

Uncorrected
Sampler

This Ragged Grace



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A Memoir
of Recovery
& Renewal

The spiral is an attempt at controlling the chaos. It has two directions. Where do you place yourself, at the periphery or at the vortex? Beginning at the outside is the fear of losing control; the winding in is a tightening, a retreating, a compacting to the point of disappearance. Beginning at the center is affirmation, the move outward is a representation of giving, and giving up control; of trust, positive energy, of life itself.

- Louise Bourgeois

Preface

I walked so hard and so fast in the winter of 2013 that I wore right through a pair of red Doc Martens. Things felt very raw and I was full of fear. I was ok standing still if I had voices in my ears, a podcast or an audiobook for company, but before long impatience would overwhelm me and I'd have to move my legs. My muscles propelled themselves and I found myself carried all over the city.

Even in my flat I struggled to be still. I made playlists of repetitive, upbeat music and in the evenings I would close the shutters and dance. Then I could forget myself, as if the movement were a spell, a way of escaping the things I wasn't ready to face. It felt like a compulsion not a choice, like the luckless girl in *The Red Shoes* (my boots were the colour of oxblood so maybe there was something in it).

Seven months earlier I'd stopped drinking. It's funny how we say that, "stopped drinking", as though the only liquid worth talking about is alcohol. Had I stopped drinking entirely I would have had about three days to live – not very long. Either way, I had stopped drinking alcohol at the end of a hot June at the beginning of a messy summer and by the time the days were shortening the pink cloud of new sobriety had worn off and I was unable to be still.

Between my last drink – a warm bottle of cheap white wine shared with a couple of friends on my sitting room floor (had I known it would be my last I would have chosen something else, maybe a chilled tequila cocktail with salted grapefruit and lime) – and the first frost, I crossed the threshold into that superstitious realm: the age of twenty-seven. Most of the preceding year had been filled with chaos and blind, impulsive action, and it wasn't

until I found myself aligned with this new number, bruised and sober, that its significance hit me: the so-called twenty-seven club, that roll call of young artists who died in their twenty-eighth year whether by their own hand or in other tragic circumstances. I, of course, did not see myself as next in a line-up that includes Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Janis Joplin, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jim Morrison and Amy Winehouse, but it left me wondering about the tenderness of that stage of life, when one is adult but often not entirely, and when destructive habits are just starting to lose the glittering sheen of youthful folly.

My extended adolescence had abruptly reached its end.

The Descent

The first year sober

If we go down into ourselves we find that we possess exactly what we desire - Simone Weil

That winter, on top of a teal metal bookcase in my sitting room sat an odd collection of items. They were arranged in a makeshift altar in front of which I had tried to cultivate a daily meditation practice: a life size plastic skull, painted Yves Klein blue; incense, I don't remember which kind; a postcard with a drawing of a naked woman riding a winged horse, a Russian tattoo design in a kitsch red frame given to me by a school friend when I was sixteen; two dried pink roses in glass vases; a print of Georgia O'Keeffe's painting *Summer Days*, in which an animal skull is suspended against a cloudy sky above a posy of desert flowers and a barren, red rock landscape beneath – the skull's horns make the shape of a human pelvis, and in the distance there's enough blue sky to make a sailor suit (a phrase I hear in my mother's voice); three candles; and a much underlined copy of Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*.

Gravity and Grace is a compilation of writing by Weil, recommended to me by a friend when I told him I was getting sober. 'She'll make the Twelve Step theology more intellectual and mystic,' promised Steve, 'and she has some beautiful expressions on love'. Intellectual and mystic were two things I could get behind, and a French philosopher known as 'the patron saint of all outsiders' was a much more appealing spiritual guide than the little blue book I had dutifully purchased at an AA meeting. Sitting on a green metal folding chair in yet another church basement, I had leafed through its thin

pages disappointed by how like a bible it was, my heart sinking when I saw it had a chapter called ‘To Wives’. I was not a wife, nor did I have one. Whereas with Weil, I was comforted by her confidence in the power of introspection – that going down into oneself can be a salve for the discontents of desire. But when I did manage to go down into myself, often I found that I did not – as Simone promised – possess exactly what I desired. Instead I found that itch in my muscles that meant, for all my good intentions, I could not be still for long enough to discover much at all. *Gravity and Grace* is written in fragments, so my scattered mind only had to concentrate on a few lines at a time, but I was still too restless to really grasp what they were getting at. Still, each morning it was that introspection I strove for, in front of my altar, kneeling to prove that I meant it.

On the altar there was also a small glass jar of sand. Grey and volcanic, it came from the island of Stromboli, where I had gone with a close friend in August of that summer, when I was not quite twenty-seven and just a few weeks into this new, thirsty life. Everything there is covered in a black dust which Giovanna, the owner of our bed and breakfast, assured us was sterile, cooked in the mountain at 300 degrees.

Kate and I arrived in Ginostra by water taxi, a wooden motorboat powered by a local man named Frank – gruff voice, wide grin, strong hands – who we met at the main port. There are no cars on the island, and you can’t reach the tiny settlement (a former fishing village) any other way. Almost unbearable joy pulsed through me as salty air blew my hair across my face and we buffeted against the crests of perfectly formed little waves. The water was the deepest blue, many shades darker than the skull on my altar, and dense as velvet.

The postman on Stromboli was a stringy German man with silver hair and two donkeys who carried the parcels and letters up the island's steep, zig-zagging paths. Their saddles were fitted with panniers in the blue and yellow livery of the Italian postal service, and we soon discovered that they did not like being stroked while they were at work. We heard a rumour that the German postman's wife was a philosopher who had studied with Theodore Adorno, a fact I found romantic because I had encountered his work during my Master's, though beyond the fact he was against capitalism, all I really remembered was that he looked like a serious, bespectacled egg. At the time, I made a point of looking up the photographs of every male philosopher and cultural critic on the course, fed up that men could be known for their ideas alone while women were mostly known by their bodies first.

How romantic, I thought, to live here on the edge of this active volcano with a brain full of anti-capitalist philosophy. How free they must be. Imagine a life not governed by mindless consumption. Perhaps living in Ginostra meant you could almost escape it altogether – there are no billboards, no advertisements. There are two little shops, one where you can buy dried things – capers, olives and tinned tomatoes, pasta, onions and bread – and one that sells fresh produce which comes in with the boats, and is therefore less reliable. Nearby there is a church, outside which there is a terrace where everyone gathers to watch the sunset and share an *aperitivo* in the evenings. Up the hill, a couple of restaurants. Not much else.

It was on that terrace outside the church, with the sun hanging orange and low in the sky, that I got talking to a French woman named Fleur. A journalist who had been covering the migration crisis in the Mediterranean for a French news agency, she had been coming to Stromboli to decompress for several years. I don't know how it happened but we soon found we were talking

about love. She used the word 'lover' with a sincerity I admired, certain I could never pull it off. But Fleur's lovers were not satisfying her. In fact what she was telling me was a story of deep dissatisfaction, of an unfillable void, which was a story I knew well.

I love it here, she told me in her soft voice, it's so calm. Yes, I agreed, it is so calm here at the foot of an active volcano.

I wondered if Fleur and I were desert flowers that could only flourish under arid conditions.

I felt safe in the shadow of that elemental danger, held fast in the heat and sheltered by hot pink bougainvillea. For a few sweet days, the past stopped existing. But I knew that it was not acceptable to only be able to flourish on holiday.

Adjusting the straps of her top, Fleur told me there was a man on the island who she slept with on her last stay. She wasn't sure where things stood but she would like to find out if they could do it again. He intrigued her, she said. The German with the post donkeys climbed past us up the path. The donkeys had strapped to them the catch of the day and two generous boxes of oranges and I watched them go, hooked on the scent of the fruit that carried in the heat. Before she left me I asked Fleur if she knew about the postman's philosopher wife who had studied under Adorno. Yes, she said, I heard that too, apparently she has beautiful white hair.

As she cast off in search of her would-be lover, I mentally wished her a satisfying time. I stayed on the terrace, watched the orange and pink sunset deepen then fade as the bright disc of sun slipped down behind the sea.

That night on the island, the sky was so thick with celestial bodies it felt like I could see the whole universe.

The truth was that the philosophy of Adorno wasn't the only thing I'd forgotten: my brain felt increasingly full of holes. I'd come to picture it like an old ruin – walls mostly still standing but no roof to speak of and windows blown out a long time ago. That night on Stromboli, by the light of the Milky Way, I found myself fascinated by the idea of this woman, this white-haired, island-dwelling philosopher. I imagined her striding up the sides of the volcano each morning, strong and tanned, notebook in hand. I wanted to know her.

In my fantasy, the logic of lava flows inspired her work, most notably her theory of sovereignty, which believed that the dynamic potential of emotion could advance the greater needs of the collective: there is no volcano without lava; there is no whole without its parts. She'd say, it's not solipsism to pay attention to your interior world – if you don't you're guaranteed to be surprised by an eruption. I imagined she wore a strand of volcanic glass beads long enough to wrap twice around her neck, and ate garlicky prawns at candlelit dinners under the intricate Aeolian night sky. Hers was a life of glamorous simplicity, reading and writing books, sending letters, feeding the donkeys.

When I found out that Dolce and Gabbana owned a villa on the island, the dream of my anti-capitalist utopia stretched to accommodate the new information. I found photographs of it online – in keeping with the other buildings there, it had a whitewashed exterior but inside was, as per their famous aesthetic, a riot of colour and texture, gilded mirrors and glossy tiles. So now there were also D&G dresses in the philosopher's repertoire (in my

mind they were generous friends to her), and, occasionally, glitzy parties. The life I imagined for her looked more and more like a Pedro Almodóvar film: stylish and beautifully appointed, full of humour. My imaginary philosopher enjoyed her life but never overdid it, allowed herself pleasure but was never a slave to it. I began to see that she had come to Stromboli to live out her inconsistencies in relative peace, and I envied her. My own inconsistencies had run me ragged – I was ready for some relief.

Only then did I understand that the glamorous philosopher who was married to the stringy German postman was a cipher for my deep need to feel sovereign myself. I'd been in thrall to my habits for too long, and it was not a free life. Addiction drags you away from reality, that's why at first it feels so good, or at least like temporary respite. And isn't it a very human thing, to want to feel good? But addiction is also a trap, and I was finally ready to disentangle myself from a set of beliefs I had unconsciously absorbed, theories of pleasure and intellect, femininity and abandon, identity and behaviour, structures I had unwittingly adopted as simply how to be. I had sought to feel glamorous, dangerous, liberated; these were the things I had wanted, but they were costumes I put on, and I'd grown attached to the story of my chaos. Now I was trying a new way, a more conscious way. A path of greater self-determination.

And so it was there, in the Mediterranean heat, in the shadow of an elemental chaos so much bigger than my own, that I first surrendered to the idea of recovery.

The next day, with the sunlight clean and strong on my limbs, I lay back and

let the clear, salty water fill my ears. All I could hear was my heartbeat. Slow. I felt the rumble of the volcano beneath me. Floating, my body motionless but for the gentle rise and fall made by tiny cerulean waves.

No man is an island, sure, but a person can feel like a sleepy volcano in the middle of the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Except Stromboli is far from dormant. Fountains of molten rock periodically jet into the sky, and from our vantage point at its base Kate and I marvelled at the puffs of grey smoke that were occasionally visible as they mingled with fluffy clouds drifting past above. Before long we grew used to it, as we discovered the strange paradox of volcano life - sitting naked on the island's hot black rocks under my wide-brimmed sun hat I smoked a cigarette and felt at peace, completely unable to connect those emissions with any real sense of threat. Not once did I worry for our safety.

(Five years after we happily gave ourselves over to the island's lazy rhythms, Mount Stromboli had a serious eruption. It claimed the life of one hiker and sent a hot blast of ash and smoke a mile into the sky and several hundred metres into the sea. I read about it in *Time Magazine* and *The National Geographic*, and sent the articles to Kate in messages full of exclamation marks: *I can't believe she blew her top!!! I hope the donkeys are ok... that poor hiker - what a way to go*).

The volcanic dust continued to work its way under the nails of my fingers and toes and I relaxed. Gave myself over to the start and end of each day, as it's impossible not to do on an island of that size; the sky is bigger than the land on which you stand. It was a relief to be so far from London and the temptations I was trying to leave behind. Here, I was surrounded by symbols of renewal - not just the tidal ebbs and flows, the sunrise and sunset, but

the volcano itself, constantly ejecting fragments of its own matter, always growing, purging, consuming. An ancient paradox, constant yet constantly changing. It filled me with optimism.

I thought about the lava, how over the years it has bubbled up from seething depths and torn a raw path across the mountain's surface like a wound, known as the Sciara del Fuoco, or scree of fire. The incandescent waste tumbles down the north flank of the volcano, where it has healed into a blackened scar. Destruction and creation. Rupture and renewal.

The eponymous trip in Jules Verne's novel *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* concludes on the slopes of Mount Stromboli. Riding an explosive lava flow to the surface, Professor Lindenbrock, his nephew Axel and their guide Hans emerge from the centre of a volcano they are surprised to discover is not the dormant Icelandic one through which they originally descended. Tired, hungry, their clothes in tatters, they walk down, careful not to trip over hot debris, until they are met by the halcyon sight of olive trees, pomegranates, and grapes on the vine. They help themselves to the restorative sweet fruit and can't believe their luck. It's an allegory of self-discovery: this scene on Stromboli is a moment of redemption and reward after the treacherous journey they've just survived, where they encountered prehistoric creatures, an unruly, underground sea, a looming giant. Scattered bones. They return changed, better integrated, having shed some of their old ideas and nurturing new ones.

What if the nephew Axel was so captivated by the island that he never left and took up life as the local postman? To look at the German with his donkeys (and supposedly a philosopher wife), in his vest and shorts, his worn sandals, you wouldn't know that he possessed the deepest secrets from the

centre of the Earth, but it's quite possible that he does.

What I like about Verne's story is its wrong turns and misdirections. They don't know the route from the start. They have to change their minds and double back. In his vision, the centre of the Earth is full of evolutionary relics, dinosaurs and strange fish long extinct from the planet's surface. I like this idea, that as we evolve, somewhere deep within us remains a skeletal trace of what came before that builds up in layers, a sediment of the self. But the point is that it's crucial to our continued survival to let some things sink to the bottom, recede until they are obsolete.

It's ok not to know where you're going. Course correction is a vital part of navigation. Knowledge and ignorance are bound together, the second being an initial condition of the first. There's a deep freedom in being able to change your mind.

Before I walked the paths on Stromboli – in the footprints of Lindenbrock, Axel, and Hans – I did not know that capers are the buds of astonishingly beautiful flowers. *Capparis spinosa* thrives on the island, happily growing in the loamy volcanic soil (Spinoza, another philosopher whose work I'd forgotten, but his romantic black curls were seared into my memory – his scalp was as luscious as Adorno's was bald). The white blooms were everywhere that August, glowing in the flat, bright light. I was captivated by their large petals, pale, occasionally a little pink, and how they set off the clusters of long, purple stamen that exploded from their centre. An echo of the volcanic fireworks that shoot out of Mount Stromboli itself. The stamen gave each flower a busy violet halo that bounced, chaotic, in the breeze, and their scent was warm and sweet.

I couldn't stop thinking of these extravagant flowers as I chased several of their tight, green buds around my plate with a fork, the night we had dinner at the restaurant up the hill. ('The new restaurant', Giovanna had called it, with more than a little suspicion in her voice.) After a perilous, pitch-dark scramble along an eventually candle lit path, I felt my senses heightened, pupils fully dilated. The briny flavour of my *spaghetti alla Strombolana* was sharp on my tongue. Did you know that capers are harvested each morning before they can blossom into flowers? I asked Kate, picturing the blousy ornaments of their blooms. I was proud of my new fact. She seemed to know it already. Nipped in the bud, I thought to myself.

We had been talking about love over a plate of grilled prawns. Why am I always talking about love? I thought. I wanted to be a more serious person, with a brain full of Adorno and Spinoza, worthy of the doctorate I was working towards, but instead all I could think about was love, love, love. I looked at the prawns, their armoured bodies curled against one another, spooning, and remembered that lobsters famously mate for life. Going by the scene on the plate in front of me, prawns were more into sharing. My mind tumbled down the path of a polyamorous crustaceous romance as I cracked the next creature's shell to get at its sweet flesh. Sounds fun, I thought, and sucked out its brains. All that love.

Sometimes it feels good to lose your head to love. What bliss to get lost in another person's body, and consciousness – those early weeks and months when all that matters is the one you've fallen for, what they think, the smell of their neck, when you'll see them next. The feeling in your guts when the letters of their name light up the screen of your phone. The glorious challenge of their otherness, and the deepening pleasure of all the ways in which you are the same.

But I was also coming to see that love, like drinking, had become another way for me to lose myself completely. I placed the prawn's head, empty now, on my side plate which piled ever higher with the remains of its fallen comrades.

Is it really love at all, if at its heart it's another way to escape yourself, just another fix? I asked Kate, who lived life always a few steps ahead of me, which was one of the reasons I loved her.

It's a good question, she said, passing me the finger bowl of lemony water. Does it matter? There are many different kinds of love. Just because something ended up not being good for you, doesn't mean you should write it off completely. It's all experience.

She was getting at something important that I didn't want to hear. Here on Stromboli I felt light and open, but I knew that since stopping drinking my thoughts had started to arrange themselves into more binary categories: right and wrong, good and bad, safe and dangerous. It was to do with fear. I felt too fragile to live in the grey area, still uncertain in my choice. Ambivalence is a hard feeling to bear. Also, a love that had gone bad was not long in the past and I needed it to stay that way – extricating myself had been the precursor to choosing a different kind of life.

It had been a classic first love. To begin with it burned heady bright, wheels greased by whiskey and heavy guitars in my narrow university halls bedroom. We kept it intense and dramatic as we went on to live in different cities, then different countries. We made desperate late night phone calls from flimsy booths in internet cafes, our feelings stoked by the brutality of our phonecards running out. We took long bus trips across Europe by night,

arriving at dawn, tender and full of longing, relief at the sight of each other's faces utterly intoxicating. The feelings were oceanic, they came in waves to drown everything else out. In that, there was solace, but underneath something festered.

Before, I had written daily in notebooks where I would try to digest the world around me, make sense of myself and imagine what other excitement life might hold. But after falling into this world of feeling, instead of thinking about my future I figured I could just *be in love*. I gave myself over to it completely, and for a while it was everything – too much – but it was good. Soon, it calcified into dependence, into need, the way that any addiction does. It became something that held us both in stasis, specimens in a jar labelled 'first try', suspended by our codependence. Part of me knew this before I understood it, and it was this knowledge that slowly swelled into courage enough to end it, in spite of the feeling I was also breaking my own heart.

I picked up a charred lemon slice from the now almost empty plate of prawns and bit off the tart triangles of its segments one by one. It was sweeter than I expected, the sugar lightly caramelised by the grill. I think I need to take a break from all of it, I said, not yet sure if I meant it.

There's a part of love that is focussed on the needs of the other, open, generous and curious, but fixating on love is the opposite of that – it's all about meeting your own urgent want, immediately and at all costs, so as to block any intolerable feeling or tune out a reality that seems unbearable. Used this way, romance is just another form of consumption. It's why addicts make such intense and beguiling lovers, at least at first: in a way, our survival comes to depend upon it.

I was reminded of some lines from *Gravity and Grace* that I'd written in my notebook before going away:

Love needs reality. What is more terrible than the discovery that through a bodily appearance we have been loving an imaginary being.

Steve was right, Weil was good on love, but I couldn't yet find beauty in this fragment because it hit too close to home. It felt more like taking medicine, and without a spoonful of sugar to help it go down.

Love needs reality. Reality was not a place I often wanted to be, especially not when I was in love – the whole point of it was to escape the everyday. But love had often ended up feeling inadequate, and I was beginning to understand why. I'd thought it was because I simply wanted too much, that maybe it was time to learn how to want less, but I came to see it was actually about learning to want something altogether different. To want the kind of love that can withstand reality, not the kind that needs to escape it to survive. Like the deep love I felt for my friends, which made room for disappointment and change as well as the pleasure of feeling understood.

Kate and I finished eating and sat, smoking in the candlelight, looking at the moon's reflection dancing on the sea. I only smoke when I'm in Europe, she said, taking a drag on a Camel blue. It made me smile because it seemed we'd come all this way just to smoke American cigarettes. The volcano rumbled and puffed out a thin thread of dust, right on cue.

But what of the glamorous philosopher and her charmed island life? Did she live in reality, or had she come here to escape it? Already, I wanted to come back to Stromboli before I'd even left, but I knew if I tried to stay

it would be an attempt to turn a parenthesis into a full sentence, or even a whole book. Only a few hundred people live on the island full time. A violent eruption in 1930 killed six and shrank the population down from five thousand as islanders fled in search of a less precarious place to build their homes. For those that remain, summer is a time of invasion, as people like me come in search of escape, starlight, or the volcano's ancient wisdom. Day trippers, paradise hunters. We ought to bring it and its inhabitants something in return, besides our money. Something of equal value.

I also knew it wouldn't be long before the itch returned – I doubted I'd survive without the distractions of city life. For a few days, maybe even weeks, I could fill my emptiness with the ashen sand, the swell of stars, and the tales of other peoples' lovers, but eventually it wouldn't be enough. Nothing ever was.

And what of the philosopher's love for the postman, who might as well be the boy who never left? It was a love without possession, I decided to myself, open and strong. Its foundations were respect and curiosity, not hunger and need. I idealised it completely.

The following morning, among the bobbing heads of caper flowers, I fantasised about discovering her notebooks (which, unlike me, she hadn't stopped writing in when she'd fallen in love). I imagined she'd left them on a flat black rock at the water's edge – there were three of them, each bound in a different shade of green. The top one had fallen open, and with a tremor of guilt in my fingers I lifted it up, smoothing down the page to read:

It's not just the buds of capers that are worth knowing about – the plant's fruit is the caper berry, an elegant, plump tear drop on a thick stalk, also generally served pickled. In the Bible (Ecclesiastes 12:5, to be precise), depending on which translation from the Hebrew you trust, caper berries are a symbol of desire and an aphrodisiac. If you split open the smooth green surface of a caper berry you find a frenzy of little seeds inside, tightly packed, a bit like a pomegranate.

The seeds of many different desires and possibilities, I thought, pickled out of their potential. As I wrote some lines about the capers in my own little green notebook, I began to see myself this way too, as a person thwarted by a substance that halted my progress and cut me off from growth.

The Spring before I went to Stromboli, in May 2013, when I was still drinking, I had a motorbike accident. It left me with dark bruises and an impressive road burn up the back of my right calf and thigh. It required the kind of recovery that involves hospitals and bandages and lying down, the kind you can't argue with. I told my parents I'd 'fallen off a bike' and avoided them until it all looked less dramatic, but something had finally happened that I couldn't shrink for myself.

The accident also happened in Italy, but in Milan. I had just handed in the first chapter of my thesis, and was visiting a friend who lived there to celebrate her birthday. It had been a hard year, and the chapter was a hot mess, but I didn't know that yet and was flying high on meeting the deadline. We danced, we drank, we ate truffle *piadinas*, strung balloons up in the park giggling barefoot on the grass. Late one night I made a reckless decision and got on the back of a man's white Yamaha in my flimsy sundress and woven

shoes. He wore leathers. We were strangers to one another and neither of us were sober. When in a sharp turn we met a light rain, the bike swung out from under us resulting in his bruised ribs, a slight concussion each, and my road burn. It scorched down my leg, livid and raw.

In the emergency room the nurses cleaned my wounds with impressive efficiency, removing all traces of abrasive grit and tarmac that had worked their way into me as I slid across the road. They mended me with a webbing that encourages rapid skin growth and then eventually dissolves, leaving the new skin intact: a broken doll, glued back together. They told me I was lucky not to need a skin graft. Through the haze of the gas and air I imagined the nurses were enchanted and their hands were made of soothing ice. They swaddled me in white bandages from ankle to hip, gave me some crutches, and sent me on my way. Once I was back in London and the dressings could be removed, they gave me strict instructions to rub everything with Vitamin E oil each day to prevent scarring, which I did religiously. More religiously than I have ever been able to kneel at my altar in pursuit of serenity. Vanity is a stronger motivator than peace.

It hurt, and later frightened me, but the truth is I loved the speed of the bike in the dark. It was intoxicating. Finally, I was moving fast enough to outrun myself, and I forgot myself completely. Forgot everything, even my body. Motion can be liberation, at least for a few swift minutes. The same can be said of risk: the thrill of the jumping off point eclipses all other feeling, and in that moment you are free from yourself, made only of anticipation and desire.

Writing this now, I think of Mary Gaitskill's essay *Lost Cat*, which is about love, loss and the perils of intimacy, where she writes, 'it is hard to protect a

person you love from pain, because people often choose pain; *I* am a person who often chooses pain.' Though pain was certainly where I ended up that night, it wasn't a conscious choice. Compulsion never feels like choice at the time. Abandon was what I wanted, which is not necessarily the same. I longed to be lost to myself. I think in truth I was looking for the void, which I could only face with a sideways glance or by hurtling towards it at reckless speed. On, say, a shining white Yamaha.

What does it mean if abandon is your pleasure? I've always found a thrill in leaving the vessel of my body, in abandoning ship. It can be exhausting to be a person in a body. And if you seek the feeling of leaving that body momentarily, forgetting its fragility and its mortality, beneath the pleasure of the thrill, is it really pain you're after, or is it something else? I kept putting myself in danger, and I couldn't make it stop. It rarely felt like a choice, though, of course, in some ways it was. It's only the death drive, my dear, Freud would likely tell me, if I lay my body down on his carpet covered couch. Everyone needs a little oblivion from time to time. Besides, what is the fantasy of the knight on a white charger if not an abandonment wish? A desire to be rescued from your own life by a story. And it's easier than you might think to use people as objects. A motorbike can be a tool, a knight also.

Of course, motorbikes promise certain things: speed, freedom, power. The fantasy of independence. That night, what I desired was to be suspended out of time, somewhere beyond all that was limited and unsatisfactory. I wanted a way out of my fate as a human animal with a body that had needs, with a life that needed tending to, the plodding mundanity of it all. Maybe I was playing at symbolic masculinity, too. Borrowing it, trying it on for size - the motorbike as detachable phallus: a fallacy. Simone Weil says, 'we have to go down into the root of our desires in order to tear the energy from its object'.

Simone says the object is not the point. The motorbike is pure energy, but it's not the point. The death drive will simply find another agent for its chaos.

Once home I struggled to be patient as my skin took its time to heal. The sticky ritual of the Vitamin E oil topped and tailed my days. There was a lot of sitting still. I waited. One morning I woke to the insistent buzzing of flies. Unnerved, I tried to find where they were coming from, and couldn't. I wondered if I was being paranoid but the following day there were more of them, and by the evening I was worried. When daylight came I tried again to find the source and decided they had to be coming from a hatch that opened into the roof space – it looked like the rectangle of MDF fit well enough but it was the only feasible answer. I couldn't climb a ladder to investigate because of my leg, so Pest Control sent a man named Lewis to come and have a look. His watery eyes were curious and shy, and his chin-length, mouse-coloured hair framed a pointed nose. He liked to crack jokes. I held the ladder for him and watched as his top half disappeared into the ceiling. As he reached for something up there, grunting slightly, his polo shirt rode up and I caught a glimpse of a bellybutton piercing, two pink gems catching the light, nestled in the centre of his soft torso. It's completely decomposed! he called down, thrilled. A squirrel had got in and died up there, the poor creature now stripped to its bones by the maggots that became the flies that I had not imagined after all.

I spent the afternoon googling decomposition, and felt somehow responsible for the animal's slow demise, as though my healing had required a flesh sacrifice.

By the time Kate and I disembarked from the hydrofoil onto Stromboli's black volcanic sands, my wounds - the visible ones, at least - had completely

healed. In certain lights the new skin had a silvery sheen to it, and I was left with three dark stripes just below my right buttock that made it look like I'd survived a swipe from a big cat. Other than that, I was intact.

Every story you tell about yourself is an attempt to organise the messy experience of living. To map it out and put things in order can be a comfort - a day starts and ends, a year, a relationship, a habit. A descent. If you consider yourself an alcoholic, the story you are telling yourself is often about shame. It's easy to end it there, in that roiling, subterranean sea. But the voyage requires something more of you, and if you actually get into the sea of shame you get further down towards the root of your desires - you sink beneath the objects they fixate on, where you eventually find the truth. The motorbike is not the point. The alcohol is not the point. The accident was a moment of course correction precisely because I was already in up to my armpits.

The reason I had stopped drinking that June was because a psychiatrist told me I was probably an alcoholic. Recovery was not my idea, and at first I did not particularly want it. I knew I drank habitually, but I felt that things hadn't yet got messy enough to warrant the exaggerated language he insisted on using: alcoholic, alcoholism, Alcoholics Anonymous.

But some ideas lay their roots in parts of the self that are just out of the ego's reach, and so you could also say that recovery *was* my idea, I just couldn't see it yet.

After all, it was me that had set off the chain of events that led me to the

black leather chair in the psychiatrist's office. I had chosen to extricate myself from that long and intense first love, with all its drama. Afterwards, spiralling, I had gone to Student Psychological Services for help and started seeing a therapist, and later, as I felt myself unravelling further, the psychiatrist. I had sat in the bright, warm sunlight that filled his airy room and explained that for a long time I had been having trouble sleeping. I could no longer distinguish my bedroom's night time shadows from the figures erupting from my subconscious in the few moments of sleep I did manage to snatch. I cried often, felt overwhelmed by small tasks, and struggled to make sense of my academic work. I no longer found joy in the places I used to reliably seek it - nothing particularly unusual, just flowers and music, dancing, looking at art. I knew I was not well and I wanted to get better. To recover, if you will, though I did not yet understand from what.

The recovery I sought was a definitive, one-time thing, a problem he would quickly solve with a prescription and a diagnosis. Like getting over a stomach bug or bad flu: take a little pill, read a little book, get well again.

I sat back against the warm skin of the chair he offered me and noticed the cards pinned above his desk. They included a drawing by a small child and many colourful notes of thanks. The psychiatrist was an elderly man with large, kind eyes and a voice like David Attenborough, who had worked with the university for a long time. Depressed PhD students were his speciality. After telling him everything I thought was wrong, I listened as he explained, gentle but firm, you are suffering from depression, anxiety and feelings of instability. He said these words with no trace of alarm, which calmed me. Writing out a prescription for an antidepressant, he looked at me over his glasses. You feel restless, irritable and discontent. I nodded. I also think, he said, you have a drinking problem. The good news is, if you stop drinking,

you can recover. He recommended a book about the addictive personality and asked me to attend three recovery meetings before our next appointment. His strong advice was not to say anything, just listen, and told me the wisdom of recovering addicts and alcoholics was a precious resource.

Drinking was not something I remembered telling him about, in my tense and weepy litany of the things with which I struggled. I was blindsided by his words, though too proud to let on quite how much. I said thank you as I took the prescription from him, the word ‘alcoholic’ ringing loud in my ears. I didn’t like it at all. I felt judged, though I later came to see the judgement was my own.

At first all I could see was restriction and denial, a life devoid of freedom or pleasure. Emptiness stretched out before me.

In *Gravity and Grace* there is a chapter called ‘To Accept the Void’, and when later I came to read it I thought back to that first meeting with the psychiatrist and to his diagnosis. With his kind and patient smile he was asking me to accept the void. Only then would I be able to escape the grip it had on me. But back then the void wasn’t something I wanted to accept, because acceptance meant knowing and mystery was important to me. If it remained a nebulous thing that made life hard to live then who could blame any of us for seeking a little relief from time to time? Getting to know my void would mean taking responsibility for it, which was not very appealing. Weil says that in order to accept the void, ‘a time has to be gone through without any reward, natural or supernatural’. But I like rewards, especially after doing something hard, like giving up drinking.

To begin with, the natural rewards were fairly immediate: the self-congratulatory

feeling of sticking to something; my skin cleared up, got brighter; mornings were no longer intolerable or filled with dread. I remembered how to wake up, rather than come round. My concentration improved, meaning my work on my thesis was less frantic and haphazard, more methodical.

Then came the material things – for a while, like a good child of capitalism, I enjoyed attempting to fill my void with clothes for a life I was not actually living, vintage party dresses and high heeled shoes, things I did not plan to wear to the library. On eBay I found a pair of electric blue and silver snakeskin platforms that had never been worn, and when I won the auction it felt like a sign from the universe that I was on the right track. They arrived and immediately I put them on, ignoring how they pinched at the sides. I could barely stand in them but I persevered because I felt I deserved them and also I was superstitious (superstition is an excellent mask for fear): the shoes were an optimistic commitment to the parties of the future, when I would once again be able to drink. Because what I desired was not actually recovery. A chance to gather myself, maybe, but what I really desired was redemption, absolution for the unruly behaviour that had draped shame around my shoulders like a sodden velvet cape, heavy and unwanted. I had no intention, then, of accepting the void. Instead, that August I went to Stromboli.

But by the time the days were short and gloomy and I arrived and left the library in the dark, the rewards were further and fewer between, and the void was at my heels every hour of the day. Stromboli was an alternate reality. Perhaps a version of myself remained there, sun bronzed and serene at the water's edge, her feet in the sea, but I was here in the slate grey cold and my heart was heavy with angst. The story I was telling myself that restless low-sky winter was that it had become intolerable to be alone inside my mind and

body without the substances I'd used to take the edge off my experience of myself and the world.

Without them, I found that there was me, and then there was a new and relentless, awful voice. It was constant. An unremitting commentary on everything I did, everything I thought. An insidious, honeyed whisper laden with criticism and shame, but canny - it knew how to appeal to me, to my vanity. Sometimes it would cajole me, sometimes insult me, sometimes tease. It felt at once alien and a deep part of myself. All the miles I covered in those dark and fragile months were a desperate attempt to outrun it. I named it Wormtongue, after Tolkien's famous sycophant, and gave his voice a sound - wheedling, nasal. I made him other, then tried to expel him.

Looking for a spell to silence him, I enrolled in a meditation course at the university. I wanted to descend down into myself so deep that I passed by him so that I could then eject him from me in an explosion of lava and fiery ash. Every Monday at 9am I arrived back at Student Psychological Services and sat on the blue carpeted floor of a big-windowed, white room along with eight or nine others, our winter coats in a large pile by the door. We were all PhD students with anxious eyes and tense jaws. Our teacher was a Buddhist but assured us that his guidance over the term would be secular. He seemed very kind and perhaps a little sad - *tristesse* was the word that came to mind. Somehow sorrow felt nobler in French.

In our first session he gave us this advice: don't talk about your meditation practice until you've been doing it for a few years. Most people meditate a handful of times then spend more time telling other people to try it than they do practicing themselves.

There was a lesson in there about ego but Wormtongue was rustling too loudly for me to hear it. *We should go back to Paris*, he was saying, *we had fun in Paris*. Stop, I replied. You know I wasn't well there. *Whatever you say, doc. It was fun and you can't deny it. Besides, you're the one who was thinking about tristesse.*

On arrival the next Monday our teacher gave us each a custard cream. Judging by the reactions of the others in the room, it was only me who regularly ate biscuits for breakfast. They received theirs with reverence and curiosity, while I went to put mine straight in my mouth. Wait said the teacher, not yet not yet, as I fumbled with the biscuit and felt a hot blush flourish over my nose and across my cheeks.

Greedy guts, Wormtongue said. *Close that big, messy mouth.*

Our teacher explained we were to try an exercise in meditative eating. Behold the biscuit, he said. Turn it over in your hands. Take in every millimetre, every ridge. What's the texture like? And the smell? Breathe it in. Go slow, there's no hurry. I was longing to eat it but I did as he said, examined the sand-coloured rectangle with my eyes, my fingers, noticed the little cushion of sweet white cream sandwiched between the two outer biscuits, followed their raised, swirling pattern, traced the words 'custard' and 'cream' with the tip of my forefinger. I breathed in its scent – sugary, sickly – and waited for permission to put it in my mouth.

Take a taste of the biscuit, said our teacher. Pay attention to the texture and the flavour. I bit off a modest corner, enjoyed the crunch then crumble of sweet and salty matter and felt a tiny rush as the sugar melted on my tongue.

Wormtongue said: *more.*

More was what I wanted. I looked around at my fellow meditators and saw them all restrained and thoughtful, nibbling delicately, eyes closed, brows furrowed into tiny erudite frowns as though tasting a fine wine. They were absorbed in the moment, entirely consumed with biscuit tasting which was the point of the exercise: presence through sensation. But Wormtongue and I were already lost to our craving for more. Furtive, I took another bite. I waited for an exquisite pleasure to invade my senses, like Proust and his interminable madeleine. I found nothing but irritation. It appeared like a pressure behind the eyes, ran down my neck, arms, fingers, churned in my stomach. More. *The Disease of More*, I'd heard it called, and knew that I had it. I wanted to be transported by the poetry of the custard cream to some higher plane of feeling and felt impatient for my own involuntary memory to strike, and elevate me – my love of biscuits came from my father, who had once worked for a biscuit company which meant in my childhood the house had been full of biscuits, my uncle even had two ginger Tom cats called The Ginger Biscuits, there must be hundreds of dormant biscuit related memories waiting to be triggered by the scent and flavour. But craving blots everything else out. Nothing makes me feel so mortal as the feeling of more.

Powerless, I put the rest of the biscuit in my mouth.

I found the descent into myself to be painful and hard. In our third session I lay on my back on the blue carpet wishing I was floating instead in the Tyrrhenian Sea and tried to follow the Buddhist's voice as he counted our breaths in and out. It was a nice voice, gentle and steady. One, two, one, two. *One, two, buckle my shoe*, said Wormtongue. My skin itched, teeth wriggled in my mouth, toes clenched. Take balanced, even breaths, said the teacher, equal counts on the inhale and the exhale, and we'll meditate together for the next ten minutes. I kept breathing, one, two, one, two. The sounds slowed

into abstractions, like the lowing of a field of cows, and my body began to ache. I let my eyes close. In the darkness I felt I was moving fast. An image came into focus: a woman and man on a motorbike, seen from above. The bare skin of her legs glowed amber, picked out against the night by each passing streetlamp. Her green dress fluttered against the bike's metalwork, its movement increasingly frantic as the machine gathered speed. Droplets of water began to fill the air as rain came and they leant into a right-hand turn. The road straightened out but the bike kept on leaning and their bodies were tossed across the tarmac like dice. Limbs flung in odd directions, they made awkward shapes on the ground as the bike came to a halt on its side between them, dumb wheels spinning the air.

I felt the nerves of my healed leg wound pulse to the steady beat of my heart. A deep pain in my right shoulder welled up into consciousness. Intense, like heat, and hard to bear. I opened my eyes, shifted my body. I sat up and rubbed at the site of the pain. It didn't help. Embarrassed at failing this simple task I explained to the teacher that I'd not long ago had an accident and was 'experiencing some discomfort'. Not my words, a politician's words, the words of a leaflet in a doctor's surgery or stamped on the back of an ointment.

I didn't want to tell him. It is very dull to be a broken thing.

Three, four, knock at the door, said Wormtongue. The knock of pain is boring but insistent. Wormtongue and I decided to let it in as we listened to our teacher explain how trauma held by the body can be hidden by the mind.

This was something I was supposed to know about. At the time, my days were spent in the British Library where I sat in Humanities One obscured by

an enormous pile of books about hysteria. Three of these books were very old and filled with dozens of photographs of women's bodies, all supposedly misbehaving. They were taken at the Salpêtrière Hospital in nineteenth century Paris, where the women were patients or specimens, depending on how you looked at it. Some were twisted into strange poses, backs arched and fingers curled. Others looked completely ordinary, but their pictures were captioned with words like 'delirium', 'malingering', and 'melancholia'. From the safety of the reading room I read and read about the troubled history of this mystifying body language. I read about the invention of hysteria, the invention of psychoanalysis, the invention of trauma theory – pages and pages about bodies speaking dormant truths and the people (men) who tried to interpret them. It moved me, both emotionally and physically – when not reading, I walked. The irony was, I walked and read so much that I tuned the language of my own body right out.

Drinking had done that too – made my body language incomprehensible, or simply drowned it in other sounds, other sensations. Now, I understand that a body which keeps seeking danger and doesn't know why probably has something it's trying to say.

There's a common misunderstanding that addiction is about pleasure, that addicts are greedy, undisciplined people who don't have any willpower and want every desire indulged without question, like children. But the truth is that once it sets in, addiction is not about feeling good, it's about not feeling terrible. The pleasure found in the hit of one's substance of choice – be that whiskey, nicotine, cocaine, heroin or sugar – is not so much about what it adds, but what it takes away: an immediate curb of anxiety, depression, fear, exhaustion, regret. Boredom. It keeps one's feelings at bay, the great repression. For some, processes work just as well: sex, shopping, gambling,

food, lack of food, work, exercise, watching endless hours of television. Behaviours can bring their own highs, but the purpose of the high is not necessarily pleasure in the experience, it's everything the high blots out. One or two custard creams can be a gentle pick me up, but the whole packet eaten at once is likely to be doing something else. And when the high wears off, the addict is left depleted, in deficit rather than nourished by pleasure. And hot on their heels: shame.

Something as simple as counting my breaths in a room full of strangers, feeling the solidity of the floor beneath my body, made it possible to detect the notes that had been sounding unheard for months.

Stupid girl, said Wormtongue, as a fat tear rolled slowly down my left cheek, and came to rest at the corner of my mouth, a little hint of salt. *Stupid, stupid girl.*

Days later I went to see a man with a machine that would give me many little electric shocks. He was large, the machine was small but very powerful. He attached six electrode pads to the skin on my back and stood beside me as he turned the dial and sent intense pulses of sensation into my shoulder muscles. My body braced against the charge and I thought of the volcano and its subterranean rumbles. I thought of the hysterics at the Salpêtrière and the strange contraptions used to try and cure them. I counted my breathing, one, two, one, two, and felt the weight of the big wet dark city with all its emails and obligations pressing in around me, self-important and empty of meaning. Each time the current filled my body I entered a world of pure sensation where Wormtongue could not follow. It felt like coming up, the way heat rushes up and down the spine, the feeling that your organs are made entirely of jelly. The blue plastic massage table was cool beneath my

palms and felt good.

The volcano is not the point. If we go down into the root of the volcano what we find is the lava. The centre of the earth. The lava is there whether we see it or not, whether the volcano shows it to us or not, whether it erupts or not.

The large man with the electric shock machine asked me, where, exactly, is the source of your pain?



Octavia Bright is a writer and broadcaster. She co-hosts *Literary Friction*, the literary podcast and NTS Radio show, with Carrie Plitt. Recommended by the *New York Times*, *Guardian*, *BBC Culture*, *Electric Literature*, *Sunday Times* and others, it has run for ten years and since 2016 has had over 1.4 million downloads. She has also presented programmes for BBC R4 including *Open Book*, and hosts literary events for bookshops, publishers, and festivals – such as Cheltenham Literature Festival and events for The Southbank Centre. Her writing has been published in a number of magazines including the *White Review*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *ELLE*, *Wasafiri*, *Somesuch Stories*, and the *Sunday Times*, amongst others. She has a PhD from the Spanish department at UCL.

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This Ragged Grace tells the story of Octavia's journey to recovery from alcohol addiction, and the parallel story of her father's descent into Alzheimer's. Looking back over this time, each of the seven chapters explores the feelings and experiences of the corresponding year of recovery, tracing the shift in emotion and understanding that comes with the deepening connection to this new way of life. Over the course of this seven-year period, life continues to unfold. Paths are abandoned, people fall ill, waters get choppy, seemingly impossible things are navigated without the old fixes.

As Octavia moves between London, the island of Stromboli, New York, Cornwall and Margate, each place offers something new but ultimately always delivers the same message: that wherever you go, you take yourself with you.

01/06/2023

Hardback | 9781838857462 | £16.99

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