

I washed my hands. My father, a doctor of the most general kind of medicine, held the opinion that a physician should scrub his paws in his consulting room as often as he washes his hands of a woman. To cover his tracks – he never stopped soaping himself, every day of the week and at weekends too. He was frankly surprised that his fingerprints hadn't worn off; I was always spotting his gaze fixed on women's bums – he'd pout, and a grimace of fake disdain would soften his rancour.

I used the hand dryer, positioning my limbs like a sleepwalker. The roar of the machine confirmed the diagnosis – I had just one wish left: to be shut in a sensory deprivation tank.

The world has overtaken me, and that's the defeat I'm proudest of. I prefer to be less firmly hooked up to that cesspit.

Hence penance in the pissoir – it takes me longer and longer, this is life's new sinew.

On the way out I looked at myself in the mirror. If I'd known what I'd see, I'd have given myself an anaesthetic.

I can't wipe the image from my mind. Worse than at Chernobyl. I feel blackened. By thought, deed and neglect. The phrase "dead tired" has ceased to be a metaphor.

Sooner or later old age will burst in on me, but I'm armed to the teeth – I've had implants done. I paid through the nose, I've stuffed an Italian car into my gob. My life has never been all that grand, and that's by design. I like modesty in all things – except for my oral cavity.

I'm careful not to smile too much, or my fine set of teeth outshines the rest and I look like happy plastic. I smoothed my hair.

In recent years I've lost a lot of it. A once magical coiffure has left me with the phoney gesture of combing through an imaginary mane from front to back.

I'm finding it hard to accept my destiny – never again shall I feel the wind in my hair, not even if a cyclone sucked me up. I've heard of toupees and other additions for men. I have no plans to apply them.


I haven't long until retirement, a little more to my demise, but I feel I'm already in the pluperfect tense. I've gained a lot from life, but I've got it the wrong way. And with this insincere unburdening of the soul, but genuine relieving of the bladder, I left the hotel lavatory in a mood as if it were a public toilet at the arse-end of nowhere.

I approached the reception desk and acted out a fictional phone call, rudely castigating the person I was waiting for, supposedly my son.

The employees and other listeners eavesdropped with rising humiliation as I ranted in a stage-whisper, betraying the fact that I'm in the business of cardiac surgery, and for the past twelve hours I've been standing at a table, doing the dirty work on an open heart – the way I described it was truly heart-breaking.

I don't know where I got this need for a false confession. I buttoned myself up all over. I respect decent clothing. No one can accuse me of a lack of breeding when it comes to clothes. I dress tastefully, smartly, not in fashion, but with timeless style. Even in situations that smack of intimacy, when – willing or not – one bares oneself entirely, I've always preferred to keep the top half of my threads on.

Excerpt translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

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|  | <p>© Nivka Gutkowska</p> <p>ZYTA RUDZKA</p> <p>Born 1964</p> |
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