

University of Western Sydney

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Ruby

Biographical note:

Gillian is a writer and architect living in Sydney. She recently submitted her PhD thesis which is a multi-disciplinary exploration of space/place anchored in her work as an architect working in the area of Aboriginal housing. She has just finished writing Ageing, Disability and Home Care's guidelines for designing group homes: accommodation for people who require up to 24-hour supported care.

Let a picture of Ruby arise!

Ruby the DJ. Ruby who is slightly wild. Ruby, always rushing from place to place. Ruby, always with her finger on the pulse. Ruby with her wise intelligence. Ruby who, through the goodness of her soul, finally allowed me to be forgiven. Ruby who, having yelled and screamed at me, came and gave me a hug. Ruby who I used as an example in my less-than-wise years, in my desire to have someone else understand, in my rush to attempt to be a good boss.

I meant no harm, but that is, of course, a weak excuse.

I will need to live to an extremely ripe old age if I am ever to understand things, and things being as they are, time is not on my side. I am getting old. I am not that well. It is unlikely that I will understand much more so the few things I do know I feel compelled to write down.

These are parallel strands I will to plait together for you. Everything is interconnected. Housing begat health begat education begat employment begat ...

But let us begin at the beginning as I sit in my office, drifts of papers around me. Memos and memorandums and briefs. All marked CONFIDENTIAL. All accompanied by a pink cover sheet with explicit instructions on them. I have to task the people around me to remove these papers and to accomplish what is spelled out on the pink sheet. It is not for me to do the jobs anymore but for them. I find this hard because sometimes it seems to take them so long to finish what it is I want done, and I wonder if it is not better to do it all myself instead. I must resist. I am expected to have others do these things and for them to reap the rewards of doing this.

Each day I carry this and other thoughts home with me and then back to work the next morning. Sometimes miraculously overnight, just like the cobbler's elves, a solution comes to me. Suddenly, I know what to do or so it seems – or seemed.

I have done those things which ought not to be done and I have left undone those things that ought to be done and there is no health in us. But thou, oh Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders, spare thou them that confess their faults.

I am hoping that the mere act of confessing will buy me the indulgences I would so like, to free me from this guilt and shame. But it is a gamble. I cannot take the high and mighty ground.¹ I have no excuses. It is mine alone.²

I did say it. I did say it about someone else. Ruby. Let's call her Ruby and in a way that is her name. As I said it, I waved my hand and said, 'So, let's take – ahhh, say Ruby'. And in that wave of the arm, I made my unmaking. The woman seated in front of me started a little. Or is it that I see her start now as I think back on things. Her attention pricked up at least and she settled back into her seat. She adjusted her hands in her lap. They no longer lay open. Snap. She shut them tightly. Snap. She had me or so she hoped. The corners of her mouth twitched. Listen now. Listen. She said it to herself internally, but, in looking back now, I see her lean in ever so slightly.

'It is not that it is bad as such ...', I was saying, but I was thinking, 'It's awful. Your writing is awful. I don't know how or why we got you to do this. It is clearly above, beyond, you. You are way out of your depth'. And while I was saying the one thing and thinking the other, I was failing to think about what it was I was wanting to say. I

need to remember this for future. I joke, but mean, that I have a slow IQ not a low IQ, but in explaining my guilt, and hence shame, I am also demonstrating here what it is I mean by this statement.

‘It is not that it is bad as such ... but it is very’. And the words failed me. I was still thinking that it was awful and my mind was racing around banging into things trying to move them aside so I could get to the one that would best explain to her what my problem with her writing was. Was the problem even with her writing or what it was she was saying? My mind was racing around too fast for me to even note with any precision what it was that I was trying to do. Mainly my mind kept grabbing at something I don’t even believe in, but it must have some sort of resonance with me since it was still lodged in there. Mainly my mind kept bumping into ‘Show, don’t tell. Show. Don’t tell’.

Meanwhile she, and this ‘she’ is not the Ruby I have mentioned at the beginning here, she, and perhaps we should call her Theresa, because although that is not her name she seems to me like a Theresa, meanwhile Theresa had run with my hesitation and said somewhat breathlessly, ‘Yes, yes, I am used to writing for university and I did find this type of writing hard. I get very good marks on my university essays and things. I get only HDs’.

My heart fell for just a moment for now I was stuck on a number of fronts. I now had in the mix that I needed to alert her to the fact that I had a number of degrees, including higher degrees including a whole lot more education than her and I needed her in her place. I had way more things than she could ever do. I was feigning humbleness and retiring, but I could do superior as well if that’s what she wanted. This dimwit who couldn’t write was boasting to me about how great she was. How the university (which one??) thought she wrote well. What sort of faculty was she in that could think that what she wrote even made any sense? She didn’t even get it. I had asked her numerous times to do this report and here it was (again) the tenth time and it still made no sense whatsoever. How could I ever get her to get it?

And so here it comes, I said, ‘So let’s take Ruby. Let’s write this as though it were for Ruby. She’s a good one to take because, although she’s not stupid by any count, this isn’t her area of expertise. She knows nothing about this. You will have to keep it simple. Simple not simplistic’.

Smug. I felt smug. I felt I had explained everything extremely well. I had been clear. I had ‘shown’ not ‘told’. I hadn’t let my centre go and say what it was I had achieved and gained. I had been quietly superior. I had shown her alright.

Theresa rose from the seat, picked up her ridiculous unreadable report and left my office. If I hadn’t been revelling in my smugness, in my superiority, I would have noticed that she left with a slight skip – a lightness in her step that, if I had been noticing anything at all except my sense of righteousness, would have alerted me to things. I was seemingly oblivious, but uneasy.³

A hush and calm, always an indication of something awful about to happen, now occurred. The office hummed on as it ought to with people busying themselves at their desks. The sounds of computer keyboards being tapped. Quiet conversations between comrades. A printer’s whirr. I had things to do. From my office, I watched

the general office busyness on the other side of the glass wall partition. I was glad that I had had removed the large masculine painting that once hung in the middle of the main wall. I no longer felt so crowded in.

At an early age before my youngest brother was born, my other brother and I had been left in a beach house for a bit by ourselves while our mother picked up our father who was arriving by train from the city. We were playing to see who could stay the longest in the small wooden wardrobe before having to get out. My brother had stayed in for the count of one hundred and seventy six before beating on the flimsy door to let him out. It was now my turn again and I stood in the small dark place counting out loud for both me and him because his counting was more erratic than mine.

I easily reached and then passed two hundred. 'Now!', I called and banged on the door for him to let me out. I could hear fumbling at the lock. Then it stopped. 'Let me out now,' I called. Again there was fumbling at the lock, a scrapping of metal against metal. 'NOW', I shouted, asserting some authority, for my time was way over his by far. 'Let me out NOW. NOW.' The darkness moved one step darker and closer. 'Let me out. I want to get out.' I started pounding on the door. Maybe he hadn't heard. 'Let me out. Get me out.' My panic infectious. The sound of the key in the lock turning this way and that, wobbling of the key, some further wiggling of both the key and the door. 'Let me out. I wanna get out.'

Finally my brother answered in a small voice, and he KNEW this was against the rules of the game, that he had locked the door. Somehow now the key wouldn't work any more. He knew this wasn't right. We had agreed at the beginning of the game, as soon as mum stepped out the front door, that we would play but you weren't meant to turn the key at all.

Now I was panicked and angry. 'We promised not to turn the key. You said you wouldn't. Let me out NOW. I'm going to die I haven't enough air. Get me out.'

My brother, too, was panicked but quiet. We'd both agreed that we wouldn't turn the key. It was our favourite game, yet mum had not wanted us to play it. She wasn't at home, which is why we could play.

She's going to die. Oh my god, she was going to die. The key slipped loose in the lock. He wobbled it up and down. Inside the cupboard his sister was jumping around like a lunatic shouting and screaming, crying, bashing on the door, the walls, jumping up and down inside the locked cupboard. Mum would never be home. When she did get back, whoa, would he be in trouble. What should he do? He could run away. He could pretend that she had gone out somewhere – but it was mighty difficult to pretend there was no-one else here, with all the bashing on the cupboard doors, the screaming, the crying. Maybe she would stop soon. What was he going to do? How could he get out of all this. Oh my god. If she would only stop for a bit, he would get a chance to think about it. Perhaps it was the wrong key. He took it out and looked at it again, turned it around the other way, slipped it in, wobbled it up and down. Oh my god. Took it out, noticed the key on the other side of the cupboard, swapped them over – nothing working, screeching and crying, bashing of head against the inside of the door, 'Let me out, let me out. I'm going to die. I'm dying'.

The cupboard was almost leaving the ground with the force with which she was jumping around inside.

He could leave, there was still time to leave. Would anyone notice? The key didn't work. The key couldn't work. He could take the key out and walk away. He wondered for a second.

For the rest of his life he would do just that. When the situation got to too desperate, he would take the key out of the lock, stride across the room, drop the key in the garbage bin, walk to the door, take a quick look around, then close the door and walk on, never even hearing the bashing from inside. Not the screams. Not the crying. Not the splintering of wood.

I, on the other hand, found it impossible to sit for any time in places where I couldn't see out, where there was no obvious means of escape. Even in traffic, sitting behind a large vehicle, I begin to feel edgy, have an urge to overtake and get out from behind the situation. It doesn't matter that I might be taking a risk, anything is better than not being able to see fully what is in front of me.

So I had the painting, which had been hung smack bang in the middle of the glazed partition in order to stop straying eyes and protect my privacy, removed. I had hated it when it was there, but then later admired it when it was hung in someone else's office. With it gone, I could look up from my computer screen or from written material on my desk at regular intervals as prescribed by any ergonomic guidelines and focus on some distant object and rest my eyes for a bit.

And me in the cupboard?

My mother and father returned eventually. Cheerful, as they entered the house, they were propelled into action when they heard banging and crashing coming from the small second bedroom at the back of the fibro beach house they had rented for summer holidays. My father dropped his overnight suitcase at the front door and raced out the back. Asking no questions, he turned the key in the lock, knowing how to engage its strange shape in the old lock as required. He did it with comparative ease and opened the door.

I stepped out. We continued our holiday at the beach. We never played the game again, never placed anything in the cupboard for any reason, never spoke of what happened. I have never liked being enclosed in any confined space and I don't know how I might behave if I was to find myself in similar circumstances again.⁴

I sat now in my office with nothing much to do. A hush came over the place. The director entered my office, holding a typed piece of paper. She sat down. She is an incredibly beautiful woman, daunting in her elegance. Her skirt fell around her crossed knees like only an expensive well-cut garment can do. Her shoes were almost new and clean and polished.

'I'm afraid ...', she said and then looked nervously away. 'I'm afraid there is a claim of racism against you and you will have to go to mediation. Don't worry', she followed up quickly, 'this happened to me once'.

Nothing else can now be heard. There is a clanging of the universe, a ringing. I am standing within the bell itself. The whole world is vibrating. Golden metal surrounds

me. I am small and timid within its confines. The tower of London. The tower of Babel. There is nothing else. I am in there enclosed, unable to get out, beating on the door, crying, screaming.

‘Go and wash your mouth out with soap.’

There is nothing more. I am too small to be seen.⁵

I used to be a contender. I used to feel I knew what I was doing. I used to believe that maybe somewhere somehow I belonged. And then I didn't.

It speeds up from here. Next Ruby is pounding the desk in my office, shouting at me. ‘How dare you! How dare you!’

I am trying to explain, but there is no-one around to listen, even if they would.

Then I am sobbing at my desk. I can close my door, but not everyone else can, and it means nothing to them. No-one turns to look at where the sound comes from. Everything is as usual out in the office, as they all busy around doing what they ought.

Everything as usual, everyone doing as they usually do, except the thin, scrawny one. Suddenly she is in my office with me, her arm around me saying she believes me, she believes in me. It can't be so bad. What is it? What can be so bad?

And I am explaining to her and saying again and again, ‘I didn't mean it’.

Saying, ‘I chose my words carefully’.

Saying, ‘I said “simple” not “simplistic”’.

And she is nodding and ah-ha-ing and taking it all in. She leaves and returns with a box of tissues and a cup of tea.

‘Sit down’, she says, she is saying.

‘I do the records, you know that’, she says, is saying. ‘The records for the Stolen Generations.’ She is wiping my tears and nodding as she tells me this.

‘Do you know what word they used time and time again about each child as she or he was assessed, having been ripped away from their mother and family and all the world that knew?’

‘I know you were trying to say something particular. I know you didn't mean anything more than what you were saying. But to others, to Ruby, to me, it means so much more. There is a history stretching back to the first invasion with that word. People locked away. People shot. People stolen from their families – because they didn't speak the same language, didn't value the same things as the strangers who had moved in, because they chose not to be so materialistic and didn't invest in all those materialistic things. We don't take those words so easily.’

Endnotes

1. ‘I said, “All along I have been wondering how you got to be the way you are. Just how it was that you got to be the way you are.”’ (Kincaid 1990: 41)

2. 'I said it again. I said "How do you get to be that way?" The anguish on her face almost broke my heart, but I would not bend. It was hollow, my triumph, I could feel that, but I held onto it just the same.' (Kincaid 1990: 41)
3. The whole thing had an air of untruth about it all; they didn't mean to do what they were doing at all. It was a show – not for anyone else's benefit, but a show for each other. And how did I know this? I just could tell – that it was a show and not something to be trusted. (Kincaid 1990: 47)
4. I was lying there in a state of no state, almost as if under ether, thinking nothing, feeling nothing. It is a bad way to be – your spirit feels the void and will summon something to come in, usually bad. (Kincaid 1990: 121)
5. One day I was a child and then I was not. ...One day I was living silently in a personal hell, without anyone to tell what I felt, without even knowing that the feelings I had were possible to have...' (Kincaid 1990: 136)

Works cited

Kincaid, Jamaica 1990 *Lucy*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.