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The Age of Rudeness

By Rachel Cusk

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There's no need to be rude, I say to the man in the packed hall at passport control. There are people everywhere, and his job is to send them into the right queues. I have been watching him shout at them. I have watched the obsessive way he notices them, to pick on them. There's no need to be rude, I say.

His head jerks around.

You're rude, he counters. You're the one who's rude.

This is an airport, a place of transit. There are all sorts of people here, people of different ages, races and nationalities, people in myriad sets of circumstances. In this customs hall, there are so many different versions of living that it seems possible that no one version could ever be agreed on. Does it follow, then, that nothing that happens here really matters?

No, I'm not, I say.

You are, he says. You're being rude.

The man is wearing a uniform, though not a very impressive one: a white short-sleeved synthetic shirt, black synthetic trousers, a cheap tie with the airport's insignia on it. It is no different from the uniform a bus driver might wear, or someone at a car-rental desk, someone who lacks any meaningful authority while also being forced into constant interaction with members of the public, someone for whom the operation of character is both nothing and everything. He is angry. His face is red, and his expression is unpleasant. He looks at me — a woman of 48 traveling alone, a woman who doubtless exhibits some signs of the privileged life she has led — with loathing. Apparently it is I, not he, who has broken the social code. Apparently, it was rude of me to accuse him of rudeness.

By telling this story, I am trying to substantiate my fear that discrimination and bullying are used against people trying to enter Britain, my country. There are many people who don't have this fear. To them, my story proves only one thing, which is that I once met a rude man in an airport. I might even have inadvertently made them pity him. I, the teller of this tale, would have to demonstrate that under the same circumstances, I would have behaved better. In the event, all I did was criticize him. I made him angrier; perhaps he took it out on the next person in the queue. To top it all off, I admit that he accuses me of precisely the same failing: rudeness.

Anyone hearing the story will at this point stop thinking about the moral problem of rudeness and start thinking about me. Might I be to blame after all?

How can we ascertain the moral status of rudeness? Children are the members of our society most often accused of being rude; they are also the most innocent. We teach children that it is rude to be honest, to say, “This tastes disgusting” or “That lady is fat.” We also teach them that it is rude to disrespect our authority. We give them orders: We say, “Sit still” or “Go to your room.” At a certain point, I got into the habit, when addressing my children, of asking myself whether I would speak in the same way to an adult and discovered that in nearly every case the answer was no. At that time, I understood rudeness to be essentially a matter of verbal transgression: It could be defined within the morality of language, without needing to prove itself in a concrete act.

A friend of mine says this is the beginning of the end of the global order: He says that in a couple of decades’ time, we’ll be eating rats and tulip bulbs, as people have done before in times of social collapse. I consider the role that good manners might play in the sphere of rat-eating, and it seems to me an important one. As one who has never been tested, who has never endured famine or war or extremism or even discrimination, and who therefore perhaps does not know whether she is true or false, brave or a coward, selfless or self-serving, righteous or misled, it would be good to have something to navigate by.

Rachel Cusk is the author of several novels, including *Outline*, and most recently *Transit*.