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workshops

Guilt
a shambolic stream of consciousness

by Jane Reynolds

Reaching for my laptop with arms that look and feel like tentacles of a mortally wounded octopus, I see it's 00.04. Already Sunday and I haven't even started my homework. I picture dear, innocent Roddy, checking his phone, looking for my piece. Roddy, with only one shoulder, who still manages to bang out homeworks and workshops despite his handicap. I fold forwards, like tissue. I am sorry. Last week I didn't even tell him, poor, injured tutor, that I couldn't make his class. I left him, not knowing, if I would arrive, or was late, or had left the class forever. He had to battle with uncertainty alongside physical pain.

But I do have a really good excuse. Don't I? I have a most hideous virus. One I probably picked up on the plane from Uganda to Dubai or from Dubai to London, even though I was upgraded to business class. Every pathogen in East Africa to the Middle East was partying in that air-conditioning system. It would have been Ebola if I'd been in economy.

So, with chattering teeth, for Roddy, I drag my laptop onto my lap. With a sense of loving commitment and true dedication, I click open his homework for 25th September. I scan to the bottom, to see what I have to write about. 'Guilt.'

I pause, then pull a face which says a thousand things. Easy, happy things. Because I know what guilt is. And, it's just one word. It won't be too hard. Internal music starts to play. The easy listening kind.

And then it starts to dribble down on me, like mercury. How could I *think* such a thing? That I? Know about guilt? When people, billions of them, from the beginning of time and all over the earth, have suffered hideously, far, far, far more than I could ever imagine. Do I know how the mothers feels who didn't blow out the candle that burned her daughter to death? Or the young man who mowed down a double pushchair of twins, drunk, when he could have just called a cab?

So I feel the tissue that is my broken body crumple further. This could get bad. So, sensing the need to regain a sense of perspective, I steady my eyes over the given links in the 'guilt' homework. 'You can do this, Jane. It's only 500 words on a one word emotion.'

Then, oh. WTF!? Only a link to the greatest living depiction of guilt in all literature, ever. 'Out Damned Spot.' Acted most superbly and not just that but lovingly set to music by Roddy. I feel threatened. I feel pathetic. I feel like a squashed ant under the foot of Ganesh. Both existentially drained by the incomprehensible torture of Lady M and her harrowing screams, and horribly afflicted by an undeniable confrontation with my own insignificance and mortality, I flee from my responsibility and scroll away as fast as I can to the next reference I have been asked to consider.

Holy Cow! Only an invitation to indulge myself in the contemplation of Aristotle's Poetics - "allegedly the most popular source material among Hollywood screenwriters." Oh, give a girl a break!

I am reminded of the stark, lemon yellow formica school refectory, during A level papers, when I realised I was not the person I wanted to be. Roddy, I'm just not resonating at the frequency of a Hollywood scriptwriter right now. Nor of Aristotle. I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry.

So, do I give up on 'Guilt' and call in sick next Wednesday? Or do I refuse to accept that this guilt thing has got the better of me, ramble averagely, finish quickly and, melting on the inside with a business class African virus, press send?

I do that. I get two seconds of the opposite of guilt. And then I see. Oh, no! I've emailed 713 words instead of the honest, decent 500. Not only have I written rubbish but long rubbish. That everyone will have to listen to, miss their turn for and get home late because of. And which Roddy will have to strain his one good shoulder even more than for the others', to constructively criticise.

Don't bother, Roddy.