Tätermentalität

Jacinta Nandi

Editors' Note

The text that follows is an excerpt from a narrative piece exploring female rage in the face of an abusive intimate relationship. The work also deals with the isolation of living through the pandemic in a country where one is never quite allowed to belong. It is a raw and powerful piece which has been trimmed to meet e-O&P editorial guidelines. For the full version, we invite you to contact the author

Erica and Fizza.

Judith beheading Holofernes (1612) by Artemisia Gentileschi. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Exchange #1, on Facebook

Penny, a mum-friend writes to me:

> "I don't want to be a Debbie Downer.. but if this virus mutates so that it's more infectious and more deadly and more unvaccinable, I will kill myself. And my kids."
>
> My response: "Wanting to commit murder-suicide on your entire family is not being a Debbie Downer. Being a Debbie Downer is more like: thinking you haven't made enough quiche for the picnic".
>
> Penny: "Why's this bastard mutating so much, anyway?"
>
> Me: "Vaccinable isn't even a word, you know, Penny".

This is all we do now, mums on Facebook. Swap virus gossip and suicide threats, some more serious than others.

I know lots of single mothers who have moved back to their mum's – or even in with their in-laws. So Granny can look after the kids – supervise the home-schooling – while they work all day. It seems kind of sweet to me? Kind of. Always found those domestic scenes in *The Walking Dead* a bit unbelievable. But not now. They seem believable to me now. My mother-in-law, my oldest's granny, she is basically home-schooling him over the telephone – all I have to do is keep the twins quiet so he can concentrate. We keep quiet so he can concentrate. I keep quiet so they can concentrate. I keep the babies quiet so that Taylor, my husband, and Nicky, my son from my first marriage can concentrate, so they can concentrate.

I am a mother, and I don't need to concentrate, which is kind of good, because I don't think I have been able to concentrate on anything since March 2020.

Exchange #2, In person:

> Taylor says to me, "I'm a *Wissenschaftler* in German".
>
> I say to him, "A *Wissenschaftler* is a scientist".
>
> Taylor says to me, "Yes. In German, I'm a scientist. I'm a scientist of philosophy".

I say nothing for a while.

> Then I say, "Well, that's f**king stupid, isn't it?"

I hate him so much – and he doesn't know – I hug my hatred to my chest, like it's precious, like it's a sweet baby with a delicate skull.

But I know everything about his hate for me. I know his hatred of me off by heart, inside out, everything I ever did or said wrong, he took a razor and etched it onto my skin, like ice laced on a window, traced the lines, tiny thin lines, threaded all over my body, a spider's web of hatred tattooed onto me, my lips stapled together, black lines, needles prick all over me.

I am Sleeping Beauty bathing in hate

And he doesn't know how much I hate him

Because I store it in my body, in my blood, my blood, thicker than water, my blood, thick like treacle, like oil, like syrup, this blood, thick with hate, heavy with sugar. My blood is so red it looks black

And my body is a stagnant pond, polluted. Can you see all the wildlife dying? Look at that, a beaver stuck in tar. Or is it oil? It's all hate, all hate.

My gums are swollen with salt, my tongue with oil. I am with hate, like how women used to be with child. Look at my hate – it's the most perfect thing about me.

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Exchange #3, with Penny on WhatsApp:

My friend Penny phones me up again – well, a WhatsApp video call – an actual phone call, I think, it must be important, she must be suicidal, or maybe she even needs something from me.

> "Guess what", she says, breathlessly.
>
> "What?", I say.
>
> "Dr Drosten's kid!" she says, "He goes to emergency care!"
>
> "Well!", I say. "He's a very important scientist. He's Germany's Top Scientist. He must be systemrelevant*".*

Systemrelevant is the German word for key worker, essential worker, trust the Germans to make such a soulless, bureaucratic word for it. 'Essential workers' sound so busy and hardworking, like bees, providing for society. Or fat, cheerful nurses with rosy cheeks and their hair in a bun. Systemrelevant sounds like a part of an atom in a diagram, with an arrow pointing towards it. Systemrelevant. It makes it sound like there's only one system.

The German people's relationship to the systemrelevant is interesting, I think. Some people are jealous of them? Because they get to send their kids to emergency care? Because they're important? But some people look down on them, a bit, too. They're important, but in a working class kind of a way.

And people keep on saying, angrily, that artists and children and the homeless and sex workers and bar staff and circus clowns and jazz musicians are systemrelevant. But then, when they decided to let the football happen, people were mad that footballers were systemrelevant but kids' football clubs were still closed.

I don't feel systemrelevant, to be honest. I don't even feel like I am part of the system, I feel like I am a fake, just pretending to be here, all normal, German – but underneath my skin, where the blood and the bones should be, there's just fraying wires, or rotting parsnips, or maybe, perhaps, just nothing at all. My German's so good, people think I am German. Or from Holland, sometimes, but mostly they think I am German. Taylor's German is so shit, and still he despises me. He manages to turn being able to speak German properly into another failure of mine.

Exchange #4, with Taylor, in person:

> "You need to apply for Soforthilfe," he says, crossly.
>
> "I know, I know," I say. Secretly I worry that this isn't, in fact true – I'm not a freelance artist, I'm just a scientist's wife. I imagine the authorities raiding my bank account, dragging me to jail, ripping the kids from me.
>
> "I can't do it for you," he says.
>
> "I know, I know," I say, soft and sullen and defensive like a teenager.

He says nothing for a moment, and the words he doesn't say, the silent accusation, just hangs in the air between us, like a really bad fart. Heavy and poisonous, a volcanic ash cloud. I wonder if the dinosaurs were scared when they started dying. I'd quite like to die, I think, I think I wouldn't be scared. I don't mean I feel like killing myself. I don't feel like killing myself. I don't actually want to die – I just wouldn't mind it that much if it happened to me. It's not nice, living together, with a man who hates you. It's not fun. It fills you with despair, and a bit of boredom.

I'd quite like to fake my own death, I think. If I had the technology – if I were the scientist – I'd do that. Imagine, they can grow a human ear in a bat – was it a bat or a rat? They can grow ears on bats – they must be able to clone people by now. They just aren't telling us to keep us calm, right? So, if I were a scientist, I'd clone myself – me, but with no soul – scientists are clever like that, huh? And then I'd hang her from the ceiling. Taylor would come in and see me. Hanging from the ceiling, dead and – what is it that pops out when you hang yourself? Your intestines, right? And you shit yourself. He already saw me shit myself when I was giving birth. Our mums used to tell us we had to close our eyes when sneezing or they'd pop out, I used to try to keep mine open, it never worked. So there I am, soulless, dead, naked, intestines and crap dangling from my body, me dangling from the ceiling on a rope. And Taylor comes in. I wonder if he'd actually smile, or manage to control himself. I wonder how long it would take for him to notice.

Exchange #5, in person with a friend

> "What does his wife do, though?" I say to a friend. We are walking through the park, pushing buggies. I just pissed in a bush.
>
> "She's an actress," she says.
>
> "Are you sure," I say. "I would've thought he'd be married to another scientist. Some kind of blonde, pale, German scientist. You know the kind of woman I mean. Almost attractive. Blonde and thin. A bit empty-looking."
>
> "No, he's married to an actress," she says. "She's been on Tatort."

My babies have fallen asleep, which means I'll have to walk and walk and walk until 6pm. They're too loud. If Taylor has a videokonferenz, he can't concentrate if we're in. So I just walk and walk and walk, aimlessly and soullessly, through the East Berlin streets. They're kind of too boring to be really bleak, that's the most depressing thing. They must be so happy, I think. Doctor Drosten and his actress. I bet they eat really boring breakfasts together, really dark bread and organic salami. I wonder what they talk about, maybe sometimes he explains the difference between viruses and bacteria to her, really slowly. She must look at him over breakfast and think: every woman in Germany wants you, even the *Ausländer.*

Taylor thinks the problem is, he is too important, and I am too unimportant, and so we have nothing in common. He thinks he can't communicate with me properly. But when we met, I was doing better than him, career-wise – somewhere along the way, he overtook me. I'd like to blame the twins but it started before then, even. It was like something inside me switched and I didn't need to prove myself anymore? And everything I wrote turned to sh*t.

I don't think that's our problem, though. I think our problem is, he just isn't important enough. Philosophy, a doctor of philosophy, a scientist with thoughts. If he were a real scientist, like, someone with a microscope, we would be happy. Imagine being a scientist's wife in the olden days, like when you had to boil them water for their baths. That must've been so much fun, being Louis Pasteur's wife and boiling up the water for his bath. Or Edward Jenner, was that his name? Although I think he had sex with the milkmaid. Probably.

Exchange #6, in person, with Taylor

"Why did you buy unsalted butter," Taylor asks. Only it isn't a question.

I raise my eyebrow at him, like I am flirting.

"They didn't have your favourite butter," I say. I smile sweetly. Maybe I will avoid a tantrum today. "And you got so mad at me when I got the margarine instead, remember?"

"You're so f**king useless, you know that," he says. He is still smiling. If I didn't know how much he hated me, I'd say he was smiling affectionately.

I can feel hairs standing up on my back, like they used to, when we were cave people, when we were monkeys, when we were shrew-like.

"I thought it would be better to get the same brand – "

"You mean to tell me there was no salted butter in the entire supermarket!" He thunders, I flinch, my teenager laughs. Taylor opens his mouth, closes his mouth, looks at me.

"Were you born this f**king stupid or do you take pills," he says. The teenager is cracking up, if we'd stayed in my home country, he wouldn't find this funny.

"We'll talk about this later," he says. I nod. I guess we probably will.

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So, maybe, when corona is over, maybe I'll get a job in a shop or something, and a Wohnberechtigungsschein flat in the suburbs, and the twins can see Taylor every Sunday, and every other weekend for the whole weekend, maybe. When corona is over. Maybe when corona is over, we'll all go to Disneyland. Maybe Taylor will be in a good mood all weekend or maybe I'll finally die, not necessarily suicide, just carelessness. Maybe.

Maybe when corona is over I'll work again, and earn more than him, and he'll start to respect me, maybe he doesn't hate me, maybe he's just depressed, maybe it just gets to him, paying all the bills, he does pay all the bills, he does pay all the bills, he does pay all the bills, even the teenager's phone bill, maybe when corona is over he won't pay all the bills and he will start to respect me, maybe I won't die, maybe this is going to be okay, maybe we'll go to Disneyland and it will all be okay. Disneyland, Paris, I mean. Disneyland, Paris. Or maybe I go to Greece, alone. Like Shirley Valentine. Or maybe I f**k Dr Drosten, maybe when corona is over, I f**k Dr Drosten. No. No, no. Maybe when corona is over I don't f**k Dr Drosten, maybe I f**k Taylor's boss, maybe secretly, maybe I'll f**k Taylor's boss secretly, maybe when corona is over we'll go to his datscha, secretly, and secretly f**k, and maybe, when corona is over, Taylor will hate me as much as he does now.

Maybe when corona is over, Taylor will finally understand how much I hate him. I think I hate him more than he hates me, although I'm not sure that that's scientifically possible. Maybe I'll electrocute him, like a rat in a lab –

People talk about women murdering their husbands all the time, don't they? But you never hear of it. So, either women are really good at murdering men – much better than men are at murdering women – so clever at murdering men that they never get caught – or they're so rubbish, they never even try. Hardly ever try. Hardly ever, mostly never. If they'd been any famous women murdering their husbands recently, I am sure I would've noticed. I would've noticed and remembered it. I would.

I wish women weren't such cowards. You know what I wish? I wish women would commit murder suicides – just a tiny bit more. Just a tiny bit more often. Then men would respect us. But women are such cowards. They never commit murder suicides, it's only ever suicide, like Sylvia Plath, boring, or maybe they drown their babies in cement and hide their bodies in the plant pots on the balcony. Newborn babies, drowned like kittens. Seriously, women are so weak. Men do this so much better than us: exterminate, exterminate, exterminate, like daleks. First, you kill your youngest, the babies, and then the school-aged kids, and then any teenagers, if there are any, and then your wife, and then, finally, yourself.

Like a king.

No. That's not right. Marie-Antoinette was killed last, wasn't she?

Still, there's something regal about it, isn't there, when men kill off their whole family. Something magnificent.

When corona is over, how many will be dead?

I saw my neighbour in the playground yesterday. I think it's safe now. He had his youngest in a sling, I hate it when German men carry their babies in slings, they look like stupid teddy bears. Imagine Taylor carrying the baby. He would never do something like that. He would never do anything like that. Pushchairs are as far as he will go.

> Yesterday my neighbour said to me, “wir müssen langsam zurückkehren. In die Normalität”
>
> I said, “must we”.
>
> He said, “Ja, langsam müssen wir das”.
>
> I said, “In the first wave, I didn’t know anyone who had died now half of London is dead already”.
>
> He said, “die Kinder werden langsam depressiv”.
>
> I said, “I think my twins quite like me, actually”.

(It was an insult – I think I am a better mother than all these people whose kids are so depressed. But it’s also the truth. My kids love me, and they don’t miss nursery, not even for a second.)

(It’s Taylor who can’t bear me.)

Why do people want to return to normality?

I want to escape from normality, if I am honest.

I want to get away from normality.

I hate normality. I hate having to be normal. It makes me feel like my head is imploding.

You know what I’d like? Instead of normality? I’d like to take the twins and go live in a cave and they could live off my breastmilk and during the day I’d go foraging for roots and nuts, like Rapunzel. Pregnant women are so resourceful, huh? Forage for roots and nuts, steal some salad off of a rich witch who lives next door. Maybe we’re not cowards. Maybe we’re just not murderesses?

What about the teenager? I think. I have to stay inside normality because of the teenager. Soaking up all of Taylor’s hate so it doesn’t seep inside the teenager’s brain, like osmosis.

Osmosis, huh! Maybe I should have been the scientist, after all.

Exchange #9, with a neighbour, on WhatsApp

My neighbour was kind of flirting, and he wanted my number, so he could WhatsApp me a funny video.

Exchange #10, with my daughter, in person

> The girl twin came up to me and whispered, “I think the girl over there has corona”.
>
> I whispered back, “it’s not your job to worry about corona. Mummy and the scientists know how to look after you”.
>
> She whispered back, “I saw it. In her mouth. A really big corona”.

When we got in, Taylor said I had sent the wrong cups back to Amazon. Well. The right ones, actually. I had sent the right cups back to Amazon, and kept the wrong ones. I said I actually liked the blue ones more, which was a lie, I was just lying to save face, and he threw one at the wall by the side of my face. The blue porcelain shattered around me and I noticed that I hadn’t even flinched.

> "You're cleaning that up," he said, but the thing was, I was already doing it. And I was secretly glad. I needed some broken shards of porcelain to grow some oregano in a jar.

I wondered if I had deliberately sent the wrong cups back, just to piss him off, so he would throw the cups at me and I would get some broken porcelain.

(Maybe when corona is over, I will poison him, slowly poison him to death.)

(No. Instead, every time I have a yeast infection, I will put his toothbrush in my vagina, and he'll get gum disease.)

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Exchange #11, in person, with my son

My teenager comes out of his room. A miracle.

> "I'll make pizza tonight," he says.

I flinch.

I notice I flinch.

> "Better not," I say quietly. "Taylor has a Videokonferenz."

He nods. He's so reasonable, the teenager, and then every now and then, when Taylor is out for a bit, he threatens to beat me up, or kill the twins.

> "I'll make pizza quietly," I say. "And after the twins sleep. We'll watch something in your room? Something stupid and British?"
>
> "Game of Thrones?" He says.
>
> "But there's always so many rape scenes to skip over," I say.
>
> "I wish they'd make, like, a 'Watch it With Mum' cut," he says.
>
> "Let's watch 'Columbo'," I say. "Let's watch one of the female murderers in 'Columbo'. I'm always in the mood for that."

§

I think my friend was wrong about Dr Drosten, though. My neighbour – my sling neighbour, he told me – and a German man versus an Ausländer woman, well, no matter how much of a feminist anti-racist person you are, you know who to believe. Don't you?

So, the sling neighbour told me "Dr Dorsten is married to a scientist". I would love it, if, when corona is over, it came out that Dr Drosten's wife designed the virus in her lab.

Wouldn't that be satisfying? I like all the conspiracy theories, about the Chinese – I kind of hope they did design it in a lab in Wuhan, I kind of feel like the West deserves it, if they did – but it would be really great if it came out it was designed by us, by one of us, by one woman, in a lab.

It kills more men than women, huh?

So maybe it was designed by some evil feminist scientist in a lab, trying to kill off all the men. #killallmen, I think. I think in hashtags now. Hashtag pay the Kieferorthopäde.

At least it doesn't kill children yet, I think. Well, not that many. Not yet. I want my kids to survive this. Huh.

I write about this in my gratitude journal every night – "I am so grateful that the corona virus doesn't kill children!" and sometimes I worry I am trying to manifest something, something bad.

Exchange #11, in person, with Taylor

> Taylor says to me, "and what, if anything, are you contributing to the rent this month?"
>
> I say, "I can give you the Kindergeld".
>
> He smiles. "Imagine that!", he says, slowly. "Imagine that. Imagine me not being the sole breadwinner for one month".
>
> I say, "But I kind of need it back, anyway. For the Kieferorthopäde".
>
> He smiles. "I never signed up for this," he says. "Do you hear me? I didn't sign up for any of this".
>
> I say quietly, "I didn't exactly sign up for this either".
>
> He says, "God, you know what I hate most about you? You have such a victim mentality. It's pathetic!"

I blink, confused.

He's meant to be so intelligent.

People are always telling me he's clever. His boss at work said to me once, *"Taylor is such an exceptionally intelligent guy, it must be hard to keep up sometimes"*.

But here, at home, he says so many dumb things! Like if someone said that in a soap opera, I'd stop watching, that's how dumb it is.

Because I don't have victim mentality – not even a tiny bit. If I had a victim mentality, maybe I'd be a bit happier being his victim.

I have a Tätermentalität, that's why I hate this so much.

I don't want to drink wine on the beach

I don't want to be free.

I don't want the kids to be at uni, and me to be free, and Taylor to forgive me – for what, exactly?

I want to be a Täter, a beautiful, beautiful, perfect Täter.

I want champagne and Taylor's body decomposing under the floorboards.

Maybe, when corona is over, I'll send the teenager to his dad's and make bone broth stew out of Taylor's body, that really would be two birds with one stone, wouldn't it. Heal my leaky gut and destroy Taylor's corpse. Taylor los werden.

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> My teenager comes out of his room and whispers to me, "can you lend me your eyeliner? We're having a sleepover tonight and all the boys are wearing eyeliner."
>
> I whisper back, "You can't go to a sleepover."
>
> He whispers back, "It's an online one."
>
> I whisper back, "Oh, you kids!"
>
> He whispers back, "Have you got eyeliner or not?"
>
> I whisper back, "Let me do it for you."

And in his room, door shut, the pale sunlight dancing on his wooden floor, me touching his face, teasing him that I wanna give him smoky eyes, for a brief moment, I remember what it feels like to be happy.

Maybe, maybe one day, I will be with love again

Maybe.

Timoclea Killing Her Rapist (1659) by Elisabetta Sirani. Source: Wikimedia Commons

German - English glossary

Tätermentalität: perpetrator mentality

Täter: perpetrator

Tatort: a long-running TV police drama

Soforthilfe: financial relief programme introduced during the pandemic for small businesses, freelancers and the self-employed

Wohnberechtigungsschein: a certificate which demonstrates that a German resident is in a low income bracket, allowing them access to state-subsidised housing

W*ir müssen langsam zurückkehren. In die Normalität*: We have to go back slowly. To normality.

Ja, langsam müssen wir das: yes, slowly we have to

die Kinder werden langsam depressiv: the kids are slowly becoming depressed

Kindergeld: child benefit

Kieferorthopäde: orthodontist

Taylor los werden: get rid of Taylor

About Jacinta

Jacinta Nandi is a single mother who lives in Berlin-Lichtenrade, where she writes - articles, columns, short stories and books. She writes in English and German, her main topics are racism, feminism, motherhood and poverty. Her most recent book was published in Autumn 2020, Die Schlechteste Hausfrau der Welt (The World's Worst Housewife), a fairly autobiographical account of a frazzled mother failing quite badly at both feminism and housework.

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