

**GUILTY  
WITHOUT  
PLEASURE**



by MIRIAM BELL

*No need to cry big tears once I'm dead. You are upsetting me and it's poisoning me in my condition.* Those kinds of sentences live rent free in my head to this day. What had been the major crime? An untidy bathroom. Pretty standard teenage behaviour, right? My mother had been sick for eight years when she died at 47. She had undergone chemotherapy on and off. At times, her hormones were raging and exploding in outbursts directed at my older sibling and me. From an adult perspective I can comprehend now that she was not speaking to us out of spite but her own fear of death, intensified by the cocktail keeping her alive. Yet, being only eleven years old, it hit a nerve.

Until my mid-twenties, I had successfully pretended her death hadn't changed me. Clearly, it did. Anxiety had spread throughout my whole body as I was anticipating cancer doing the same to me in the future. It caused me to cut myself off from fully experiencing joy. But it wasn't the only force pulling the strings. Once I accepted that I hadn't even begun to process her death, I unknowingly set out to discover my frog – in therapy.

*A frog?* Well, imagination has always been one of my strongest suits. I bet my therapist could have done a gallery showcase of vivid pictures representing my emotions by the time our three-year-long journey

ended. Somehow it was easier to use figurative language to describe my current state of mind. Especially when I hadn't entirely grasped the depth of an issue yet. So, during one session, I found myself explaining to my therapist that I sensed an animal sitting under the sofa. Initially, I was incapable of even naming the kind of the animal. After a while, I settled on a frog. It was just staring at me with a sulky face. I had no clue what it wanted me to do next. Or even if it wanted me to do something at all. Several weekly sessions later, I reluctantly became aware of the fact that I had felt guilty about being alive and healthy all those years. Gradually, I convinced myself the frog had been the outcome of my mother's unintentional guilt-bombing. All I wanted was to shoo it away. *Why is this frog hiding under the sofa?* I wondered. *Why doesn't it just stop bothering me?*

My mind kept wandering back to the little frog staring at me. Not until I looked at it closely, did I reconsider whether my interpretation of the frog's morose presence had been twisting my outlook on life. To my surprise, I suddenly saw a sad face rather than a grumpy one. *Had I kicked it under the sofa?* The thought of having caused the little frog pain dawned on me. My therapist gave me food for thought when she asked if maybe it wasn't the frog that felt abandoned and needed to be loved but someone else. Instead of verbalizing the truth buried up to that moment, I simply croaked.