PROJECT MUSE®

Shame, The Secret I Would Tell, How to Turn a Phone Call
into a Disaster

Maria M. Gillan

Prairie Schooner, Volume 77, Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 88-93 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/psg.2003.0013>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/41654>

Maria Mazziotti Gillan

Shame

Today I was thinking about shame and how much it is a part of
everything
we do, the way I was ashamed at 10 to say to my cousin

That my mother asked me to buy toilet paper, as though my
grown-up
Male cousin didn't use toilet paper and wasn't stuck with all
those

Messy bodily functions we have to plan our lives around, the
way public
bathrooms and our need for them reminds us of our humanity,
a cosmic

Joke on us, so we won't forget how rooted we are to the earth
and not the
ethereal beings the nuns wanted us to be.

Today I was thinking about shame and I see Dennis, thin and
frail and
naked, the skin stretched tight over his big bones, not an ounce
of fat

To cover him, the skin blue and translucent as he crawls from the
bedroom
on his helpless legs to the bathroom. How ashamed he is, as
though this

Illness were a failure of his own manhood and he to blame, how
he pounds

his fists on the floor in frustration, how he scuttles into the
bathroom and

Closes the door but not before I see the dark well of sorrow in
his eyes.

Today when I am thinking about shame, I wish it were only toilet
paper

Or a red splotch on my dress or my inability to learn the Periodic
Table

In Chemistry that made me feel it, instead of my convoluted
feelings

About my husband's illness, how nothing in our lives is all one
thing

Or another, not love, not grief, not anger, but always mixed
with its

Opposite emotion, so when I see Dennis crawling along the
floor,

I am struck with the axe of grief, a terrible pity that can do
no good,

but mixed in with it, the shame of my own impatience when
he can't

remember something I told him two minutes ago or when he
struggles for

twenty minutes to open a package and won't accept help or
when he

insists he can walk down the stairs and falls, the corrosive shame
of my

quick annoyance, the shame of my lack of patience, the shame of
feeling

that his illness is a deep and muddy river in which we both will
drown.

The Secret I Would Tell

The secret I would tell if I could, the life
 Hidden behind the black door in my mind
 That I keep sealed shut. You know how that is,
 The things you cannot bear to know about yourself?

How talking to you on the phone last night, I feel
 The sharp hook of guilt for having left you behind,
 Only our neighbor to check on you, and the cat
 To keep you company. You struggle now

To complete the smallest task. Picking up a knife
 Becomes an action complicated in the thought
 It takes for you to open up your hand and reach
 Out and close your fingers around the handle.

Behind my mind's black door is my fear
 Barking like a pit bull. *It is not his death*
that frightens me, I tell my friend, "but his life,
as his body becomes more immobile with each day,

And what if, when he is rigid and corpse-like,
His mind still functions? You'll have to be his rock,"
 My friend says, but I feel hollow and delicate
 as the shell left behind when my father sucked the egg out.

Your voice in my ear sounds reedy and frightened. I force
 A sureness into my own voice when I speak to you now,
 Knowing you need my certainty to hold you up.

How to Turn a Phone Call into a Disaster

Sunday morning. Dennis has gone to church;
 I, as usual, when I don't have a workshop or a reading,
 Am sitting on the sofa in my nightgown and robe.
 I decide to call my son, and first my daughter-in-law
 Answers; she sounds unpleasantly surprised that I called.
Well, she says, I'm just going out. Here's John, and then,

My son's voice. I ask how the children are, how Caroline
 Is managing with her broken arm, and the front door bell rings.
Oh, who's that? I say, annoyed but moving to the front door
 With the phone in my hand. My husband's friend is there,
 Saying *Get the walker. Dennis is having trouble.*
 I get flustered, as I always do in a crisis. *I'll call you back,*

I say, my voice shaking. I rush off to get the walker
 With its little wheels, but I can't go outside. I'm still
 In my soft slippers and it's raining so I watch as Al
 And his wife help Dennis up the walk, one on each arm,
 Dennis embarrassed and struggling, each step only achieved
 After immense effort. Panic fills my chest like hundreds

Of mosquitoes. In the hall, the carpet catches in Dennis's feet,
 And I shout *stop, stop, you have to lift your feet,* as though
 He can help having his feet stuck to the floor. His body leans
 Toward the walker as it slides away from him, his torso
 Parallel with the floor. I lean over to pull his feet forward;
 Only later do I realize that my fat thighs must have been visible

When I bent down. I get a chair for him; thank Al and his wife,
 get Dennis a glass of water and his pills, my hands distraught
 So I know I could never be a nurse or a doctor and I think
 How terrible I am at this, and what a bad caretaker I'll make
What will I do? How will I manage? I leave Dennis
 Sitting in a chair in the living room waiting for his medicine

To work, and I go into the den to call John back. Before I get past,
Hello, I hear Dennis calling me, his voice tremulous. *Wait, John,*
I have to see what he wants, and with the phone in my hand,
 I run out to the living room where Dennis goes through an
 elaborate

And slow explanation of how he wants me to ask John whether
 he uses

An electric razor and does it work and what kind does he use.

His friend told him that he uses a Norelco. What does John
 think?

It takes him ten minutes to say all this, as my mother-in-law
 Used to say *to make a long story short*, and she'd go on for two
 hours

So when he keeps on explaining what I already understand,
 nervous

Laughter starts to bubble up into my chest. I rush back into the
 other room

And explain to John about the razor, and suddenly, I am sobbing
 and can't

Stop. I only cried like this, without restraint, maybe 4 times in
 my life,

But I can't stop and I can't get words out while my son is saying,
Mom, what's the matter? What's the matter? When I can speak
 again,

I say, *John, you needed this phone call like you needed a hole*
In your head! I've added one more worry to this son of mine who
 takes

Responsibility on his shoulders like an old man, though he is
 only 34,

And I have added one more burden on this rainy Sunday
 morning.

I try to make small talk, ask about his job, the children, the new
 house.

I can feel my composure crumbling, my voice starting to break
 apart again.
 I say goodbye though I know he can tell I am choking on my
 own tears.
 I think I could make a million dollars teaching people how to ruin
 A person's day with a phone call.

Elaine Terranova

Heat and Light

"I'd rather be a raindrop returned to the sea than a soul in hell."
 – Faustus

STRUCK

From the start, you find no rest. Traffic
 from a nearby turnpike. Birds rising
 to sing before dawn. Whereas the body
 takes so much concentration.

To be human is to be imperfect,
 so the soul is always
 trying to escape. It creates diversions
 such as illness. It leaves in increments.
 The body continues, adhering to
 its 248 commandments
 attached to every function.