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## Guilty Children

by Victoria Cooper

Someone told me once that when you have a baby, they take the baby out and put the guilt back in. I laughed along but I did not fully understand. Now I know though. I know when the guilt gnaws away at my insides like some brooding carrion picking over my bones. I know the ache of when you are asked where you were when “everyone else had their mummy there”.

The puzzled look on an innocent face when you accidentally turn over four pages instead of one on the bedtime story you have read every night for two weeks. Their tear stained cheeks when you rant and spit over lost school uniform only to remember you stored it in the airing cupboard that morning.

The mournful wailing that fills not just your ears, but your head, shaking shoulders and sinking heart as you deliver them to nursery. They fight their growing up and you drag them on kicking, biting and screaming all the way.

You peek at the angelic face that lies peacefully sleeping and you melt when only moments before you had de-corked that wine, gulped that first gulp and slammed down the glass with a “bloody kids” under your breath.

So, they were right those wise words told to me on the eve of parenthood. But although that impregnated guilt is now tight as a drum, the wide girth in its roundness is not all consuming. I do **not** feel guilty for their belief that the tinny melody of an ice cream van means they have run out of ice cream. Their little disappointed faces only make me do a small jig inside.

I feel nothing when their eyes widen with astonishment at friend's huge selection of toys, which more than double their selection tidied away in small bedrooms. Equally absolutely nothing when they sit for hours on coin-operated ride on aeroplanes, tucks, diggers, or trains because I have sadly shaken my head and imparted the sad news that its broken.

No guilt at all when they whine monotonously over lucky Tilly or Tom who has a cat, a dog, a snake, and a rabbit while you tell them nobody likes spoilt children.

No guilt over informing politely its Daddy's turn.

No guilt over insisting they eat all their carrots one night and not caring what they eat the next.

No guilt over being really good at hiding in hide and seek and terrible at finding them.

Definitely none for waiting until their heads are turned to spit out burnt biscuits made at school.

None of it, not one jot. Not an iota.

My guilt is on an even keel these days and when it wins, I wander around the house glassy eyed balling up socks and neatening teddies. The other days, the good days, I stand victorious and proud knowing I am ahead of my game. Just for one day I am on the front foot and these are the days when I don't grab my running shoes and hurtle out of the door before those carrions get me.