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It's Catching

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Today at work we had Diversity and Inclusion training. What does diversity and inclusion say to you? the first picture asked, cock-eyed and wobbling on the overhead projector. I think the training package should have come with a taser; of course nobody wanted to answer. It was like a 'This Way to the Beach' sign in the middle of a minefield.

And afterwards, all six of us looked guilty or resentful; "including the black and minority groups," I pointed out to Aisha, air-quoting my irony. Aisha is the only black person where I work. I think behind me somebody started to say 'what the...' but definitely the atmosphere got pretty tense, as you can imagine, and in my panic I carried on with: "But of course saying that is probably discriminatory, because you're actually inclusive now. Not that you weren't in the first place. And actually, isn't saying minority discriminatory?" And when she just looked at me, I added desperately, "Well. Welcome to our world!"

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"Apparently, as we get older we can't help saying things without thinking. We lose our ability to judge what is or isn't appropriate to say, which actually is a bit of a relief for me." My boss blinked a few times, quickly. "Are you being actually serious?"

I was actually. It was something that had begun to worry me; this silly, often inappropriate spew of garbage that spilled out sometimes. I couldn't stop it. And if not inappropriate, it was just muddled, inane crap. In the shops I could be asking if they stocked marzipan, and wind up telling them all about the four big greenish patches that have recently appeared on my bedroom ceiling.

I'd Googled it up. 'Why am I talking shit?' The doctor said I didn't need to come to the surgery, that 'it sounded like anxiety', and offered me pills, but Google said there are some strong signs that I would soon develop dementia. I definitely had fatty plaque deposits binding to my cortisol and building up on my brain. That was inevitable with getting older, apparently.

That night I lay in bed worrying about it and then I worried about Aisha. Me and Aisha got along well, pre-pandemic, anyway. When I finally fell asleep I dreamed I killed 50 seagulls with my bare hands, and my pillow was wet with tears when I woke up.

I bought Aisha a £3 box of Celebrations as a way of apologising, and some zinc supplements and canned mackerel to try and stave off the dementia. Then I went back and swapped the Celebrations for Roses, in case Aisha thought I was saying let's- celebrate-your-ethnic-minority-status-in-a-patronising-non-inclusive way.

"You've never had a filter," said my boss, "but this is going just a bit too far. Aisha had to find a safe space yesterday."

Safe space? I thought for a moment I'd been zapped off to a parallel universe, or something.

"What's up with you? Come on, Pauline! Diversity and Inclusion training? It's ridiculous."

"It's the law."

"I'm not racist, none of us are...do you think I'm racist?"

"I think you need to grow up a bit."

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. I've worked there for eight years; Pauline and I used to joke about stuff a lot. I used to cut out bizarre headers from *That's Life* and stick them to her desk drawers and on her computer: "I Thought I Was Pregnant and Then My Intestines EXPLODED", "SACKED Because of My Irritable Bowel Syndrome".

"Ok," I said, "but then aren't you being a bit ageist?"

Smile, I thought, look at me and smile! But she didn't, just realigned her facemask and liberally applied her sanitiser.

I realised then that it was hopeless.

Not much has changed in our not-quite-post-pandemic world. Covid has paved the way for the 'new norm'. With the last remaining rules hanging by a mask strap, everyone's wandering around lost without them. 'Guidance' doesn't cut it. Guidance says: "Up to you, but I'm just saying..."

And so we stick with the plan.