

Suckered

By Keda Richens

During the day my futon/sofa/bed in my bedroom/living room/office is covered by a teal tapestry octopus that draws me in with her tentacles. Underneath the octopus my flowered linen bedding does the same at night, encasing me in a hay fever fog and forcing my dry eyes to clench shut. It's not exactly comfortable; the futon lumps and sags make it difficult for my arthritic fibromyalgia'd limb to pull themselves over or out. But still it's hard to resist.

I dream of an empty room with doors opening onto a garden, an ugly but proper office chair, and two large tables. Where my only dilemma is which one to make a desk and which to make a drawing table. There's an uncluttered wooden floor and wall space of at least a couple of metres behind. All ready to be filled with mess and ink and ideas.

In reality my bedroom/living room/office is cheaply carpeted throughout, with two cats and the TV and a coffee table covered in junk and bookcases and ornaments and a piano/keyboard and paintings all over the walls and a printer and a desk covered in junk and a computer and all our art supplies in and out of a cupboard and two more chairs and my wardrobe and a Hoover and a radiator covered in wet washing and the door heavy with extra clothes and my twin teenage daughters leaning in wanting breakfast or dinner or to play wii and watch telly with me. I am lucky that we enjoy each other's company. And they have college work to do in their actual bedrooms, and our home is secure for now as long as the housing benefit keeps coming. But I miss having a garden or a balcony, and I still feel like I'm being pulled underwater, sinking, or drowning.

The computer opposite my sofa/bed is full of people doing brilliant things. Making videos, showcasing their talents, collaborating, changing up their practice, learning new skills and helping others. Yet I can't seem to rise to the challenge.

The first two weeks were ok. I kept myself positive as the emails came in withdrawing all the funding and jobs for which I'd spent weeks applying. I moved my newly unfunded arts project for lone parents online, and started posting weekly challenges. I consolidated my mostly anonymous online presence and went public. I wrote a short piece for an online journal and I thought of a domain name for my website which someone offered to buy and help design for me. Tate agreed to keep me on for now on my part time contract, and as I'm already in the Universal Credit system I felt secure enough.

Until I started to unravel.

The website person changed their mind and as we can't transfer the domain name for 60 days I'll have to work out how to do it myself, so I've put it on hold. Along with the extra jobs for Tate and data input for an arts charity that have offered me 3 days work over 6 months.

I've spent the last 30 years studying, juggling minimum wage and freelance jobs; acting, modelling, massaging, teaching, writing, and creating. I've spent the last 18 also raising twins as a single parent, fleeing an abusive marriage, moving countries, towns and cities, and homes. My daughters were kidnapped 8 years ago and I got them out overnight on a bus through Greece and then spent years fighting our case in the high court and local courts. As the PTSD kicked in and my body began to rebel I retrained as a 'no hands' masseuse to give my wrists a rest, but it hurt my hips and knees. So I studied for a PGCE teaching art and design (so I wouldn't have to bend over so much), and a module on political research that got me hooked. I moved my kids and myself to London to do an MA and accidentally made us homeless for 3 months in the process. So I am happy to finally be settled in our tiny privately rented 2 bed flat now, and to have an MA and a job with a gallery. I hate to complain. But still I feel like I am sinking.

I assumed it was the isolation at first, although I've been isolated before; first as a working class child in rural 70's Cornwall, living in an abusive household. But back then I could climb out of my bedroom window, and no one reported or demonised me for sitting alone in a field, or a park or a bus shelter. And it was isolation I craved the most. I have lived in precarious and often isolated circumstances throughout my 49 years. I've learned how to cook with cheap, scant ingredients and to modestly stockpile for upcoming no-money emergencies. Moving countries and cities alone I have been isolated -bar tiny children- often for weeks on end. But I have had friends, relationships, work, the internet, and for a few years in the early naughties a blog to sustain me, and I found connection. But this is different. This time I'm just too exhausted.

Isolation as a single parent is inevitable. I always had less security, less money, less work, fewer opportunities, less emotional or practical support, less sex and fewer cuddles than most of my friends. I slowly got used to no one touching me for days or weeks or months on end. Sure my kids cuddled me a lot when they were younger, but as 18 year olds they mostly avoid it whenever possible. And as I got older, less attractive, and less sociable in general I just hugged and kissed friends instead. And at least I was master of my own life. With my new life in London I finally felt I was ready to 'put myself out there' again. So this has hit me hard despite my years of preparation.

A life spent in precarious circumstances does prepare you to face the unexpected, but it certainly doesn't shield you. People say "but you are so strong and have been through so much -you can handle anything". Not true. The years of struggle have depleted me. They have made me expect the worst. In my everyday life I fake optimism until I make it. But behind the fight façade I am still terrified, and I want to take flight. Mainly by lying in the arms of my octopus, watching apocalyptic films, Drag Race and Scandi noir.

I do feel immense gratitude, and I know I am extremely lucky to be safe in a home without hostility. I'm able to afford and (usually) find enough food. I have nice clothes hanging on my door. I have never suffered with depression, I am usually open to change and am a firm believer in lifelong learning. There are many much worse off. But I've rarely felt this useless before. As a single mum

with younger children and multiple jobs I was good at my jobs. I helped people. Now I just feel defunct. I have had to reinvent myself so many times my CV could cover 10 pages. I have years of work experience, of learning new skills, and of gaining qualifications, but I cannot seem to get my head around this. I feel so inflexible, like my body and my brain cannot stretch anymore. They've had enough. So unlike the octopus that can squeeze, extend and camouflage itself to break free of any circumstance, I now feel more like a woolly mammoth that will soon become extinct. I haven't seen a razor in weeks. My brain feels too small, my hooves too clumsy, and my bloody tusks keep getting in the way.

My website, like my next reinvention, and like many things these days, could be a long time not happening. Maybe I need external deadlines and appointments... but I am surprised I am that person. I thought I knew myself pretty well, but am learning that I am truly rubbish at meeting my own expectations. Or maybe it's just the fresh air and the sunshine I can see but not feel.

Maybe I'll cook something new, book a zoom meeting with someone, get dressed and put on some make-up, and pretend I have something to look forward to. Or go for a walk and search for eggs and butter. Or maybe I won't.

I haven't completed Netflix yet and I do still have crackers and cheese, and lentils, and an octopus sofa/bed waiting for me with open arms, and lap cats. And by staying in I am supposedly saving lives. But it really doesn't feel like it.