

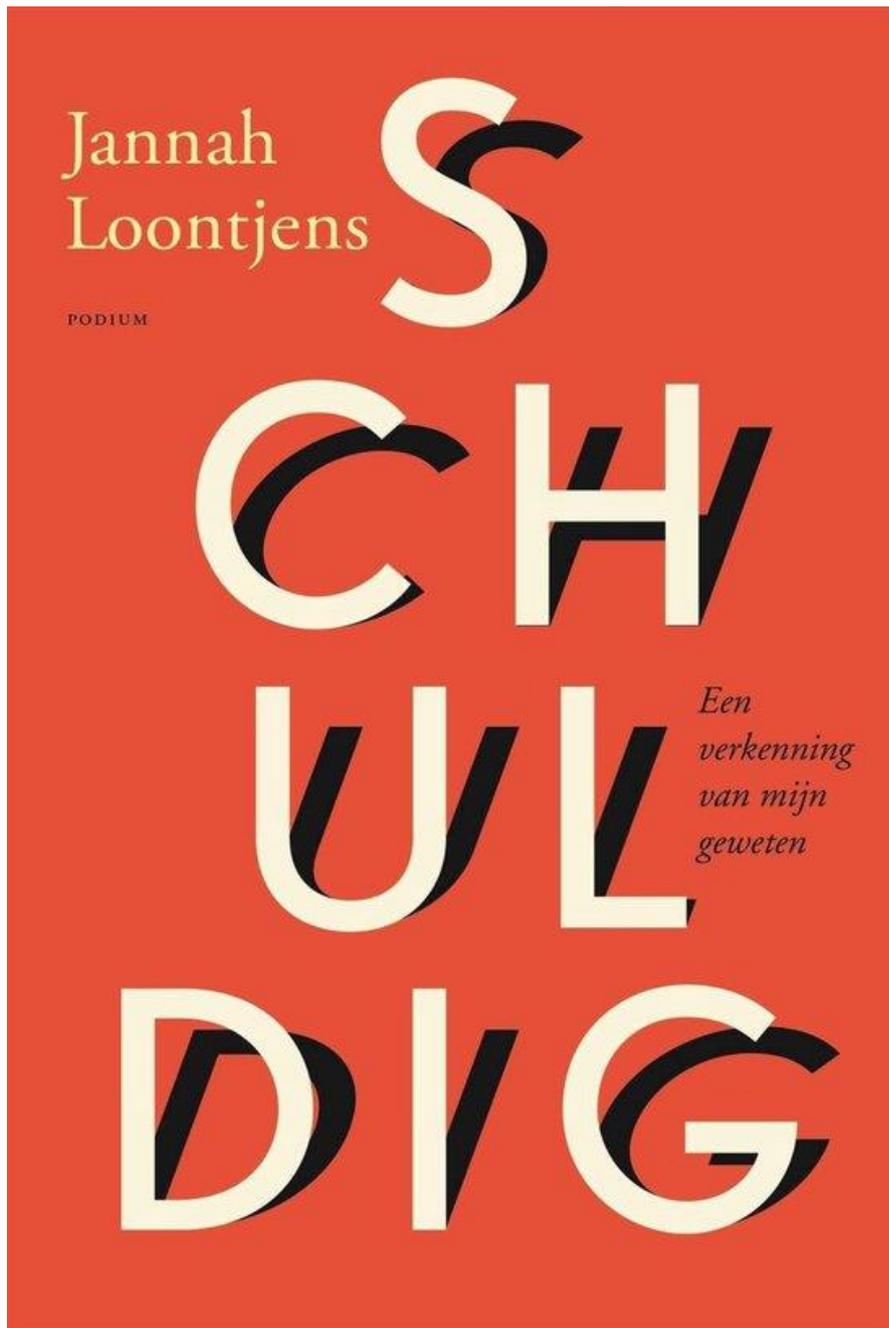
Guilty: An exploration of my conscience

By Jannah Loontjens

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Author biography

Jannah Loontjens was born in Denmark in 1974 and spent her early childhood in Sweden before moving with her mother to the Netherlands. She studied philosophy, gaining a PhD from the University of Amsterdam with a dissertation titled *Popular Modernism*. Having explored the possibility of becoming a photographer and held a variety of jobs from go-go dancer to flower seller, she is now a published novelist and poet, who also writes regularly for Dutch newspapers and magazines. Alongside writing she teaches literature, creative writing and philosophy. Her novels include *Good Luck* (2007), *How Late Actually* (2011, nominated for the Halewijn Literature Prize), *But Then Again* (2014, translated into Danish and Hungarian) and *Who Knows* (2018). Her poetry collections include *Variants On Now* (2002), *The Incredible Shrinking* (2006, nominated for the Eline van Haaren Prize), and *It's You* (2013). Besides *Guilty*, her non-fiction includes the autobiographical philosophy book *Roaring Nineties: Or how philosophy changed my life* (2016, nominated for Best Spiritual Book 2016), as well as *My Life is More Beautiful Than Literature* (2013) and *When it comes to love* (2019), a travel story tracing the footsteps of writer Frida Vogels. Loontjens' writing engages with topical issues, while drawing on her personal experiences and grounding in philosophy. Her latest book, *Guilty: An exploration of my conscience*, develops and reflects on many of the themes of her fiction in her own authentic voice.

Synopsis of *Guilty*

Guilty starts out from a situation that will be familiar to many in Western culture: the decision as to whom to spend Christmas with. Loontjens has decided to go to her aunt in the Netherlands and is worried that her mother will be disappointed at being left out. The guilt induced by her decision leads Loontjens on an extensive exploration of her conscience, interleaving personal anecdotes with discussions of philosophy, literature and psychology through the ages. She lists the trivial things that torment her conscience and serious transgressions for which she feels relatively little guilt, delves into her family history, from divorces and feuds to her grandparents' wartime experiences, and examines what the great philosophers, psychologists and other writers, religious and secular, have had to say on the subject, from antiquity to the present day.

The book's themes range from topical issues, such as domestic violence and racism, to longstanding philosophical questions such as the moral repercussions of free will. Of particular current

interest are the striking personal descriptions of Loontjens' own difficult past relationships, which poignantly illustrate the role guilt plays in perpetuating violent relationships, holding the victim in place. Also striking is the theme of writing in itself. Loontjens addresses criticism she has received for writing part of her novel *Who Knows* from the perspective of a Somali woman, questioning who can legitimately write from different points of view. She also tackles the sense of exposure in writing personal non-fiction, the contrast with presenting a fictional account from multiple perspectives, which has more in common with the philosophical dialogues of Plato and Kierkegaard. Other current themes that arise include the #MeToo movement, white privilege, motherhood, climate change, the boundary between public and private life, and the usefulness of official apologies for colonialism. The book also tackles classic issues such as the moral role of free will in conferring guilt, the relationship of guilt to punishment, whether guilt can be inherited, and the bearing of religion, particularly Christianity, on the experience of guilt.

Loontjens writes in a confessional literary style. Most chapters begin with lyrics quoted from a song, then proceed through personal anecdote to philosophical reflection, underpinned by references to the great writers of our time and times past, always returning to the author's own situation, with the Christmas dilemma forming a thread that runs throughout. Loontjens is also a published poet, has studied philosophy and has experience in teaching, all of which show through in the lyrical yet erudite prose, with theory clearly linked to relevant and relatable anecdotes. Loontjens enters into discussion with an impressive range of literary and philosophical figures, including Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, Augustine, Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Foucault, Freud, Camus, Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Donald Winnicott, Hannah Arendt, Rebecca Solnit and Rachel Cusk, to name just a small selection, underpinning her quotes with an extensive bibliography.

This is top-quality, thought-provoking non-fiction, where every new idea expressed by the author generates new ideas and associations in the reader. Highly personal material is narrated in a captivating and dignified manner, interwoven with academic and technical material presented in a crystal-clear, relevant style. For anyone who experiences even the occasional pang of conscience, much of the sentiment will be familiar, occasionally uncomfortably so. Yet the book concludes on a note of reconciliation: Loontjens may not have escaped her guilt but her exploration has helped her to see its positive aspects, resolving the tension between public and private by settling on the Ancient Greek notion of *parrhêsia*, a focus on confession of truth for a good purpose.

Sample translation (table of contents and excerpts from chapters 1, 2 and 9)

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Chapter 1: Racked with guilt: On disappointing my mother

Now, the wintertime is comin', the windows are filled with frost

I went to tell everybody but I could not get across

BOB DYLAN

The scent of the frozen forest floor, the deep-green fir trees, one of which we've sawn down to decorate the house with, the childhood memories that haunt the dancing candlelight, they're part and parcel of Christmas for me. But this year I'm not going to Sweden, where my father, brother and half-sisters live. Nor am I going to my mother in France. This year I've decided to stay in the Netherlands. I don't have the money for tickets for myself and the children, and, what's more, we'd like to stay home for once.

Guilt wells up inside me, seemingly increasing in step with the winter darkness. My mother has repeatedly emphasised how much she'd like me to spend Christmas with her; otherwise she'll be on her own, in the house she fixed up herself in the French countryside. It's cosy there with the open fire, her dog, the chickens and her cat, but she lives in a remote location and it's lonely spending the holiday season without children or other family. I've visited my father plenty of times, she says, and I'm not going to Sweden this year anyway. The older she gets, the more important it is to be with family, she confides.

My guilt is further exacerbated by the fact that I'm not just staying in the Netherlands, but am considering spending Christmas with her younger sister, who moved to a Dutch village a while back. The plan arose a couple of weeks ago, but I haven't told my mother yet. Every time I speak to her I somehow don't get around to it, it slips my mind, there are so many other things to talk about, I forget what I meant to say, or subconsciously suppress it, perhaps, as I subconsciously suppress so many things: that I'd resolved not to drink wine, that I'd intended to go running, answer my mails, mop the floor, fill out my tax return; it slips my mind, or only occurs to me late in the evening when I won't get around to it anymore. Yes, as I get into bed I think, I was supposed to mop the floor. In the same way when I hang up the phone I remember I'd meant to say I'm considering going to her sister's this year. Meanwhile the floor grows filthier, the kitchen stickier.

My mother has always been good at fulfilling obligations. Every day she makes lists, she lists important things and unimportant things, who needs calling, who should be sent a birthday card, what needs repairing and when to wash the windows. Although an atmosphere of chaos adorns her like a cloak, thanks to her lists she is extraordinarily precise, efficient and attentive. I too make lists, but not everything makes it onto mine. I try to retain some things without clearly enumerating them, which

soon leads to sloppiness and slovenliness, birthday cards arriving late or forever forgotten, dust piling up along the skirting boards. But I'm kidding myself when I pretend I didn't get around to mentioning it while speaking to my mother, as if the matter genuinely slipped my mind. No, that's not how it is: despite my trying not to think about it, the thought pursues me like a bad dream that keeps on floating to the surface. In fact, I can't *not* think about it.

I daren't bite the bullet and tell her, afraid of hurting her, as if I'm passing her over, excluding her. That's how I imagine her taking it.

Feelings of guilt about offending a loved one, about a lie, about shoplifting or wasting food, manifest themselves in various forms, the guilt appears in different ways, as if dressed in different uniforms. You might say that my guilt towards my mother wears my home attire, an old sweater and joggers; it's the most familiar to me and the most integral to who I am. In this book I will examine diverse causes and consequences of guilt: guilt inherited from family or parents, guilt about injustice, personal and political; I will confess my own crimes, shoplifting, dissimulation, finding excuses for other people's guilt; I even tell the story of selling my passport. What originally spurred me on to conduct this study, however, is the deep-rooted guilt I feel towards my mother, a feeling which in itself can take on many different guises, just as I have various old sweaters, some marginally more attractive than others, that I like to wear at home, when no one other than my children can see me.

This time my feeling relates to a plan, I haven't yet done anything to make me guilty. But I'm looking ahead and feel burdened in advance about the future. On the other hand, coming up with a plan is a form of action in itself, even if you never follow through. It's the clothes you've laid out ready, you already know how you'll look – except this time they've been left behind in a messy heap, trousers and socks still holding the shape of my body, I could step straight back in, this sense of guilt fits me seamlessly.

As a child I already felt guilty towards my mother, I fell short: I wasn't kind enough, I was too awkward, I didn't understand her well enough, I didn't help her enough. She didn't expressly make such accusations, I berated myself with them. My mother's life seemed to be dominated by adversity, as if it were a ball being passed between enervating adversaries. I was the sucker who made clumsy attempts at grabbing it, to send it in the right direction, bring it safely back to her. I failed; worse still, I felt that I, too, was a burden to her, making her life more difficult.

Feelings of guilt towards mothers often begin at an early age: the moment children start to pay attention to others, they experience this as a conflict of loyalty. Yet there is more to it than this natural form of betrayal. My mother was adventurous, impulsive and enterprising, she was open and curious and easily got to know new people, at parties she was unafraid of dancing, but at the same time, beneath her enthusiastic zest for life was a deep insecurity, a pain that could flare up, a feeling

that she didn't quite belong, had *never* really belonged, that she'd been excluded from an early age. But for my mother it is precisely this deliberate exclusion that she has identified as the core of her suffering, being rejected by her parents, her brothers, her sister, her friends, her lovers and even her children. I want to avoid hurting her this way as well.

There are people who know they are guilty, for instance of a theft or a lie, but who nevertheless grow angry when someone points it out, as if the guilt lies in the discovery. There are also people who attempt to evade guilt by pointing to the circumstances and the role of others, in order to minimise their own responsibility: they present themselves as victims.

It's rare that one is entirely responsible, the influence of your background, school, friends, the way things turn out, all play into it. By emphasising other people's impact on your life, you can push yourself into the role of victim, which can lead to a powerless, melancholy feeling. As a child I wasn't yet able to put it in these terms, although I did feel that my mother suffered in this way. She saw her life as continuously leading her into situations where she was thwarted, rejected, denigrated, just as characters in Greek tragedies are tormented by the gods. It sometimes seemed to be of vital importance to prove that she was innocent, that she'd been duped, caught in a trap, misled. Everyone's life is in part determined by random coincidence, fortune and misfortune, or if you like by divine providence, influences over which you have no power. Lamenting your destiny, as in tragedies, can bring relief, but it doesn't change the situation.

Evading guilt by holding others responsible achieved little, I discovered: at best it caused despondency, at worst it made others angry. Other people's rage, as well as my own, frightened me; it struck me as something that should be avoided in any form. In adopting this attitude I failed to grasp that certain kinds of rage, for instance about injustice, can sometimes be functional. My brother was less afraid of other people's anger than I was. While I surveyed the situation and analysed each person's share in it until no one seemed guilty any longer, he stood up for himself. He argued with the children next door and classmates who bullied him and he often got into fights with our mother too. Both my brother and my mother could explode, leaving me as the anxious witness. In order to avoid becoming the target of their fury myself, I preferred not to pick sides. Nevertheless, over the years I came to realise that my brother was really the more honest one; I hid and never said clearly what I thought or felt. In fact, I barely knew what I really thought or felt, I lost myself in a kaleidoscope of interpretations, which were further twisted with every new remark, so that I had to examine everything all over again.

Even now I'm good at setting aside my emotions, pushing them to the edge of my desk, so that I have space to pick them out one by one and inspect them from all sides, to investigate my share and that of others. Attempting to understand the motivations of others enables me to put both their role

and mine into perspective. And sometimes I burst out laughing, at the tangle of motives and misunderstandings, ingrained irritations and unjust accusations.

Recently I got into a long discussion on the phone to my mother because she accused me of calling her 'businesslike', when in fact she had always had to get by with little money due to her *lack* of business sense, as she countered. I couldn't even remember having called her businesslike, nor could I imagine doing so, knowing full well it would offend her. 'You did,' she retorted, 'when we were playing Monopoly with your children.' 'But that was about the game,' I responded indignantly. Nevertheless, she'd taken it as a personal accusation. I could remember now that she had reacted that way at the time, declaring that she couldn't have lived in France as she did if she hadn't had some head for business. Often the misunderstandings are a good deal more painful than that, but even then I generally see the absurd, comical side.

Analysing motivations and laughing at painful situations is a controlled form of avoidant behaviour. I evade the deep wave of feelings that could sweep me away. I feign controlled distance, but let's face it, the whole Christmas crisis is essentially somewhat ridiculous in itself, right? Behold, a woman of forty-five, still reduced to a quivering wreck by her mother. Out of a mixture of fear, concern and guilt she might yet decide on that Christmas visit after all, then feel awkward about her own subservience, act wilfully and with false cheerfulness, eliciting resentment and subcutaneous stings. In short, a tense Christmas scene worthy of a Woody Allen film.

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Chapter 2: Is guilt a feeling? On the difference between thinking and feeling

A good friend of mine told me his sister was angry with him when he asked her during a family dinner to please listen to the others for a moment. She was offended. He still felt his request was justified, but his sister was so upset that he began to feel responsible for her emotional state, leading to feelings of guilt. His brothers agreed with him; his reproach was justified, she should have listened more to the others. Even when you think you're right, you can still feel guilty. He couldn't get it out of his mind and tormented himself with accusations about his bluntness; he should have expressed himself more tactfully.

I remember a psychologist once explaining to me that guilt is not a real emotion, as it is dependent on thoughts. A feeling that you talk yourself into with arguments. 'Guilt is not a pure, primary emotion,' she said. 'At its foundation there is always the idea that you've done something wrong. Whereas it remains a question whether you really did.' But isn't that the case with all emotions, I wondered. After all, I can make myself sad or angry with my thoughts too, can't I? 'Emotions such as rage or sadness well up inside you, as if they have a physical manifestation, but guilt nestles in your brain,' the psychologist argued.

In Dutch the word for 'feeling', *gevoel*, is part of the word for 'guilt', *schuldgevoel*, so as a Dutch speaker it seems natural to classify guilt as a feeling, but perhaps it really is a predominantly mental state. Psychologists also distinguish between 'emotions' and 'feelings': emotions well up and instantly signal that something has touched you, whereas feelings are slower and often longer-lasting; feelings can lie dormant.

Rage and sadness are emotions and have clear physical symptoms, a face contorted with anger, tears welling up, neck and cheeks turning blotchy red. Feelings of guilt are invisible. Nevertheless they can weigh me down physically, tension pinches my shoulders together, makes me nervous and sleepless.

'How does your guilt manifest itself?' asked the psychologist. Well, as a feeling, a heaviness; thought and movement are slower, as if little weights have been hung on me, like the ones to hold down tablecloths outdoors. The psychologist repeated that the *idea* preceded these feelings of responsibility, when I might not actually be responsible. The feeling arises due to my *thinking* I'm responsible.

Philosophy makes a classic distinction between thinking and feeling, mind and body. From as early as Plato it was about the mind, not the body, while the latter was primarily viewed as an obstacle in the

way of thinking. That body in classical philosophy appears to be a 'neutral' body, distinguished mainly by the fact that it is *not* a mind. At the same time most great thinkers had a particular type of body: male and predominantly white.

As a young philosophy student I felt we should think about issues that transcend the physical; about the effects of language, the essence of truth, about questions that would be valid regardless of physical appearance. Perhaps I emphasised the immateriality of thought because my young female body jarred so awkwardly with the men of the philosophical canon. I wanted to be judged on my ideas, not on my appearance. Thinking was invisible and it would be best for me to be invisible in philosophy lectures as well. Whereas at other moments, for instance in a nightclub, I enjoyed that same visibility of my body, the interplay of provocation and seduction, sexy clothes and podium dancing. Only much later did I begin to approach the role of physical appearance as a philosophical subject in itself. Of course the body plays a role in reality, in our experiences and thinking.

The mind-body distinction is misleadingly clear-cut. As a result we place feelings and emotions in the physical, meaning that 'feeling' and 'thinking' end up in opposition. But in thinking we constantly make use of observations we've acquired physically. Our use of our senses in observation is not the only role our bodies play: even our thoughts on subjects such as truth, justice or freedom, are influenced by the way in which people react to our physical appearance.

Feeling and thinking are both internal perceptions controlled by experiences: feelings are aroused by observations and interpretations, thoughts are influenced by emotions. The line between feeling and thinking is sometimes so fluid that the two terrains overlap. Feeling and thinking do not exist separately, although everyone understands the difference. The location of conscience seems to lie precisely on the threshold between the two.

If guilt is always instigated by thoughts, I should have more rational control over my conscience than over anger or sadness. But that's not the case for me. I'm usually pretty good at suppressing rage and sadness, while guilt takes possession of me, controls my mood, dominates my thinking and even affects my perceptions. Once I feel guilty, I observe every remark, every glance and believe that I'm constantly seeing signs of unspoken accusations, silent attacks against which I'm defenceless – after all, I already know I'm guilty. Tormenting yourself with guilt can lead to depression, and vice versa: when suffering from depression you can feel ever guiltier; you let people down, you're a disappointment to loved ones, you're not friendly enough, too gloomy. Is it your thoughts talking you into this or is it your dejected feelings influencing your thoughts?

In an old Christmas edition of *De Groene Amsterdammer*, psychotherapist Frans Schalkwijk notes, 'Guilt mentalises a state of vague internal disquiet, emotional regulation takes place. In translating internal disquiet as a guilt signal, the disquiet becomes comprehensible and less confusing.'

That sounds plausible. Really my emotions are a mess, I feel worried, anxious, and at the same time I don't want to be controlled by that; I believe I should make choices, without being led by my hypersensitive conscience. But that very notion increases the oppressive muddle which for clarity's sake I will call guilt.

When I think this way about this Christmas and try to examine what precisely I feel, I have to confess that I am indeed increasing my guilt with thoughts, with propositions I've created myself. I imagine that my mother will be sad, will feel excluded and accuse me of that. On the one hand I'm afraid of her reaction, of her expressions of pain, which will continue to reverberate through my conscience long afterwards. On the other hand I'm also concerned about my mother. Of course I'd like her to be surrounded by kind people, people who give her warmth and have her dancing around her house for joy. Most of all, I would like to contribute to that joy.

The Dutch word for guilt, *schuld*, is derived from the Proto-Germanic verb root *skul*, which means 'must' or 'be obliged'. I recognise this from Swedish, where *ska* and *skall* mean 'must' or 'shall' and *skulle* means 'should have'. When you feel guilty, you think you really should have done something, that you were obliged to take action and omitted to do so; or the opposite, you did something you shouldn't have done. Either you violated a prohibition or you neglected a duty. When we talk about what we should do, normativity comes into play. In our ideas of what 'should be' we are influenced by culturally ingrained norms, such as respect for parents.

The subjects about which people feel guilty can differ by time period and culture. My grandparents' generation was more affected by a sense of duty and social expectations than mine. In the 1960s my parents' generation struggled to free themselves from those crushing norms and demanded more space for individual thoughts and feelings. It is often noted that since that time individualism has grown ever more dominant in Western society. The emphasis is currently on self-fulfilment rather than family responsibility. There is a prevailing idea that if you want to be happy you need to listen to yourself. But the question is to what extent internalised norms contribute to our deepest convictions and feelings, to 'who we are'.

We're all influenced by the Zeitgeist and in the 1950s I probably wouldn't have had a second's hesitation to visit my mother or father, driven by a sense of social duty. But I can just as well imagine that in the 1950s my parents might not have split up, or that my mother would not have moved back to the Netherlands alone, or that we would never have ended up in Sweden in the first place. These hypotheses don't get us very far. Even in the 1960s and 70s social patterns of expectations still weighed more heavily on the conscience than they do now. *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* sold well in the 1970s, whereas nowadays it's titles such as *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* that make bestsellers, titles which clearly reflect their respective Zeitgeists.

Even if people aspire to go through life light-heartedly not giving a fuck about restrictive norms, in recent years a form of guilt and responsibility has arisen which is felt particularly strongly by younger generations. This is a sense of responsibility for bigger issues, for which people are willing to take up arms: global warming, opposition to racism and homophobia and other forms of discrimination. My children's secondary school pays considerably more attention to differences between people than mine did. Terms such as gender equality or intersexuality were unknown back then. The individualism of which the younger generation is often accused seems, remarkably, to go hand in hand with a sense of responsibility for the image of humanity and the world which you convey *as an individual*, a responsibility for the stories we each separately tell about our shared past, a consciousness that those stories could also be told differently. These are subjects I will address in more detail later.

Difficulty saying no is now seen less as a result of prevailing norms than when my mother was young. Nowadays such guilt is seen more as a consequence of insecurity or of trying to live up to a strict self-image. This is the topic of Schalkwijk's book *Onvolmaakt tevreden: omgaan met je innerlijke criticus* (Imperfectly satisfied: dealing with your inner critic). 'In psychology,' he writes, 'we combine shame and guilt under the term "self-conscious emotions": emotions you have about yourself.' He approaches guilt and shame not so much as consequences of prescriptive social patterns of expectation but more as a result of feelings of inferiority that arise from being demanding of oneself, something which can be worked on. Regarding shame, Schalkwijk writes, 'Shame often goes together with feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and wanting the ground to swallow us up.' According to Schalkwijk someone suffering from shame is inclined to see events as failures and to attribute that failure to their own shortcomings.

My mother often told me how much she was afflicted with shame as a little girl: she was ashamed of her glasses, she laughed with her hand over her mouth to hide the gap in her teeth, she was shy and nervous, always fearful of her father's harsh tone, her brother's teasing remarks, his whining imitation when she practised the violin. She grew up in the 1940s and 50s, a time when women were still expected to become housewives and mothers. It was also a time in which bullying was seen as normal childish behaviour that fostered resilience. My mother had a naturally sensitive character and tended to get teased, something that was allowed to continue at school. This certainly didn't help in the silent development of her inferiority complex, which in that sense really did stem from the prevailing norms.

In primary school my mother struggled to concentrate due to her nervousness; she was advised to attend housekeeping school, to learn ironing and folding sheets. Nevertheless she was enrolled at an academic secondary school where she achieved her diploma, but was subsequently still sent to the housekeeping school because she was too young for the jeweller's training she wanted to

pursue. To her this became a lasting source of shame. Here again the norm of what was considered a good education and what was a waste of time (the housekeeping school was scathingly referred to as the 'spinach academy') clearly affected her sense of shame. In hearing these stories, even at a young age, I felt pity for the child my mother once was, combined with guilt for having it so much easier than her. I had an ingrained need to do something in return, to restore the balance of our lives.

My grandmother too – we called her Mumu – was an insecure woman, who was easily embarrassed and didn't like to speak out. Mumu sometimes had lively moments and could laugh at her own clumsiness and other people's teasing, but she was generally quiet, fretful and somewhat unsociable. 'Only the balanced, healthy woman aware of her responsibility can be a "good mother",' writes Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Unfortunately few women are balanced and healthy and aware of the responsibility of mothering, yet generally people manage to live with it. As a girl, however, my mother had no one to look up to, she was highly sensitive and anxious, characteristics reinforced by her mother's timidity. She found little affirmation in who she was or what interested her. Feelings of inferiority had nestled deep inside her and she only succeeded in escaping them to some extent much later in life. She is now much stronger, but when I lived at home she was often despondent and told me in detail about her difficult childhood. I was worried about her and resolved, with an increasing sense of powerlessness, to compensate for all that pain.

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Chapter 9: Legally guilty: How I sold my passport in Thailand

*I'll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies
I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife*

HOZIER

Of course it can't have been my boyfriend's fault that there was a snowstorm raging in Bucharest, as we approached the landing strip for a stopover, tottering and lurching, panicked by the screams of our fellow passengers, bouncing down onto the frozen runway. It can't have been his fault that a soldier in a fur hat, a machine gun at his chest, ripped my good-luck bear from my rucksack and proceeded to pick out my pen knife from a side pocket, but it seemed as if everything I undertook with him was ill-fated, as if misfortune was always hot on his heels. I hadn't known him all that long, nor did I know if he'd had panic attacks before, perhaps it had something to do with the strong antimalarials we were taking; in any case, within a few days of arriving in Bangkok he was suffering from delusions.

The slightest hint of bartering, in shops, with tuk-tuk drivers or at a market, triggered something in him, his eyes would widen in panic and he would hastily give the salesperson the amount requested. Often the negotiation began at a figure ten times the actual price – it was part of the game – but to the great hilarity of the salespeople, my boyfriend immediately paid the first sum mentioned. This meant we were spending more there than we would have done in the Netherlands. I tried to convince him that we were expected to haggle, that if he went on throwing money around like this, we'd run through our budget within two weeks, whereas the plan was to stay in Thailand a couple of months. It made him suspicious that I disagreed with the way he went about things. I wasn't supporting him, he said, I was undermining him. He took my passport out of my bag and kept it on him, fearing I would leave.

The moments of mistrust alternated with fervent expressions of regret and impassioned attempts to make up for it, taking me to a chic restaurant high in a tower, a tailor-made Thai dress, attentive caresses and heartfelt declarations of love. Although there was a great deal that divided us, there was also something that connected us, something that no one seemed to understand, but that very point strengthened our pact.

We booked a bus trip from Bangkok to Koh Samet, a heavenly little island so narrow you could watch the sun rise over the sea while enjoying breakfast pancakes on one side and see it sink into the water on the other side at dinner. We had a hut on stilts, with delicate sunbeams slicing through between the planks; there was a resident gecko whose funny noises made us laugh; it was idyllic, but we were not happy. After falling asleep in the sand, my boyfriend's back came out in large watery

blisters. I was worried about him, about his burnt skin, but even more so about his erratic behaviour. My hair was falling out from the malaria pills.

After a week we decided to return to the mainland and travelled on to the north. In the city of Chiang Mai we rented a motorbike. Seated behind him, criss-crossing the chaotic traffic of Chiang Mai, I endured mortal fear. Fortunately we headed towards quieter mountain roads. I held on tight to his back, nauseous from the winding paths. At a hairpin bend my helmet blew off my head and bounced away down the mountain slope. My boyfriend gave me his, which was much too big, but he still insisted I wear it.

In a mountain village I ordered a milkshake in a restaurant. Sitting at a narrow table I slid from the wooden bench to lie unconscious on the floor. My boyfriend lifted me up and took me by taxi to our guesthouse. I had such bad food poisoning that days went by before I could get up; I could barely raise myself up to vomit over the side of the bed. Two Thai women patiently mopped up after me, dabbed my forehead and fed me dry rice and spoonfuls of powder.

Meanwhile nobody knew where my boyfriend was. He'd disappeared after bringing me back. Three days later he turned up with a bandaged arm. It turned out he'd fallen off the motorbike. He had spent a lot of money on a hotel and finding a doctor.

How we got back to Chiang Mai on that motorbike with his bandaged arm, I can't remember. What I do remember is the angry face of the motorbike owner, who demanded that we cover the cost of the helmet that had blown away and the damage to the bike. Our money was now almost gone. We found a guesthouse where you could pay on departure. The rooms were basic: concrete walls, a double bed with a dangerously rotating fan above it, cockroaches that shuffled clicking under the door. In one of the other rooms lived a scrawny English heroin addict with yellowish hair. Every afternoon an expensive car parked up at the door, the Englishman crawled in and the car left. A little while later he would be dropped off at the guesthouse, an intense smile on his face.

In an Indian restaurant a woman spoke to us, she could see we were in trouble, she said, she wanted to help us. Why didn't we sell our passports? We'd get lots of money for them. The plump Indian woman's friendliness didn't quite ring true for me and I found her suggestion unsettling, but this woman was the only person who seemed to care about our lot. We should go to her cousin in Bangkok, she said, but advised us to report our documents as stolen in Chiang Mai. So we went to the police and told them that my boyfriend's bum bag had been stolen at a market with everything inside it. The bus driver took us to Bangkok free of charge when we showed him the police papers.

The sale of my passport left behind no deep sense of guilt, although I am ashamed and repentant. I actually only feel really guilty towards the couple who ran the guesthouse. The two were trusting and let us take yogurts or soft drinks from the fridge, noting them on a slip of paper so

everything could be paid for at the end. But at the point when we needed to return to Bangkok, we didn't even have a tenth of the sum we owed. We couldn't bring ourselves to tell them, so we decided to slip away early in the morning, before anyone was up. For that I still feel guilty to this day, not just because of the money, but mainly because we broke their trust. There's a good chance that after our surreptitious departure they put a lock on the fridge and asked their guests to pay for their stay in advance.

It was Thai New Year and in Bangkok you couldn't go out in the street without being drenched and having white paste smeared on your face and clothes. Whitewashed and bewildered, we walked through a city filled with people rushing around deliriously chucking water and talcum powder around. It triggered my boyfriend's delusions and with soaking clothes and a ghostly talcum powder face he accused me of wanting to leave him. I wasn't allowed to accompany him when he went to the passport dealer, he pushed me into our room, locked the door from the outside and disappeared.

When he returned, hours later, he triumphantly showed me a gigantic pile of Thai baht notes. The Indian family had promised us dollars, but ok, what did it matter, he said, who pays with dollars in Thailand? Once we'd spread the baht out on the bed and counted them, it emerged that he had received even less for the passports than it would cost us to get new ones. This wasn't even enough to live for a couple of days. I couldn't believe it. We would have to go straight to the embassy and make sure we could bring our tickets forward as soon as possible.

The ambassador took pity on us, poor robbed travellers. He gave us an expensive bottle of wine and a hundred guilders and informed us in detail as to what we should expect. It turned out not to be easy to leave the country without a passport; we would have to have replacement proof of identity made and pick up a form from an office showing proof of entry to the country.

Even before we'd set foot in the relevant building, pink and yellow slips of paper blew towards us, the little forms that we, too, had had to fill in on the plane. All over the building, absolutely everywhere, on the stairs, lining the walls, in cabinets from floor to ceiling, were shelves, tins, bins and boxes full of slips of paper. In order to be allowed to leave the country, our landing forms must first be found.

The officials calmly lifted box after box from the cabinet and meticulously read each separate slip. I tried to ascertain if there was a system to it, whether they were sorted by date, but no one seemed to understand my questions. This could take days, weeks. My boyfriend and I began to help search; each of us at a different end of the building, I looked at the boxes on the stairs, in search of the one with the right date.

After a long day, having almost given up hope, I found a metal tin in which I recognised the dates of the week we'd arrived, beside it a cardboard box containing the right day, and as if they emanated light, the two forms with our signatures suddenly shone up at me.

To celebrate we decided to drink the posh wine on the guesthouse patio, but on picking it up the bottom of the bottle mysteriously dropped out and blood-red wine flowed over the concrete floor.

Interview with Jannah Loontjens: 'If guilt is never assuaged'

translated from an article in *Standaard der Letteren* by Ann-Sofie Dekeyser on 12 December 2020

What if you are continually weighed down with a deep and inexplicable sense of guilt? Jannah Loontjens has written a book on the subject, in which she digs down to the roots of her own guilty conscience. 'I'm still that little girl looking for a pat on the back from her mother.'

Christmas may be the festival of light, peace and stuffed turkey, but Jannah Loontjens' festive meal is served up each year with a guilty conscience on the side. Enlightened and peaceful are the last things she feels, as this meal sits heavy, leaving her with an agonising sense of disquiet.

You might be familiar with a gnawing conscience at the end of December, setting you back on the straight and narrow after excessive meals and a few glasses too many; perhaps you even think of children in poverty as you open an overly decadent gift. And you may well have felt uneasy at the question of whom you'll let in this year and whom you'll leave out in the COVID cold. Or perhaps you're afraid of infecting someone around the Christmas tree with the virus.

For Loontjens it goes deeper than that. In *Guilty: An exploration of my conscience* the Dutch writer and philosopher goes in search of the origin of her deep-rooted guilt and answers to questions such as: does intention determine guilt, is the truth always morally preferable to lying, and was it wrong of her to voice the perspective of a Somali woman in her novel *Who Knows?*

She lies on Freud's couch and that of an anonymous contemporary psychologist, and seeks insight from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Nevertheless *Schuldig* is a strikingly relatable book for anyone troubled by excessive feelings of guilt. With great openness Loontjens carries the reader along into her personal past. She confesses her complex bond with her mother, shady relationships, an affair, shoplifting, and selling her passport in Thailand.

Guilt is all too often coupled with dissimulation, she notes on our video call. 'Since I always feel guilty in advance, I'm not open. I imagine how the other person will perceive it, what they'll think, and adjust my behaviour a bit. I'm not entirely honest, in the hope of keeping the situation under control, which gets in the way of sincerity. I hide behind that guilt, tie myself in knots, avoid saying honestly what I think, feel or want. Guilt is a mask that conceals other feelings. In my case: fear of conflict, judgement, rejection.'

'I made the book so personal out of a longing to speak the truth, at least for myself. It's also a longing to bring greater integrity and intimacy to my personal relationships, to make tenderness possible.'

She says that in writing it she tried hard not to think: how will she react? 'She' is her mother, who plays a pivotal role in the book.

A faithful dog

Loontjens was actually trying to write a different book towards the end of last year; she'd already signed the contract, but she left those characters in the lurch (yes, she even feels bad about that) after a difficult Christmas. She knew that her mother, who lives alone in France, very much wanted her and her children to come for the festive season. But she didn't want to go, preferring to stay in the Netherlands and visit her aunt – with whom her mother has a troubled relationship. Out of fear of offending her mother and falling short as a daughter, she kept on putting off telling her, and in the end she came out with a lie. 'Behold, a woman of forty-five, still reduced to a quivering wreck by her mother.'

She looked at herself, discerned a recurring pattern and finally just *had* to know what was going on with her hyperactive conscience. 'I'm usually pretty good at suppressing rage and sadness, while guilt takes possession of me, controls my mood, dominates my thinking and even affects my perceptions. Once I feel guilty, I observe every remark, every glance and believe that I'm constantly seeing signs of unspoken accusations, silent attacks against which I'm defenceless – after all, I already know I'm guilty.'

When I inquire as to whom she will spend Christmas with this year, she sighs. 'It sounds bad, but with my aunt again. I'd resolved to go to my mother's, but due to the travel restrictions that's not possible. We'd have to quarantine.' The fact that the government made the decision offers no relief. She feels weighed down again. 'You don't have to be guilty to feel guilty. It can be completely unjustified, a sort of phantom pain.'

She doesn't know whether the openness in her book has alleviated her guilt. 'I sent the book to my mother, and she found it very painful.' In fact Loontjens doesn't have much truck with the current confessional culture, in which everyone praises openness and assumes it confers an automatic cleansing of the conscience. Is confession liberating? She doesn't believe so. She describes guilt as 'tough, stubborn and as clingy as a faithful dog who won't be sent away'.

'I've heard it from plenty of Catholics: they feel even worse after confession. When you confess your sins, you give the other person power. Power to judge, to diagnose, to punish.'

Without empathy there is no guilt; it arises only when you recognise or suspect another person's suffering. Without a sense of responsibility, there is no gnawing conscience. They're noble qualities, aren't they? 'It's not exclusively a bad thing, that feeling of guilt. It functions as a moral compass. It can be a useful emotion, especially if you really are guilty of something. You want to make it up to the person you've disadvantaged.'

'I also consider guilt about greater injustice in the world useful. It compels you to take a political standpoint, even if you aren't guilty as an individual. Imagine that no one felt guilty about climate change; then nothing would change.'

But if you get stuck in guilt, it paralyses you. It doesn't get you anywhere, other than physio for those tense shoulders. 'When you take on too much responsibility that's not really yours, it gets in the way. Then there's nothing you can do about it. Guilt can mark you and follow you.'

Nightingale complex

Loontjens suspects that the seed of her guilt resides in her relationship with her mother. 'I was five when I began to feel very responsible for her.'

Until then she had lived with her parents in Sweden. A couple of years after their divorce, her mother moved with her to the Netherlands, while her father and brother remained in Sweden. They lived as squatters, moved house frequently, and were stared at by the neighbours. Her mother was often very despondent. Loontjens wanted to compensate for her suffering. She was worried about her mother, afraid she would attempt suicide, as her grandmother had done. 'Every night, as I lay in bed, I resolved to be more helpful the next day, kinder, more patient, while already knowing that I couldn't do that. I could never bring myself to do it, however much I planned to. I froze up.'

'It's a classic pattern between children and parents. Writer Rebecca Solnit felt that her mother's expectations expresses the message, "I have sacrificed my life to others; sacrifice yours to me." Simone de Beauvoir, too, writes that a daughter who longs for independence feels weighed down about rejecting and abandoning her mother. Psychologists call the persistent fear of offending parents detachment guilt. It's particularly prevalent between daughters and mothers. In traditional families the father is the remote authority to be admired. But between mother and daughter the relationship becomes very close; the mother comes to rely on her daughter, in terms of emotional support as well as housework. If the daughter falls short, she will tend to feel guilty. She wants to liberate not only her mother, but also herself. A gnawing dilemma, especially in the case of a single mother. My mother could be despondent before the divorce too, but then it was my father's job to deal with it. When he wasn't around anymore, I came to feel very responsible for her state of mind.'

Loontjens emphasises that there was no benefit to her mother from her becoming less open as a child, tying herself in knots, weighed down by the way she repeatedly seemed to disappoint her mother. 'A strong tendency to feel guilty in no way makes you a better person.'

But couldn't you see guilt as a by-product of love? 'I think that's dangerous. During two unhealthy romantic relationships I was convinced of that. The first guy hit me. I felt an extreme kind of sympathy for him. I saw him getting into a panic, losing his mind. I couldn't give him what he needed and felt guilty about it. In my eyes he was the victim. The second man was extremely jealous, suspicious

without justification, but I still denied myself things, such as an innocent coffee with a colleague. I came to see that as love, trying to fulfil his exacting demands. I was largely driven by fear of rejection. It's about fear of failing to live up to what someone else wants you to be. In the moment you think you want to be that way too. But you're deceiving yourself, subordinating yourself to someone else.'

Loontjens is determined to avoid calling that kind of martyrdom love. 'I was Florence Nightingale, morbidly exaggerating my role in his existence.'

Parricide

'Repentance is not a virtue.' Loontjens describes guilt as a mask. In an attempt to unmask herself, she discovers that it is not only concern for the other person and fear of rejection that cause her to blame herself. 'It's also suppression of rage. An incapacity to get angry. Even my children say it: Mum, you don't know how to get angry. When I really should be angry, I feel guilty. Instead of standing up for myself, in a conflict I immediately empathise with the other person. "Ah yes, when you look at it from that angle, perhaps what I did wasn't so convenient." Or even if I completely disagree with the other person, I'm prepared to act against my will, just to wriggle out of the conflict. Then I feel guilty about my own hypocrisy.'

'I've always been very scared of rage, both that of others and my own. With my mother I had the sense that it wasn't safe to be angry. I saw how she would hold a grudge at others for years on end for being unreasonable. The accusation of getting angry, it seemed, would long follow me.'

Now she sees it as a form of cowardice. 'You don't have the courage to stand up for yourself, to brave the anger.' Immaturity, that too. Every child must enact a symbolic parricide in order to become an adult.

'Freud and Jung claim that as a young child you want to be like your parents, seeing them as perfect; you also see yourself with your parents' judgement in mind. A sign of maturity is the development of your own moral sensitivity, your conscience. I realise I still don't have that. I recognise what Freud writes: your conscience takes over the voice of your parents – even when you no longer need to obey them, you still judge yourself through their eyes. While writing this book I tried to avoid anticipating my mother's judgement, but it still crept into my head. I'm still that little girl looking for a pat on the back from her mother. Until you're completely free of the desire for your parents' approval, you haven't fully grown up.'

Does that immaturity also play into her guilt towards the boyfriend who hit her? 'Yes, he takes the place of the parents. I always act in service to the other person's perception of the situation. Even when that's an unhealthy view.'

Packaged cucumbers

Jannah Loontjens has published poetry collections, novels and essays. As a student in New York she was taught by Derrida, after a side job as a nightclub go-go dancer she completed her PhD in Amsterdam. That doesn't sound like a woman with sagging shoulders, eyes fixed on the ground, weighed down by a lack of assertiveness. 'I do see myself as a strong woman who can stand tall, yet there is something of a split in that image.'

'It's a need for control,' Loontjens suddenly bursts out. 'It's essential to the guilt mechanism. I'm concerned about my mother who's alone in France; really I want to make sure she has a good time. Even if I'm not there at Christmas, I want to have an influence. Perhaps that's down to subconscious delusions of grandeur; I assign myself a crucial influence on another person's life and experience.'

From individually packaged cucumbers, to the state of mind of her nearest and dearest, to child labour in Bangladesh: Loontjens is capable of feeling bad about pretty much everything, even when she hasn't the slightest impact on it. But when she stole from shops (as a teenager), borrowed money without paying it back, and sold her passport in Thailand, she hardly felt a moment's guilt. In fact it was often 'a source of triumphant pleasure'. When asked for an explanation, she says that her soul is affected far less by laws and regulations imposed from above than by the psychological tension built up since her childhood.

Does she still hope for forgiveness from someone? Does she still expect absolution? She barely dares to say it out loud. 'I long for my mother's forgiveness. But really I've discovered that forgiveness is something you have to bring about for yourself. In fact I don't so much need to forgive myself, I'm mainly aiming for reconciliation. To reconcile myself with my own conscience. To find acceptance. Perhaps that's really what I'm after, a form of freedom, a freedom that means not having to worry so much. Not constantly imagining her pain. Liberating myself. Finally growing up.'