

WHERE TO?

SAMUEL JEFFERY, KITTY KRAUS,
LUCY MCKENZIE, GILI TAL

Organised by Robert Liddiment,
Olivia Thurn-Valsassina

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CARLOS/ISHIKAWA

Unit 4, 88 Mile End Road

London E1 4UN

www.carlosishikawa.com

+44 (0) 20 7001 1744



SMALL MERCIES

When I was eighteen I was given a dressing gown for Christmas by my mother, which I rejected because I thought it was a boring present. Faced with my ingratitude, my mother – consistent with her destructive, yet successful, career in ‘centrist politics’ – decided to flip the situation on its head by suggesting she had actually given me the greatest gift possible. She went on to explain that being given a gift that we don’t want is a painful yet wonderful part of growing up.

‘The greatest gift we are given is the gift we don’t want, my son,’ she told me, ‘because it gives us the chance to realise we can exist in the ecstatic realm outside of civilisation’s folly. Christmas is bullshit, just as families are bullshit.’

‘Mummy,’ I whimpered, ‘Christmas and family aren’t bullshit are they?’ And to this she smiled condescendingly, ‘Yes they are dear, and when you realise this you’ll be a real adult, and one I can be proud of because big boys achieve a kind of existential sanity that refuses to conform to the madness of a demented civilization. That is your gift this Christmas, do you like it?’

‘Oh Mummy, I love it.’ I cried with delight.

January, then came and went and I realised that the gift Mummy had given me didn’t feel that great, in fact I had spent the past four weeks in bed doing nothing but crying, staring and sleeping. I went to find Mummy to tell her the gift she had given me seemed not to be working. She nodded solemnly, ‘I’m sorry, I lied to you. I felt bad that you thought the gift I gave you was so poor, so I told you a tale to cheer you up. I’m not sure if it will help but I’ve thought about it more and there is a second part of this makeshift gift, if you’d like to hear it.’

‘Yes please.’ I said eagerly hoping she would flip the gift again into a positive sphere.

‘Now remember the gift of existential sanity I gave you, that gives you privileged access to the ecstatic realm of higher truths,’ I nodded expectantly, ‘Well the uplifting promise of existential sanity actually plays out as depression. Because the romantic kind of madness that is required to reach that ecstatic realm outside of civilisation’s folly is just as much bullshit as Christmas.’ Well, I was crushed. ‘Oh God, this is really bad.’ I replied, ‘It turns out that the inauthenticity of society isn’t that edifying. The existential sanity that at first you said gives me access to higher truths, in reality just makes me into a dull inoperative depressive.’

‘That’s right.’ Mum responded reassuringly.

‘So the gift you gave me, is also one I don’t want, because existential sanity doesn’t make me feel liberated from the shackles of society at all, rather it makes me feel like a insubstantial depressed miserable failure, who is at odds with the world.’

‘Which is why it would have been easier for you to just say thank you for the dressing gown.’ My mother replied enigmatically.