat, the sleeves settling around your arms, the handbag swinging into place like a sword, and push the door open and go through, letting it slam shut behind.

Walk. Walk and don't look back, pulling your chin up and high, breathing in that sharp, clean breath of air, moving forwards and onwards, always, leaving behind a weight and a waste with hardly a regret.

Walk and don't look back.