UNSHAME

healing trauma-based shame through psychotherapy

CAROLYN SPRING

author of *Recovery is my Best Revenge*

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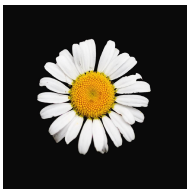

Unshame: healing trauma-based shame through psychotherapy

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3 Archers Court, Huntingdon, PE29 6XG, UK

www.carolynspring.com

To every human being who sits with another human being in their suffering and draws them into unshame.

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INTRODUCTION

Shame.
Everyone has it.
No-one wants to talk about it.
But the less we talk about it,
the more we have of it.
— Brené Brown

I talk about shame.

A lot.

In fact, here's a whole book about it.

This is the story of my journey through psychotherapy over nine and a half years, and my struggle from a place of unremitting, crippling shame to a place where nowadays I speak and write about my shame, without shame.

Shame tells you it's just you. That you're all alone. That you, uniquely in the universe, are irrevocably defective. This book will show you that you're not. And that it's not just you. It's, at the very least, me too.

Each chapter stands alone and so you can read them in any order: there's no clear-cut narrative, and there's not meant to be, because therapy sessions don't unfold according to such a plan. I write in the present tense of the increasingly distant past. These are not verbatim accounts—they're narratively true rather than historically true: these sessions didn't happen exactly as I present them, and yet, in essence, they absolutely did happen. Isn't that true of all autobiography?

It’s hard and it’s vulnerable to write like this. I’m opening myself up to be shamed: to cruelty, sniggers, and supercilious put-downs. I’ve had plenty already as my words have appeared on my website and via social media. I want to say that that’s okay. But it’s not. When did it become acceptable for us as a society to become so snarky and cynical, shaming everyone who dares to be vulnerable?

There’s nothing I can do to stop people shaming me. All I can do is not let them stop me doing what I do. That’s what I’ve discovered is the power of unshame: I’m not perfect or sorted; I’m not in such a state of numb imperviousness to rejection and hurt that people’s shaming doesn’t affect me. But I carry on regardless; I keep doing what I value; and I keep on being compassionate to myself, especially when I need it most.

So this isn’t a book by an expert on shame, who has it altogether. This is a book by someone who wrestles daily with shame, even now. My only qualification is that I’m willing to vulnerable.

Because my motivation is to help people—people like me whose lives have been ravaged by shame. If that’s you, I want you to know that you’re not alone, as shame suggests. I want you to know that you’re not fundamentally flawed, irrevocably defective, or unworthy of love and belonging. You are a precious human being whose birthright is to be accepted, just as it is mine. That’s what this book is about: not a sterile journey through theory and therapeutic interventions. But the story of how I experienced humble, compassionate humanity for the first time, and how, as the antidote to shame, empathy changed my life.

To shift shame, we have to change our state before we change our story. Shame affects us deeply, at a neurobiological level. It puts us into the red zone, the freeze response of trauma. And we get stuck there, because the purpose of shame is to be a brake on behaviours that would otherwise threaten our survival in the group. It’s hard to live life moving forwards when you’ve got the handbrake on.

But compassionate presence—the preverbal, indescribable and deeply primitive right-brain-to-right-brain regulation of one human being to another—is what I’ve found shifts our state. I didn’t journey from shame to unshame by being talked out of it. Instead, again and again and again and again, I experienced the activation of my green zone: the ventral vagal circuit of my social engagement system. Every time I wanted to run and hide and dissociate because of shame, there was the therapist, drawing me

back into green, regulating me with her deep, steady compassion, her empathy, her unwavering acceptance, despite all my shameful emotionality and trauma. This book captures a tiny glimpse of that. My regret is that I couldn't capture more, but how do you capture with words what is ineffable and wordless?

For me, shame manifested largely as a result of chronic and extreme childhood abuse—trauma too terrible to name. But whilst not everyone has experienced trauma, every single human being has experienced shame. And so how ironic it is that, when we are in shame, we think that we're the only one.

For me, the symptoms of shame and trauma resulted in a way of experiencing the world that is called dissociative identity disorder (DID), which I've written about more extensively in my first book, *Recovery is my best revenge*. Dissociation is a creative survival strategy that allows us to cope with trauma—and the shame inherent in trauma—by separating off from overwhelming experience. Shame is endemic to DID. In shame, we hide because we feel fundamentally unacceptable: what greater hiddenness is there than hiding even from yourself, and experiencing the world as altered states of consciousness, alter personalities, dissociated parts? The shame-based strategy of not being 'me', because I believe I am too shameful and unacceptable as 'me', underpins the nature of DID.

Shame nearly killed me: I made a number of suicide attempts because I could not bear to be me. But somehow—mainly as a result of the therapist in this book—I survived. And so in writing, I want to give thanks, not only to her, but to every therapist and every human being who offers hope and compassionate connection to those who need it. If someone hadn't believed in me, and believed in my inherent worth and value as a human being, I wouldn't be here to write these words.

Like her, many therapists and similar professionals give the inestimable gift of faith, hope and love to people like me: people who know the agony of living lonely amongst multitudes, always on the outside, never wanted, never good enough.

I've written this book so that people like me will know that they're not defective and flawed.

I've written this book so that people like me will know that they're not alone.

I’ve written this book so that people like me will know that they are enough.

Because I am enough.

This is my journey to ‘Unshame’.

Carolyn Spring

April 2019

1

THE START OF MY JOURNEY OUT OF SHAME

Shame. It's a familiar word and yet the more I think about it, the stranger it becomes. *What does it mean? Where does it come from? How does it go? What is the point of it? Why does it even exist?*

I'd never even considered it before therapy. It was just a run-of-the-mill emotion: one that I'd heard about, but never (so I thought) really experienced. I could grasp it at the level of 'embarrassment'—realising you've been wearing your top inside out all day—but beyond that I hadn't given it much thought. It was like hydrogen: all around me, part of my very being, and yet invisible and odourless. I had never paid it any attention whatsoever.

Part of the problem was that I didn't know how to do emotions *at all*. I could name a few, but I was unaware that I was so emotionally illiterate. Like not being able to speak Japanese, my deficit didn't occur to me except very occasionally. Not for one moment did I think I was a captive of shame: I lived in an invisible prison.

I sat in that very first therapy session, tense, awkward, feeling like I was playing a game of chess and conscious that I didn't know the rules. It felt like a dangerous game to be playing, but I didn't know why. My very existence seemed at stake.

Shame was there in the room from the very start, this 'thing' in the space between us, black but formless and empty, and ever-shifting. It held us apart, stopped us connecting, kept me away from her. It glued all over me like sticky, dripping tar. Everything about me felt wrong in that first

session, but I didn't know that was shame. I thought it was just the way it was, just the way it had always been, just the way it would always be.

Coming for therapy—looking for help, to change—is a strange thing to do when shame has shaped your life. Because what help is there?—*You don't deserve any.* What change can there be?—*Surely none when you are intrinsically defective.* Then why come?

Even here shame has a hand: I think I came to therapy, that very first time, to placate other people: those around me fed up with my breakdown, my broken-down way of relating, my mood swings and dissociation and profound suicidality. Shame, about who I was and how I was acting, was my primary motivation in seeking therapy. Not because I believed it would help—I was beyond repair, and undeserving of the help—but so that they would at least see that I was trying.

Now this woman sits here looking at me and I don't know how to be. I know that all of me, here, now and always, is wrong. I am filth. I am broken. I am a dirty, damaged, defective, sub-human. That is who I am. And I don't think it: it just is. It just always has been. *This is me. I am shame.*

She asks me why I've come, what I'm hoping to get out of counselling and dutifully I tell her what I think she wants to hear. Shame navigates a course for me along the downstream of acceptability. She asks me why I have come *now*, what has prompted it, and I tell her a little of my breakdown and she listens. But she *listens*. I've not known listening like it before and I feel like a layer of my skin has been peeled away and I start to worry that she's seeing me from the inside. I have the sense, and it steadily grows, that she's listening to more than my words. She's listening to *me*. It's like she's trying to find me, and pull me apart like Lego, to see how I'm made. She's listening to what I'm not saying. She's listening to my body. I feel utterly, and shamefully, naked.

I have to leave comes the panicked thought in my head, because it feels like she is on top of me and I need some space and I didn't think it would be like this and it's all too much. Panic in my throat and jiggling my left leg up and down, and to make things worse she glances down at it, watches it for a few seconds and then looks back at me with her head to one side, silently enquiring. *She's noticed*. I don't know why my leg is jiggling and I don't know what it means. I don't know why she's pointing it out with her eyes. I don't know what any of this means or how to be, or not be.

I feel *ashamed*.

Suddenly I can name it. Like it's just taken form, and it's welling up from within, a geyser ready to burst. Hot and flashing it comes from within me. *Shame*. *Shame*. *Shame*. I want the ground to open up and for me to fall into it and then the earth to cover me over, so that I can't be seen any more. So that I won't exist. So that I won't be this twisted, damaged, evil, rotten nastiness that is me.

I have just told her that I was abused as a child, and I'm getting these flashbacks and... *no, no, that's enough, don't tell her about what happens at night*. I don't think I've spoken it aloud in quite this way before and the shame scalds all over me but there's nothing in her face where there should be disgust. I look for the curl of the lip, the squinting of the eyes, the flaring of the nostrils—something to denote how she feels, but it's not there. I don't know what's there. I can't read it. She is inscrutable.

I feel ashamed that I can't tell what she's thinking of me.

There's a thump on the inside of me, drums in the deep, a cavernous, chilling emptiness and the shame just fills the space. *What am I doing here, sat with this woman, a woman that I don't know, a counsellor? What am I doing?* And there's something about her that makes me want to stay even though everything in me also wants to run. It's like my shame is a sonic boom and she's absorbing it like egg boxes and it's not echoing starkly back at me. This is a new experience. I don't understand it.

I am overrun with opposites. I want to leave and I want to stay. I want to tell her more, and already I've said too much. I want her to help me, and I know that she mustn't.

I feel like I ought to warn her: that in working with me she will be contaminated. And she will hate me. She will find me out as the fraud that I am. She will peer into the darkness of my soul and glimpse the horror of the badness that is me. She will smell my rankness.

So what is the point in starting work with her if all that lies ahead is rejection?

These are the thoughts that churn through me in the moments between words. *Why am I here? What am I doing? What do I say next?*

But that first meeting changed the course of my life. It was the start of nine and a half years of therapy with her. I saw other therapists too, but she was a constant.

Because ‘I can help you,’ she said, at the close of that first session. She was looking intently into my eyes, almost beyond them and into me. I was terrified but entranced. I had told her that I had been abused as a child—the most shameful, shocking thing I could ever imagine telling another human being—and she said, ‘I can help you.’ Just like that. Confident, but not brash. Quiet and calm and meaningful. And I believed her.

It was the moment that I first dared to hope.

Shame had told me that there was no hope: I was intrinsically defective. It was not about trauma (which I didn’t understand) or behaviours or choices. It wasn’t even about mental health or emotions or skills. For me at that time, my symptoms and my experiences were only and always a direct result of the badness that was me. I didn’t have any other way of framing it. I had had a breakdown because I was bad. I couldn’t cope because I was defective. I wanted to kill myself because it was the only way to be free of my ugliness.

I was puerile and pathetic and needy and wrong. I hated myself with unadulterated loathing. When I self-harmed, I was acting out the violence upon myself of sheer hatred: I seethed out my anger in scars.

But I never once called it all shame. I never thought it had a name. I thought my way of being—powerless, incapable, rejected, unloved—was as native to me as the colour of my eyes.

In that first session, I didn’t say, ‘I need help with shame’ because I didn’t know that shame was the problem. Shame told me that *I* was the problem. And then was the moment: ‘I can help you.’ And later: ‘I think we can work well together,’ with gentle, placid acceptance.

I was surprised that she had been weighing me up. I thought she took on clients like me out of pity. It dawned on me that she actually intended working with me, because she thought she could effect change. In *me*. Even in *me*.

Maybe she really can help me, I dared to think. I hadn’t bargained for this. Just go and meet with this woman you’ve been sent to for counselling, and be good, and say the right things, and don’t say the wrong things, and do as she says, and be polite, and try not to let her see who you really are... That had been my remit from myself.

I walked up the High Street afterwards. *I can help you.* It trilled in my ears. Somehow from her brain to mine had wafted a fluttering of hope. That

things could be different. *I can help you*. She spoke of change and possibilities and a different future. *I can help you.*

That was the start of my journey out of shame. I didn’t know it at the time. I had no idea that I was its prisoner. And it started with someone believing they could help me, and thus believing that I was worth helping at all.

2

THE SHAME OF DISSOCIATION

She enters the therapist's room and there is nothing but terror. Something has happened—she doesn't know what; the therapist doesn't know what—but here she is now: here and not here. In a thirty-something body, she looks child-like, fragile, vulnerable. The therapist feels the familiar thud of compassion on the inside of her, the almost-overwhelming need to protect and care and repair. Does she move towards her, take her hand, guide her to her chair? Or does she wait, encourage autonomy, let this scene play out? It's never an easy choice, nor an obvious one. She waits.

The woman's eyes flick around the floor. Her breath is caught up in her ribs, hardly exhaling. Her fists are clenched. Her shoulders shrug upwards around her neck, protectively. The agony of being is raw on her face. Terror and dread and shame and confusion. She shuffles slightly forwards. Everything seems strange. She's not sure where she is, what she is doing here. She knows this place, but only as if in a dream. She doesn't know it *now*. The ache of dissociation sits heavily in her.

'Come on in,' says the therapist softly, not daring to break the tension with too much volume. 'You look very scared.'

The meaning of the words won't register in her brain. She doesn't know what she is supposed to do. Nothing makes sense. She wants to run, but the familiar unfamiliarity of being here is also drawing her in: perhaps there will be safety here, perhaps there will be love. Perhaps there will be rescue. Perhaps there will be hope.

She doesn't dare to hope.

She stands stuck in the conflict between approach and avoid, wanting to run, wanting to stay. Her breathing jerks in and out as panic rises: the panic of not being able to choose what to do, the stuckness of this freeze, the fear of making the therapist cross, the fear of not doing the right thing. Thoughts crawl slowly, hardly at all, across her forehead. *I need to leave. I want to stay.* Nothing more than that. She is caught up within her own dissociativity.

'Come on then,' says the therapist again, even more gently, and reaches out to take her hand. Unwittingly, she flinches, pulling it away, curling her fingers tight into her palms. She doesn't want them to be hurt. The therapist holds the motion in mid-air, waiting, patient, understanding. This is a familiar pattern. She knows that what one part fears, another part craves. Eventually, a hand stretches out tentatively, not sure if it's allowed. She holds it lightly and guides the woman to her chair.

'What's happening?' the woman says, suddenly, as if opening her eyes for the very first time. She looks dazed and sheepish.

'It's okay,' says the therapist, settling back into her own chair, and letting out a silent breath of relief. 'You got triggered by something on the way in. You're here now.'

'I don't feel very here,' the woman says, and the shame of that washes over her, bleaching the life from her cheeks.

'No.'

The therapist watches her closely, weighing things up. What to do? Force some grounding, get the adult present, shake off what's just happened and go back to Plan A? Or Plan B: does this need exploring? Does someone need to come and talk and be heard? It is a weekly dilemma. She looks for clues in the woman's body language. She knows if she waits that one option or the other will play out. It is early days still in therapy. Sometimes they work on grounding into the present, so as not to reinforce the helplessness of being hijacked by other parts of the personality: it is important that the woman begins to develop self-leadership and an open-door approach to her parts, where she can choose and engage and collaborate. But she's not there yet. Parts come by force because if they didn't, they wouldn't come at all. Her self-loathing for being dissociative is still too high: she hates her parts, and wants to keep them out of mind. Gently, gently they progress.

The woman sits motionless, apart from flickerings on her face. Her frown, her eyes betray the battle going on in her, like several cars trying to park in the same space, and no-one is giving way. Minutes pass. The

therapist sits, trying to breathe normally, aware of her own stress, focusing on staying calm and attentive. She has to stay present to her client, not be overwhelmed by her own sense of inadequacy and fear. She's not going to get it 'right'. She can't be perfect. She can only be good enough. She breathes that out, like a mantra, soothing her anxiety. It will be okay.

Suddenly, dawn breaks: someone has taken control, and out come the words, like torrents of rainfall.

'We couldn't... when it... the... the... when the other ones... we couldn't... because the... every time when... if they... when the people come... all of it... we can't... and... we can't... but they... and they... we can't, we can't, we can't...'

Distress.

Pain.

Fear.

Shame.

It's like a thunderclap of agony in the room, all of it pouring out, none of it making sense. The woman—she is hardly a woman now, but has somehow become an inconsolable child—shifts uncontrollably in her seat as if being stabbed by knives, the pain of what she's trying to say, incomprehensible, broken, expressing itself through her body, her faltering voice, the raspy gulps of air that she's trying to suck into her lungs between words. Her body is shaking with unbearable emotion.

The therapist feels herself being activated: panic, pain, compassion, fear. She almost doesn't want to know what's coming. She doesn't want to make sense of what is being said, to fill in the gaps, to put herself back there with her client. It's an overpowering dread and every part of her wants to run. Should she ground? Get the woman back again, to end this discharge of pain? It would be easier. It would be less terrible. Pain is sitting like a smog between them. But *unshame* is in connection, so in connection is where she'll be.

She breathes, steadies herself. If the woman went through it, the least she can do it is sit with her. She chooses approach rather than avoid.

'Oh dear,' she says, and as the words come out she regrets how lame they sound, but she also knows that their tone carries the gravity of compassion. She just needs to make contact. It doesn't matter what she says. She just needs to *be with*.

The child-woman is intense now, rising to a frenzy, her body twisting, arching away from something that is happening again, right here, right now, even though it was there and even though it was then.

‘I’m here with you now,’ the therapist says, pushing warmth and presence into every word. ‘It’s not happening now.’ She doesn’t expect the words to penetrate, just for their tone to be a bridge for connection. ‘You’re safe here. I’m with you.’

More words, trying to stuff together a sense of it, to explain, to tell the story, to vomit out some horror-ful awfulness. ‘The people... when they... and I couldn’t... if it doesn’t... we couldn’t... all of them... they’re coming... he’s going to... mummy... but I didn’t want to...’

‘No, you didn’t want to.’ The therapist doesn’t know what it was the child-woman didn’t want to do, but it hardly matters. The point is, she shouldn’t have had to. A lancet of rage stabs the therapist in the chest. She feels it, senses it trying to take over her entire body, and breathes through it. This is the client’s trauma, not hers. She has to lean in to the client, but lean back from the trauma. She’s no good if she gets caught up in it herself. She has to mentalise, notice it, observe it, but not react to it. She breathes, and breathes, and deliberately relaxes the muscles in her tummy that have unconsciously gone tight.

The woman’s distress is unabating. Out bundles a broken narrative, of things too terrible to mention, of human rights atrocities that no person, let alone a child, should witness and suffer. The therapist pushes into it, against her instincts to defend herself from the knowing of it. It is painful to listen, painful to hear. It takes all the energy she has not to absent herself from it, to sit back, be critical, be dismissive, be unbelieving. She can’t not believe what she is hearing. The now-ness of it is too real, too immanent. This pain that she is witnessing could not be acted: it is subconscious, primal, and the body is telling its story. The woman’s skin is both flushed and pale; beads of sweat on her forehead; clammy cold hands; quivering legs; narrow pupils. This is physiologically true. And anyway, there is nothing to disbelieve: the narrative is too disjointed to make much sense. All that is clear is that the child-woman is remembering some horrendous trauma, of being forced against her will to do things which shattered her sense of self.

The words dry up, as if the child-woman is being strangled by her own emotion. Rage is coursing up through her, but rage—the therapist realises, sadly—at herself. Her arm flails around to beat herself with, or to inflict

pain in some way. The therapist reaches out to catch her hand, holds it gently, squeezes it tight. ‘You’re okay, I’m here, you’re safe now.’ All she can do is keep being with. All she can do is to keep being calm, like a parent soothing a baby.

Again, panic leaps through her: is this harming the client, to be reliving it like this? Possibly, but what is the alternative? She can’t shout at her to stop. She can’t walk off and refuse to engage until the client has calmed. Her words won’t register. Better to be with, she reasons—better to be present and attuned and show kindness and compassion and empathy and care, and to do her best to allow this emotional vomit to come, but to contain it. Because it’s here now; it’s happening. Theories from books don’t apply in this moment. All she can do is to stay present, and hold.

And maybe by doing that, she reasons, maybe at least she will transmit some new sense of safety, that the child-woman isn’t abandoned in this agony, that there is a witness to this untold story, that she has not had to face this pain alone. Because she knows that these flashbacks happen outside the therapy room too, when no-one is there to soothe or to help. They happen at night-time, and there is no-one to hold the flailing hand that would self-harm; there is no-one to reassure that it’s not happening now. So at the very least, maybe by doing that here, it will offer an alternative experience, one of soothing within the distress, rather than avoiding the distress altogether.

At least she hopes so. She doesn’t know. So much of this work is in the failing, the worrying, the not-knowing, the being unable to control what goes on. All she can control is herself, by breathing, by grounding, by staying present. All she can do is not feel ashamed of her own inadequacy. She resists—with difficulty—the urge to control the client, to make this agony stop. It’s not the client she wants to reject, but the awfulness of the trauma. She doesn’t have the luxury of dissociation: the therapist is feeling the full weight of this disclosure. She works hard to stay present. It’s all she can do.

Her soothing continues. Minutes pass, nearly an hour: a constant battle with panic that she’s not doing the right thing, that someone better than her should be conducting this therapy, that maybe she should refer on. But also a sense that this is all that can be done. And in between the sobs comes some moments of stillness, a more coherent narrative and state of mind. Gradually, breath by breath, the client begins to calm. Eventually she switches to another part.

‘That wasn’t very nice, was it?’ says this part, and the therapist is tempted to laugh because it’s so incongruous. ‘Not very nice’ is not how she’d describe it. But there’s a fresh, invigorating straightforwardness about this part, as if they’ve seen it all before and they’re not going to be fazed by it. The therapist wonders why this part has come, rather than the woman returning. Perhaps she’s not ready to yet. Yes, that seems to fit. She needs to be two doors removed from that trauma. This part has come to fill the gap.

They talk about what’s just happened. This part—who calls ‘himself’ Switch—is earnest and frank and connecting. He seems to have a bird’s eye view of the experience of the previous, distressed part. He pulls various aspects of the narrative together into a coherent whole, explaining it, with an aching sense of hurtful loneliness, but without the same obliterating distress. So they step back from it, talk about it, process some of it. Switch is able to draw on the relational support from the therapist to think it through in whole sentences, with occasional tears. It’s raw and ragged, but whereas the previous part was lost in their own distress, Switch is connected as if with a steel braid to the therapist.

They talk about how to bring the woman into the loop. She can’t stay on the outside, the therapist explains: this is her trauma too. Switch is thoughtful but anxious. ‘She won’t cope with it yet,’ he says, with an edge of panic. The therapist accepts this, but pushes again: ‘How can I help her be ready to cope with it?’

‘It’s not the badness of it,’ Switch says, at last. ‘It’s not the trauma.’

The therapist looks at him, surprised. The horrendous evil of it is what would make her want to not know. She prods at him with her eyes, enquiring.

‘It’s the shame,’ says Switch. He doesn’t make eye-contact; he never does. He fumbles over his words for a while, as if he fears being in trouble for revealing a secret. ‘She can’t cope with it because she’s so *ashamed* of it,’ he says, in almost a whisper.

How could anyone be ashamed of this? the therapist thinks. *It wasn’t her fault. She didn’t cause it. She’s a victim. That’s all. It’s not her shame.* She knows this, but every time it surprises her, because of the gap between how she sees the woman, and how the woman sees herself.

She picks her words carefully, like stealing money from a piggy bank. ‘So how can I help her feel less ashamed, so that we can process this trauma?’ she says.

Switch shrugs. Shame is normal. Shame just is. It's like a membrane surrounding the being. It doesn't seem as if life is possible without it. It is a protein structure around the soul: without it, we fear annihilation.

'She can know about the trauma a little bit,' he adds at last, 'but she can't know it *with you*. That's what's so shameful.'

The therapist nods. Whilst alien, this idea at least makes sense. Shame is a two-person emotion. But if she could process this trauma on her own, she would have done it by now. The shame will only metabolise in the presence of a catalyst: another person. The therapist, whose 'withness' is so shaming. It is Catch-22.

Suddenly, the therapist has a thought. 'But *you* don't feel too ashamed to talk about it with me,' she says.

Switch freezes, as if caught out, guilt creamed all over his face.

'I'm not real, though,' he says, nearly crying.

An eternity of sadness sits in the room between them.

'I understand that,' says the therapist, and it's all she can do not to cry. 'You can only cope with the shame by dissociating from it. You can only bear to connect with me by not being real. In a moment, when she comes back, she will deny your very existence.'

Switch nods glumly. But for once he feels understood.

Later, the therapist talks to the woman. She is frustrated that she has 'lost' almost her entire session.

'What do you remember from earlier?' the therapist asks.

The woman looks down at the floor. 'Nothing really. Not a lot. Not much.' She can't decide which phrase is most apt, because she knows that there are flashes of memory there, but she doesn't want to look at them. A nauseating sense of shame is keeping them at bay.

'You know, shame drives dissociation,' says the therapist softly, 'and the dissociation drives shame. They are both ways of surviving by disconnecting.'

I look up, curious. I had never seen them as connected before. I know that I feel terribly ashamed that I 'lose' chunks of my session like this, that I step back into myself and fall down a hole, like Alice in Wonderland, and reality ceases to be. I am ashamed that I need to do that. I am ashamed of not being able to stop it. And more than anything, I am ashamed that sometimes I don't *want* to stop it.

‘How do we fix it?’ I ask, because finding a solution is easier than facing it.

The therapist smiles and sighs. ‘We just keep doing what we’re doing. We keep connecting. And eventually, if I keep connecting with your parts, maybe I can be a bridge for you, for you to connect with your parts. And then you won’t need to feel ashamed of them any more.’

What a thought. What a strange, strange thought. Is it even possible to not be ashamed of your parts? Is it even possible not to be ashamed of *yourself*? Of being you?

But I look at the therapist and there she is, at home with herself, all comfy within her own skin. She knows she doesn’t have all the answers, but she isn’t ashamed of that. She knows she isn’t an expert, but she’s willing to learn. She can accept herself, flaws and all. So it’s possible, at least, for *other people* to accept themselves, I decide.

So why not me? Could I accept myself, my parts, and not be ashamed of them, not be ashamed of dissociation?

Why not me?

It’s the strangest of thoughts, but at least I’ve thought it now. *Why not me?* Indeed. Why not me?

3

THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY

‘Things aren’t getting any better,’ I whine miserably at the therapist. ‘If anything, they’re getting worse. I can’t sleep. I’m in constant pain. I’m up and down and all over the place. I can’t stay present. I can’t see a way forwards. I can’t stop the flashbacks. I can’t cope. I just... can’t... do it any more...’

My words puff into nothing like thin strands of smoke and I’m frustrated that I can’t communicate the depth of my despair. She’ll just nod slightly and say something that’s intended to be encouraging, and I’ll feel all the shame again of being so defective. I’ll feel the desperate, dank gloom of the week to come. With scrunched-up toes and jittery fingers, I’ll dread coming back next week, only to disappoint her again. I don’t know how much longer I can carry on being such a failure in therapy.

I ache with the bleakness of being me.

We sit quietly for several moments. I wonder, briefly, how she can bear to sit with me in such dismal despondency. And yet when she rebuffs my negativity with her asinine positivity, I feel disconnected and misunderstood. She can’t win. She can’t ever win.

She always takes her time before answering, but today the seconds stretch out like a rope bridge across a canyon and I begin to feel wobbly and faint. Eventually, I risk a glance at her. She’s watching me. Serious. Stern. Maybe a little bit sad, but I can’t tell. I just feel in trouble. Her look sears through me with shame and I bristle at it.

‘I’m so fed up of being me!’ I explode, albeit quietly. My words launch out towards her, like a challenge.

She tips her head slightly to one side, still looking at me.

‘Is this helping you?’ she says, at last.

Is what helping me?! I have no idea what she’s talking about. And I say so.

She pauses again, like she’s trying to bleed the tension out of me. Then carefully, like drops of vanilla into a cake, she says, ‘Is it helping you to be so negative?’

Ouch. My knees clench as if between tonic immobility and the reflex to run. Her disgust at me is pasted all over her face, her words contemptuous, brimful of mockery. *How she must hate me*, I think, in the tiny gap in my brain where words can still form. Mostly I feel winded and unable to move. I want to shrink back into myself.

Perhaps she catches my reaction and understands what is going on in me better than I do. Because the next thing I know she is leaning forwards, and there is warmth and colour and the hum of human connection. ‘Being negative is a great way to deal with unbearable feelings,’ she is saying. ‘Perhaps it would help if you could just notice what you’re doing here?’

I don’t know which way to turn. Does she hate me, or not? Does she think I’m pathetic, the epitome of failure, or is this a genuine insight? Is she trying to help me, or is this a trap to prove my worthlessness?

Inside, I feel like refracted light, a spectrum of different hues and responses. I genuinely don’t understand who and what she is. *Is she good? Is she bad? Is she for me? Is she against me?* The confusion grips my airways and I can’t suck enough air into me. I want to disappear.

‘What do you reckon?’ she says, drawing me back towards her, and at last her voice begins to melt my insides a little. ‘Does that resonate at all?’

Think, I tell myself. I’m trying to shake myself out of this terror. I’m so afraid of being rejected by her.

‘I don’t know,’ I say, just so that I’ve said something. ‘I don’t really understand.’

‘Okay,’ she says, kindly—*yes, definitely kindly. It might be okay. I don’t think she’s trying to hurt us.* ‘What I mean is that sometimes you seem to get stuck in a downward spiral of negative thing. You can’t see anything positive at all. You don’t have any hope that things will get better. It’s as if your entire attention is consumed with everything that’s bad, or might be. And I was wondering if you’d noticed that this is something that happens. Because I think it’s a trauma reaction. And I think it might be something

you do unconsciously to try to manage painful feelings. But the problem is that you then believe the negativity, and so it actually makes your experience even more painful.'

My brain feels twisted through ninety degrees. I need to snap it back again. I need things to be the same, not different. I need the world to be what I expect it to be. For the moment, her idea is too much.

'But things *are* bad!' I counter. Does she think that my negativity has no basis in reality? That really I'm having a lovely life, and just misinterpreting everything? There's a little fizzle of indignation on the inside of me. Again, I feel defensive: maybe this therapist, like so many others in the world, doesn't actually believe me. *I've just got the wrong end of the stick. I wasn't really abused. It wasn't all that bad. I just took it all the wrong way.*

I know at one level that this is the argument I use within myself to minimise the pain of trauma. But I am also, perversely, resistant to the therapist turning it against me.

'But I know things are bad!' she cries, surprised. Her head bobs backwards as if she's been jabbed on the chin. 'I don't doubt for one minute that life is extremely difficult for you,' she continues. 'That goes without saying.'

Does it?

But again the warmth in her voice.

'You have every right to be miserable, and negative,' she says. 'And I think to a large extent that it helps you.'

So what does she want me to do then? Carry on being negative? Or be positive? How can I get this right?

I shush myself. At last, my curiosity is beginning to rise.

'How does it help me?'

'You tell me?'

I push my thoughts together, like playdough into a ball. I squeeze my eyes shut to focus them.

'I'm negative... because then I'm safe,' I say at last. It takes great effort, but slowly the words are forming. 'Things *are* bad, and things *are* difficult,' I say. 'I really don't know how to cope. I really don't know if things will get any better. And often it feels like you don't believe me on that.'

She is about to say something, no doubt to contradict me, but instead beckons me on with her eyes. So I continue, halting, fearful, but intrigued

about what I will say next. My words seem to be laid out before me like a trail of breadcrumbs and I don't know where they will lead.

'It feels like I have to be negative, to go on about it, to get you to believe me,' I say. 'To get you to help me...' *Yes, this is it. This is what I need to say.* But there's more. 'It's so frustrating, because so often I *don't* feel like you believe me. I feel like you'll just tell me that it's okay really, that I'm fine, that I'm braver than I feel and smarter than I think... but I always want to tell you that things are way worse than you imagine. Because you're not there...'—my voice is beginning to rise—'... You're not there, in the night-times, when I can't sleep, when the pain is really bad, when I can't stop the flashbacks, when I just want to die...'

My voice is a vortex of agony.

She looks down, emotion—some emotion, but I don't know what—washing across her face. 'I know,' she says, and her voice is cracking slightly. Maybe she just needs to clear her throat. Or maybe she is genuinely moved. I don't know which. But, just for a moment, I feel understood.

'So it feels like, if I could just get you to understand how hard things are, I wouldn't have to be so negative...' I say. I don't want it to sound like an accusation. Instead, it's a plea.

She nods, intense and connected. I feel a surge of understanding.

'Okay,' she says, and I believe her. 'And how else does it make you feel safe?'

For a moment I don't understand her, and then I remember that she's echoing my words. *How does being negative help me feel safe?* My thought is constipated and dry. I push hard on it.

'Because...' I am struck by a sudden terror, as if it's the most dangerous thing in the world to speak, to reveal shameful secrets. 'Because.... because then I won't be disappointed,' I say. 'You're always talking about how much better things can be. How things can improve. How I can learn to manage my flashbacks, and my switching, and the body memories, and the pain. And I want to believe you. But it feels such a long way off... and I don't know if I can. I don't know if *I* can. I believe what you're saying, about developing skills to manage all these things, that I just need to learn how. But I don't know if *I* can. That's all. So if I'm negative... It's not just because I don't believe that things can get better... because actually sometimes I do...'

I know I’m getting tangled up in my own contradictions, but I press ahead, hoping for clarity.

‘It’s just that if I agree with you, that things can get better... If I’m positive...’—I twist myself from side to side, the agony of it contorting my body shape—‘... then what if it all goes wrong? Where’s the hope then? If I put all my eggs in one basket... if things don’t get better but I’ve believed they will...’

The sudden horror of hopelessness, of the fear I’ve been holding, ripples through me and I feel aghast, desperate, terrified.

She nods and moves towards me again. It’s like she’s holding onto me, pulling me back from the edge.

‘I get that,’ she says. ‘You’re afraid of not having any hope left at all. Whereas if you can keep a bit of hope in reserve, and not admit to it, then you’ve got a backup plan. So it feels safer not to admit to that hope, like having a secret savings account for a rainy day.’

Yes. Exactly that.

And suddenly more words come, like unblocking the loo.

‘If I’m positive, then you can take that away. You can mock me. You can tell me I’m being stupid. Because what right have I got to be positive about the future, when so many bad things have happened in the past? It feels safer to be negative. It feels more realistic. And if I’m positive, and it doesn’t work out, then you’ll pounce on me...’

She shifts in her seat, as if once more to contradict me, but holds herself. I press on. I don’t know what I’m going to say next, and I just need the words to birth themselves.

‘You’ll tell me how stupid I was for believing. Like as a child, when bad stuff was happening,’ I say, and pain rushes upon me like a blowtorch of emotion. ‘You hope, and you hope, and you hope that it’ll stop. You hope that things will get better. And they don’t. They don’t. *They just don’t.* They keep happening. The shit keeps happening. Night after night after night after night. And so you feel so stupid, for hoping. And it feels like that’s part of their power over you, that they get you to hope. It’s another way they hurt you. Because they’re abusing you, and then they stop and it’s over for that day, or for that night. They choose to stop. *They* choose to stop. And you can’t do a thing about it. You can’t say when it starts, and when it stops. All you have is your hope. And they crush it. Again and again and again... Because they keep coming back.’

The room has gone dark around me, and the therapist a long way away. It's raw and uncomfortable and a place of deep sorrow.

'So if you don't hope, they can't hurt you. You get used to it instead. You expect bad stuff to happen, because it always does. And then you're not caught out. You're not *stupid*...'—I spit this out with all the contempt it deserves—'... You're not lying there, a *stupid*, pathetic, defenceless little child stupidly—*stupidly*—hoping that it won't happen. Unprepared. Powerless. Instead, you're ready. You know that bad stuff is going to happen, and you're waiting for it. And that's what it feels like now...'—I'm angry and sore all at the same time and I don't know what to do with myself except to go blank in my head and pretend the therapist isn't here—'... when you want me to be positive. It doesn't feel safe. It feels like I won't be ready to deal with the bad stuff. It feels like you're asking me to let down my guard. It feels naive and simplistic and *stupid*...'—that word again—'... and it feels like you obviously don't get it, that you're willing to be so lazy and unready and offguard as to believe that the shit isn't coming...'

I am spent. The words sit poisonously between us, accusing her, accusing me, fizzing with their bitterness and rage, like fajitas spitting in a pan. I hold myself taut, ready for her to retaliate, or tell me off.

But we just sit. And the anger cools into sadness. She is breathing with me, matching me, dejected and disconsolate.

'Yes,' she says at last. Her voice is like buttercream icing. I want to sink into it. I don't know how, but I feel attuned to. I feel understood. I feel accepted. The rage ebbs within me. I have said it, and there are no recriminations.

'Yes,' she says again, full of astute sadness. 'You were right to be negative. You were right to prepare for the worst. You did the best thing you could to protect yourself. Being negative, expecting bad things, helped you back then. It was the best thing you could do at the time to survive.'

I twist uncomfortably on the inside. It doesn't feel right, not to be negative about being negative. But I feel validated. I want to find words again to tell her—again—how important it was that I didn't have hope. I want to tell her—again—how I couldn't bear to play their game of willing them to stop. I want to tell her about the long nights of watchfulness, the thudding of my heartbeat in the silence, watching through the grey-green light for the twisting of the doorknob, waiting for it to start. I want to tell

her of the battle within myself all those nights of not hoping. I want to tell her of the power of negativity. But I have no more words for now.

Tears come out of nowhere and dribble down my nose. I am disinclined to sniff them away so they fall wetly into my lap.

‘It was the most painful thing in the world to hope,’ I say at last, my words slipping through unmoving lips. ‘And it feels like the most painful thing *now* too...’

Heaviness and silence fall between us, like the air is humid with sadness.

‘I know,’ she says.

I’m expecting her now to pivot. I’m expecting her now to turn the negative into positive. I’m expecting the ‘that was then, but this is now...’ routine. But it doesn’t come. She just sits with me in the weight of this moment and I allow it to sink down, deep beneath my rage.

‘*I can’t afford to be positive*,’ I say. ‘It’s too risky. It’s the only thing I can control. To not hope. But I hate it too. I hate being negative.’ I don’t mean to be the one who pivots, but emotions have motion and something is stirring from the attunement of the moment and I know I’m not done yet. I need to finish this.

‘It feels powerful to be hopeless,’ I say, surprising myself. ‘It’s something I can control. *You’re* banging on all the time about

hope, about things getting better, but that’s *your* hope...’—I don’t mean to sound combative, and maybe my voice is too worn to show it—‘... and I need to find my own. I need it to be safe to hope. I need it to be something that no-one can take away. I need it to be my own choice. It can’t be imposed upon me. I can’t be positive because

I’m supposed to be, to be a good girl. I’ve got to be positive because it’s *true*.’

A long pause, then, ‘Is it true?’ she asks.

At last I feel space in my chest to breathe, and my lungs expand outwards along with my thoughts.

‘Maybe,’ I say, carefully. ‘Maybe. Because things *are* different now. Back then, I was a child, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about any of it. I couldn’t go and live anywhere else. I couldn’t even unlock the front door or run away. I couldn’t have survived on my own. Nowadays I’m an adult. I live in my own house. My abusers don’t live with me. I can lock the front door, and they can’t get in. If they tried to, I could phone the

police. I have allies. I have people who would help me. So I'm not entirely helpless, however much I feel I am.'

My curiosity is mounting. This insight is fresh, like morning dew.

'So the abuse isn't *inevitable*. It was, when I was a child. I was completely powerless to do anything about it. But it *has* stopped now, actually. It's been years since they abused me. I *am* safe.' I pause for a moment, and acknowledge this. It is an incredible thing. I know it's not true for everyone, for people who still live with their abusers. But it is true for me. And I need to honour that.

'So maybe it's safe to hope a little now,' I continue. My head tilts away to one side, as if I'm looking at the underbelly of this hope idea and I need to get a closer look. I feel oblivious, for the moment, to the presence of the therapist, and so safe to think out loud. 'And maybe, actually, I'd like to...' This idea feels a little daunting, but also compelling. 'Because...' I don't know if I can say this. 'Because... because...' I sigh. *Go for it.* 'Because I *hate* being so negative,' I admit, finally. 'I hate it. I hate how it makes me feel—morose and powerless. I hate how it makes me look. I hate how it narrows everything down into misery and helplessness. That's not who I want to be any more.'

A line from the *Barnum* musical floats bizarrely into my mind, a memory from adolescence. 'I want *rosy possibilities.*'

I want to allow myself to smile at the image of Michael Crawford as the showman, cheeky and humourful: the dreamer. It is an incongruous moment in my mind, and the therapist sits oblivious to this train of thought and the faint beam it is drawing on my lips. *Rosy possibilities.*

I shift myself in my chair, moving myself upright. I make myself conscious of her, and settle back into myself in the room. I look square at her.

'Negativity is powerful,' I say, shearing into her with direct eye contact. I won't let this point go. But I will also build on it. 'But so is positivity. I guess I need to decide which is most effective for me right now, to move forwards.'

She inhales deeply, like she's sniffing in this shift in my thinking, and then she nods.

'You don't need to let go of negativity,' she says. 'You can use it, if it helps you. Just be conscious of whether it is actually helping. And make that choice, rather than doing it as a habit.'

Yes. That’s it. It’s my *choice*. I am not the helpless victim of negativity or positivity, pushed around them, under their control. They are tools that I can use for my own purposes. I am the master, and they are my slaves. And right now, as the session draws to a close, hope shimmies softly in my bowels. I can be positive, if I want to be. But I can also hold onto the negativity, for when it’s needed. It’s not all or nothing. It’s the right tool for the job.

‘The power of negativity...’ I say, folding the idea into a tidy pocket in my mind, ‘is *my* power. I can use it if it helps. And I can also choose not to use it if it doesn’t help. I can *feel* negative, to protect myself and keep myself safe. But that doesn’t mean to say that things *are* negative, and will always be so... because things *are* different now. I’m not a child any more.’

‘No,’ says the therapist, unsmiling but happy. ‘No. You’re not. You have the power now.’

As I go to leave, a sudden panic grips me. I need to check things out again, just once more. ‘But things *are* really difficult for me,’ I say, not looking at her. The struggle of the upcoming week looms large over me and I need to acknowledge its shadow. ‘They don’t stop being difficult just because I choose not to be negative,’ I say.

‘I know,’ she says simply, and it is enough that she knows. She has heard me. She will help.

4

AM I TOO MUCH?

‘She said I was too much.’

There. I’ve said it. My shame is disclosed and I tighten reflexively, waiting for the words that will doom me to hopelessness: ‘Yes, you are too much.’

Instead the silence wafts gently between us, backwards and forwards, like a palm leaf.

It was a friend of mine just after university who first said it. I was having a bit of a breakdown—just a fun-size one rather than the maxi version I would have in my thirties. I had nowhere to live. I had no money or work. And things were unravelling around me. I spent an evening in this friend’s college room and at some point I started having flashbacks. Or dissociating. Or something. I didn’t have the words for it then. But I was back in a place of pain, and it was evidently difficult to watch. Afterwards she told me that she couldn’t cope with me, that she didn’t want to be friends with me, that I was ‘too much’.

At one level I understood it. She was an undergraduate studying politics. She had no knowledge or awareness of mental health issues. She wanted a friend to hang out with and do student-based stuff with. She hadn’t signed up to witness *that*. She didn’t know how to handle it, so not surprisingly her reaction was flight. Maybe she wasn’t proud of herself for it. Maybe she later regretted it. But I took it personally, and failed to mentalise all the myriad reasons for her saying what she was saying. I took it to be self-evident truth.

I am too much for people.

The silence sits drably between me and the therapist, now, as these words seep through the air. I feel terror and shame. I am afraid, not only that I am too much, but that by saying I am too much, I am being too much. I want to reach out and take my words back, to swallow them down, and never speak of it again.

I have been coming for therapy for half a year. The therapist has recently announced a break: she is going on sabbatical for a few months. I can only assume that this is because I am too much.

I am always too much for people.

I don't know why I've brought it up in this particular session. Maybe somewhere deep on the inside I needed to vocalise my belief that I have caused the break, by being too much; that I therefore fear that she will not return, because I am too much; and that no-one will ever help me again in the future, because I am too much. I feel my only potential strategy, in seeking help, is to mislead: I mustn't tell anyone how bad things are, how extensive the abuse, how far-reaching the dissociation, how terrible the nightmares, how profound the despair. Because if I do, they won't want to work with me, because I will be too much.

I want to ask her how I stop being too much, so that I can get the help I need for being too much. But I daren't say it, in case it's too much.

So the silence thickens, like stirring sauce.

Eventually, the therapist speaks. She bobs in slightly towards me, like she's ducking under the surface of an invisible pond, and her eyes narrow.

'Do you think you were too much for her at that time, or do you think that you're always too much for everyone?'

Disappointment pools in my gut. I wanted her to say, *But you're not too much!* I wanted the easy way out, of facile reassurance. I wanted her to make me feel better, not push me deeper into the pain. *Ugh*.

I force my mind onto the question. Of course I'm too much for everyone. It is who I am. It is intrinsic to me. I am a builder's bag of neediness and no-one will ever be able to fill it. I am doomed to neediness and unrequited love and so I will always feel ashamed of who and what I am.

And so comes the feeling, surfacing up through me, of utter self-contempt. I hate being me. I hate being too much for people. I hate being needy. I am *wrong, wrong, wrong* and there's no way to be right.

I drop my gaze as the shame rises hotly through me. I don't want her to see me. I want to withdraw my request for help and connection. I want to make sure that right here, right now, in this session, I'm not too much. Her impending absence hangs above me like Damocles' sword. If I am too much, she won't come back.

But.

And here is where I'm stuck. If I don't engage with her now, if I don't make the most of the session, if I don't do what clients are supposed to do in therapy and think things through and be open and vulnerable and honest and real, then she won't come back either. I need to express my need without being needy. I need to talk about how I feel without vomiting those feelings over her. I need to get it right. I need to get it right *now*.

'I don't think people know how to cope with me, and I understand that,' I say, but the words sound like a lawyer-approved press release.

And indeed, she frowns. Only slightly, but I sense it. Or I imagine it—I'm not sure which. Because I'm not looking at her, and I can't look at her, and suddenly all that I can think about is whether this is our last session and whether I'm going to blow it and whether I'm too much even for a professional whom I'm paying.

I'm too much. Stop being too much.

This therapist is a trainee still. That helps, because maybe she won't realise that I'm too much: she won't have a long history of other clients against which to judge me. But maybe her inexperience will make her particularly prone to being overwhelmed by me. So I need to convince her that I'm not too much. That if she feels that I am, then that is her inexperience talking, and she's seeing me in order to build up her experience, and so she needs to push through. Yes, that's the plan. I need her to keep giving me a chance. But to do so, I need to tune down my neediness. I need to not be too much.

But what if I'm being too much by trying too hard not to be too much?

I sit in my own tangle of impossibilities.

The leaves on the tree outside the window are rustling. It is gloomy in here, as if what happens in here is so shameful that it blocks out the daylight. And in coming here, I always have the sense, winding down the endless corridor to find this last, tucked-away room, that the only acceptable way for me to be here is if I am as far removed from other occupants of the building as possible.

She exhales noisily, but only because the silence is so loud.

‘You know, you’re not too much *here*,’ she says.

Is this a trick? Why is she saying this?

I sit, frozen and unalert, as if by stillness and shut-down I can evade the paradox of what she is saying. I have always been too much—for everyone—and so her words impact on the surface of my mind as lies, as deceits, as mistakes, as trainee’s naiveties. And I can’t think what to say, so I stare back at her emptily, willing her to do something or say something or be something that will shift me out of my stuckness.

And even as I sit there, I fear that I am being too much. I want to wriggle out of the shameful, mortifying awkwardness of being me.

‘I think that’s probably hard for you to believe, isn’t it?’ she says at last. She’s bobbing in towards me again, like she’s trying to reach me across the puddle of my self-contempt. I don’t know how she manages to be aloof and immanent all at the same time. There’s a quality about her, that she manages neither to sink into my pit with me, but nor does she sit distantly on the outside of it, calling patronisingly into it.

I desperately, desperately don’t want to be too much for her.

I still don’t know what to say, and I don’t mean to stretch out the silence, but words simply won’t come. I’m stuck in the guilty impossibility of who and what I am and I have no idea what I could possibly say in response to any of her questions. I want to speak, but there is just white space in my brain where words should be. I semaphore to her instead with my eyes.

She shifts in her chair. ‘Let’s approach this a different way,’ she says, and her voice is like the gentle lapping of waves, like she’s trying to coax me out of my puddle. ‘Tell me what it feels like to be too much for people.’

Oh, now there are words. Now the words won’t stop. I could tell her this for three months straight, without drawing breath.

And I’m not sure where the emotion comes from, but here it is, breaking upon me like surf onto rocks. It is a subtle shift within me, but the youngness of my heartache surfaces and I watch myself, as from a distance, as if I’m not really me, and as if I have no control over my words, which gurgle out, falling over one another in their eagerness to be heard.

‘I’ve always been too much for people,’ I say—or rather this other part of me does. ‘I’ve always been too much. People have never liked me, or wanted me. I have to be quiet, and not say anything, and not do anything,

and not be anything, and not exist, and that's the only way that it's okay for me to be me. I'm wrong if I have feelings. I'm wrong if I get upset. There's all this stuff—the trauma, the abuse, the stuff that happened to me—and it's messed my life up, but I mustn't tell anyone or talk about it or refer to it or be affected by it, because it's too much. No one wants to hear it. No one wants to know about it. No one wants to feel it. So I have to hide it and hide it, and I have to push it away deep down within myself, so that no one can see. But it doesn't go away and it doesn't stop affecting me and it's all too much—it's all too much, even for me.'

The flood of words won't stop. I can do nothing about it.

'When I went for counselling at university, the man there said it was too much and we just had to concentrate on me learning to count to ten. But counting to ten didn't stop it. That didn't solve it. It didn't make any of it go away. I didn't understand why he thought that it would. I think he was overwhelmed by it, and that was just a tiny bit of it back then. So he always said, I just had to count to ten. But I could count to ten thousand and it would still be there. It's not as easy as that. I didn't understand why he wouldn't let me talk about it... I didn't understand why it was too much even for him...'

The words are mangled and mashed together with sobs and panic and labile, wretched self-hatred, and I watch this unfold, sitting at a distance, empty and silent and ever so slightly horrified. This is what they call co-consciousness, but I don't understand it. I don't understand who 'I' am right now. I just feel dreadfully ashamed of this word-full, feeling-full, terror-full person sitting there with the therapist, crying and talking, and being *too much*.

As the words ebb away, I feel myself slightly more present, but I'm mortified and afraid. This is exactly what I promised myself I wouldn't do in therapy. And here I am, doing it again. If I'm being too much, if she doesn't come back from her break, I'll only have myself to blame.

But she speaks and her face is wrinkled all over with concern and kindness and empathy. I don't understand it, but it is.

'Often when people feel that they are 'too much', it's because that's how they were treated by their very first caregivers,' she says, measuring out her words carefully 'And that's often because that primary caregiver can't cope with emotion and closeness. It comes across in their attachment style and what's called insecure-avoidant attachment. But the child—the

baby, the infant—gets the message that they are wrong for having feelings and for wanting to be close. They don't see that it's a problem that the adult has, rather than them. They just know that if they express their emotions or their needs, they don't get a positive response. So they learn that the only way to keep that person close is to suppress their feelings. They grow up believing that it's wrong for them to have feelings, and that if they express them, they are 'too much'.'

Yes. Yes. This is it. How does she know?

She looks at me, perhaps trying to see if I'm following her, if it resonates. I feel both horrified and relieved that she understands.

'And so,' she continues, 'you end up believing that the problem is in *you*, rather than in your mother. You assume your feelings are wrong, and that your needs are evil. It's difficult, maybe impossible, for a child to mentalise and understand that the problem is not with them. They just assume it is. And so with everyone else you encounter in life, you work on the basis that it's safer not to have needs and express your feelings, in case you're rejected, like you were by your mother.

'The sense you made of your mother's inability to cope with feelings—her feelings, your feelings, any feelings—was that there was something wrong with *you* having feelings, and that your feelings were too much. But that said more about your mother than it did about you.'

I nod, trying to take it in. It feels wrong, because it is new. It feels scary, because it changes everything, and I'm not sure I'm ready for everything to change. Not just yet. But I also want it to be true. I want it to be true that I am not too much for everyone.

'But,' I say, suddenly, as another thought hits me, '… but my stuff *is* too much. All the abuse, the trauma, the dissociation, the triggers, the flashbacks... it IS too much for people. It's not just me thinking it's too much for them because my mother couldn't cope with feelings. It really is too much.'

She nods and unwraps her fingers from where she's holding them with her other hand, like she's applying hand cream, then wraps them up again.

'It's true that you do have more than most people to deal with,' she says. 'And I can understand why your friend at university couldn't handle it. But you are not too much. The trauma you experienced is too much. There's a difference.'

But the trauma is mine, I think. *Blaming my neediness on the trauma doesn't stop me being needy.* But I don't say this, because I don't want her to think I'm disagreeing with her.

She looks at me intently, like she's trying to read my thoughts, and deliberately I mask them and try to be good.

'So there are two things going on here,' she continues, in the absence of my engagement. 'You believe, by default, that you're too much, that no-one can handle you and no-one will want to know about your 'stuff'.'

Yes. Obviously.

'And then you do also have a lot of trauma to deal with, which most people would in fact find too overwhelming. They wouldn't know how to help, and they wouldn't know how to handle it. And although that's painful for you, it's understandable. We can't expect the whole world to be able to deal with trauma, even though we'd like them to. But that's why you're here.'

She pauses, and I catch a glimpse of her face as I stare out towards the tree. It's not angry. It's not despising. It's not rejecting. It is soft, even compassionate. It echoes her words. It says, *You're not too much here.*

Can I dare to believe this?

All my life, I have believed that I am too much. All my life, I have despised my neediness. All my life, I have been scared of having feelings. I have never understood how to relate to people. I have never understood what it means to reach out to people in need, and have that need responded to. And this, always, has been the source of my shame: a need expressed that goes unmet.

But here I am, in therapy, expressing a need—the need not to be needy—and it is being heard and held. I am not being shamed. I am not being told I am wrong. I am instead being given an explanatory framework which shifts the blame away from my intrinsic badness and onto the inadequacy of the parenting I received as a child.

Just for a moment I become acutely aware of her words—penetrating my left brain, logical and rational—alongside her presence. Her warmth, her here-ness, the look of softness in her eyes, long fingers gently holding themselves in a ball between us: the indescribable connection of another human being rubbing itself like oil over my right brain. And I realise that her words would have no power without her presence.

I sigh, and a little tension escapes me. I sag into her acceptance. I can't quite believe yet that I'm not too much, but I have truly never seen it from the viewpoint that she is now presenting.

'So how do I get what I need from people without overwhelming them?' I say at last. Because this to me has been my eternal conundrum. Hold myself at a distance, closed and hidden, and people find me aloof and unfriendly. Let people in, disclose the secret shame of my traumatic background, and my neediness crushes people with its weight and intensity.

She chews on her thoughts for a while before responding. Then carefully, she says: 'Your trauma 'need', if that's what we can call it, is high right now. You've only just begun to process it. But it won't always be like this. Over time, the work we do together will let the pressure out. So your need won't be so great. You won't be like this forever.'

The work we do together... she's planning on coming back. I can't focus on the rest of what she's saying because this phrase has clapped upon my consciousness in giddy relief.

'And different people can cope with different levels of need,' she continues. 'Here, in therapy, is the right place to process trauma. With the milkman, you just exchange pleasantries. He doesn't need to know.'

I snap back into what she's saying. 'What about with friends?'

She chews her lip a little. 'It depends,' she says. 'You have to weigh that one up. Friendship is not therapy. The weight of processing trauma can crush a friendship because the trauma is too big, not because the friend isn't good enough. As therapists, we have training to help us manage the weight of it. We have boundaries. We have supervision and support.'

I feel ashamed that my trauma could crush someone, but I know that she's right. And, at least in some small part of my brain, I also know that it's not my fault.

'When we've reduced some of the pressure of trauma, your friends will be able to cope with it better,' she says. 'What you really want is for your friends to be friends with *you*, not friends with your trauma. Your trauma is part of what happened to you, and it affects how you react to things in the here-and-now. But your trauma isn't *you*.'

The reality of this dawns gradually upon me. I have always seen the entirety of my life, since my breakdown, through the lens of my trauma. It has overwhelmed my vision. Going to the cinema or out for drinks with friends has been an issue of my trauma, rather than an issue of friendship

and having a nice time. I have felt that by not talking about it, I am hiding it and being deceptive. But of course, I am not. I am merely adapting to the social situation I am in. My friendships don't have to be mediated through the variable of trauma.

I lean forwards slightly in my chair. My shame is subsiding. She is saying that it is okay for me to have needs, even if people can't cope with them. And she is saying that my needs are okay, in all their hideous, ugly excess, *here,* with her.

'I'm not too much?' I ask, curling up slightly in the conflict between hope and dread.

'You're not too much,' she says, pink-cheeked and earnest, like she is swearing an oath. 'Your trauma was too much... too much *for you*, which is why we call it trauma. And so unsurprisingly, it is often too much for other people. But that's not your fault. That's the fault, only and always, of the people who traumatised you.' She pauses, and the air sings with expectation.

'If people say you are too much,' she continues, 'then don't take that personally. Maybe the trauma is too much for them. Maybe they don't have any capacity for anyone other than themselves right now, because of what's going on in their own lives. But don't just assume that *you* are too much.'

I am not too much.

The shame of being too much is too entrenched within the foundations of my self-beliefs for me to shed it in this one session. But it is a start. *I am not too much*. I will have to think about this. I will have to let it soak deeply into my roots. I will have to lie awake with it at night and observe it from all angles. It is too new an idea for me to simply accept it. But it is a start. Like everything I face in therapy, it starts with a start.

I am not too much.

5

LEARNING MINDFULNESS

‘Have you tried mindfulness meditation?’

The therapist is asking the question without humour or irony and yet I laugh explosively in response. I imagine a cross-legged hippy and am only vaguely aware of my stereotyping. I really do think that is what she means.

‘Not my kind of thing,’ I say curtly, suddenly realising that she is being serious.

‘Mmmm.’

And then there is silence between us. It becomes uncomfortable. In normal conversation, we would turn to something else. ‘Did you see *The Apprentice* last night?’ But this isn’t normal conversation. This is therapy. There’s a reason for this silence, although at this moment I can’t fathom it. It starts to itch. I want to make eye contact, and at the same time I have an urge to run away.

Eventually I give in.

‘How would it help?’ I ask, realising that she’s been waiting a long time to suggest this.

She pauses as if to assess my seriousness. Will I continue to be flippant, and if so why?

’A lot of people think it’s effective in reducing the symptoms of trauma,’ she says carefully, picking each word as if from a slow-moving conveyor belt.

I’m not sure why I feel so resistant on the inside. Perhaps I’m just scared, because it’s new, and new things are scary, and so by default I avoid

them. Perhaps I'm just being adolescent, rebelling simply because she's suggesting it and it's my kick-back against her power.

'Isn't it dangerous for people who dissociate?' I ask and I'm being half-serious with the question, because I read it somewhere.

She exhales. I feel like she senses my ambivalence, of fear plus bloody-mindedness. 'Like most things it depends how you go about it,' she says, but then doesn't expound and I succeed in switching tracks.

'I tried it,' I announce at the beginning of the following session, a little more loudly than I intended. As the words sit in the air between us I realise that they sound provocative. My unspoken message: 'I tried it and it didn't work. So now you can drop it. You were wrong.'

'Mmmm?'

She's so inscrutable. I feel sudden panic because I struggle at the best of times to read others' thoughts and intentions, and right now I have absolutely no idea what that sound means.

So I stare back at her, defiant within myself, because I feel scared and lost and I'm being triggered into fight. Panic is stretching up within my gullet to gag me.

'I couldn't do it,' I admit. *There, I've said it. Now can we change the subject?*

'Mmmm?'

What I always forget, with this therapist, is that everything—literally everything—is grist for the mill. She feeds on scraps. And she never fails to uncover the reactions, the overreactions, the underrreactions, the non-reactions, that trauma evokes in me.

Trauma therapy doesn't involve talking endlessly about 'what happened'. For me, in this period at least of the work, it involves talking endlessly about the imprint trauma has left on my automatic reactions. It's about noticing them, drawing attention to them, being curious about them, and seeing if these reactions are still helping me or if they get in the way. It's both liberating and intensely annoying. Because the muddy footprints of trauma are *everywhere*.

I remind myself that the therapist is not the enemy. She's here to help me. I stop fighting her.

'It terrified me,' I say, and then the words dry up again.

'Say more?'

‘All I had to do was focus on my breath—in, out—and I couldn’t do it.’ Suddenly I feel overwhelmed at how far I still have to go to be free of trauma. ‘I should be able to *breathe*. It shouldn’t be that difficult.’

‘But it’s not about just breathing, is it? You do that all the time. It’s about *noticing* your breath—bringing your attention to it.’

‘Yes, but why is that so hard? Why can’t I do it?’

‘What do you think?’

I really have no idea. And I haven’t actually stopped to think why. This is why therapy is so helpful—because it provides the space, and the imperative, both to ask these questions and to stop long enough to answer them.

Suddenly I see it. ‘I don’t know where my body is,’ I explain. ‘So focusing attention on it is hard. I’ve trained myself, all my life, *not* to notice my body, *not* to pay attention to it. That’s normal when you’re being abused, isn’t it?’

‘Not just normal, but smart too. Adaptive.’

‘So maybe that part of my brain just doesn’t work very well. Maybe it’s underdeveloped.’

‘Maybe it is.’

I come back several weeks later. This one insight poked alive my curiosity. I still couldn’t engage, but at least I was edging up to it. I started to read about it. As always, with me, intellect first: I’ll engage once I understand.

‘I’ve been reading about mindfulness,’ I say and I detect a wry smile at the corner of her lips.

‘It’s my insula,’ I announce and the therapist looks blank but invites me to explain.

‘It’s a part of the brain. It operates a bit like an internal CCTV system. It relays images and data from the body up to the brain. It tells the brain, basically, what’s going on in the body. Abuse survivors often have an underdeveloped insula. In brain scans, it even appears smaller than people who haven’t been abused.’

‘Mmmm?’

‘It doesn’t make sense to receive data and images from your body when you’re being abused. It makes more sense to switch off your internal CCTV, to shield yourself from what’s going on. So our insula doesn’t develop properly. Hence we don’t know where our body is, or we have out-of-body

experiences. It's what makes us feel that we're 'dead': the lack of emotion, the sense of nothingness and disconnect.'

'How do you turn it back on again?' she asks, and I think she's genuinely interested. Brain science doesn't normally excite her.

'Through mindfulness meditation,' I say, a bit too keenly, and immediately I regret showing my feelings.

'Even after just six weeks of mindfulness meditation, one study showed that the insula was thicker.' I'm quoting Daniel Siegel, one of my new heroes. 'And with a better functioning insula, you have a better sense of what's going on in your body. And as well...'—my excitement is increasing and I'm not even trying to hide it—'... it improves your empathy. You can see what's going on inside yourself, and you can see what's going on inside others.'

I'm triumphant. I've forgotten, for a moment, that all I've done is read about the insula. I've done nothing yet to improve its functioning.

'Sounds like you'd better give mindfulness another go then.'

Ah yes. That.

I come back to it the following month. In the meantime, we've covered a lot of ground in our sessions, with no time to discuss it. But for several weeks I've been practising with an app called Headspace. It takes all the whooshy-whooshy geekery out of it. It's just *normal*.

Every morning I meditate. Twenty minutes of breathing deep into my belly, sucking the fullness of the air into my body then blowing it out like I'm squeezing the air through a straw. A million times my mind is distracted. A million times I draw it back to the sound of air in my lungs. *In, out. In, out.* Slowly, deeply, gladly.

It's hard work. To start with, I am like a ferret on a fire. My mind dances everywhere. *What I need to do today. What happened last night. Pins and needles in my foot. A memory of school. The house I walked by yesterday. What I need to order from Amazon.*

Back to my breath. *In, out.* The sound. It's all I can focus on. I try to feel the air expanding my chest, but it's only the sound I can concentrate on. The neighbour slamming a car door. *In, out.* Did I put my phone on to charge? *In, out.*

I fail and fail and fail again. But it doesn't matter. *In, out.*

At the end of twenty minutes, there's a deep stillness. I don't know where it came from. The ferret has gone to sleep. The fire has gone out. I

feel like my insides have been wiped out with a clean cloth. I failed and failed for twenty minutes but in the end I succeeded, simply because I didn't quit.

The calmness calms me. I don't want to stop. The day is reaching for me, trying to shake me into action, but now I'm here I want to linger a moment more. It's a good feeling. I feel clear and steady. There's an undercurrent fizzling through me: fuel for the day. Just a moment more. *In, out.* There's the relief, too, that it's over, that I don't have to focus any more. *In, out.* Just one more. And stop.

But before this, I have a dozen false-starts. The stillness evokes panic. The focus on my breath leaves me derealised. My smoke alarm sounds because it's not safe to close my eyes. I can't locate my breath. I can't feel my body. The torrent of self-doubt in my head. The smacking, cynical, distasteful self-hatred that I can't go more than three seconds without losing focus. I fail and fail and fail.

'How's it going?' the therapist asks, in the middle of my learning, and I tighten, because she has found me out. She knows I'm useless. She knows I'll never be any good at it.

I shrug. 'Okay.'

'What are you struggling with?'

I don't want to admit to it. Because it shouldn't be this difficult. *All I'm doing is breathing and counting,* I tell myself. *What's so hard about that?!*

I jiggle my head slightly from side to side, because part of me wants to tell her, and another part doesn't. It's like throwing a coin and seeing which side lands up.

'It's okay. But it's not. I can't do it. But I'm trying. I get distracted too easily. I'm getting better though. I can't even sit still for ten seconds. I'm better than I was. It's really hard and I don't know how to keep my focus on my breath. Everyone says the same to start with. I'm no good at it.'

I *harrumph* at my conflict. Suddenly, in this moment, is a shaft of grief piercing through me, a sharp glimpse into my brokenness. It shouldn't be this hard to focus on my breath for a few seconds, but it *is* this hard, and this too is the legacy of trauma. I wish I were not so defective, so damaged. I wish myself different. I wish for effortless success. I wish for the ideal that no-one is. And self-loathing washes through me like bleach, sterilising all emotion. Utterly, and totally, I hate myself.

‘You’re doing well,’ she says, and I assume she has heard the scream in my head of self-fury and is trying to reassure me.

‘But it shouldn’t be this hard!’ I whine. ‘Sometimes, I sit down to do it, and I panic. Sometimes I drift off. Sometimes I switch. I know the theory, that mindfulness will help. But it’s not helping *yet*. And I don’t know if it ever will. Maybe it helps other people. But maybe it won’t help *me*.’

A long droop of empathic silence.

‘You’re not unique,’ she says softly. ‘You’re ‘other people’ too. What works for other people will work for you. It just hasn’t worked *yet*. You explained to me the brain science yourself. Just stick with it. Don’t give up. Have some confidence in yourself, that you *can* learn, and that you *will* learn. And just keep going. That’s the difference between success and failure: *just keep going*.’

Her words sit like tissue paper on my feelings, crinkly but light and protective. I needed to hear that.

‘I know,’ I say, and the tension starts to slough off me.

I go home and try again. And the next day and the day after. Each day, all week.

‘I’ve realised what the problem is,’ I say before I’ve even sat down in my next session. She’s not quite ready for me and it helps to have the courage to say it, while she’s still off-guard. ‘It’s not doing the mindfulness and finding it difficult that’s the problem,’ I say. ‘It’s me beating myself up for it when I fail. It’s me expecting to fail. It’s me feeling damaged and defective. It’s me being afraid to try something new. It’s my impatience with myself. It’s the way that in that silence all my feelings come out of hiding. It’s the way it’s diametrically opposed to dissociation. Because being present—really being present, focusing and noticing and observing what’s going on in me—is the direct opposite of dissociating.’

She’s caught up with me and her eyes laser into my head.

‘It’s good,’ I say, unironically. ‘Mindfulness is a skill. I’ve never had the chance to learn it before, so of course I’m rubbish at it. Instead, all my life, I’ve practised the opposite skill, of dissociating... That’s a tough habit to undo. But it’s the right thing to do. It’s the way forwards.’

She nods, surprised and pleased and curious.

‘I can’t be good at something I’m not good at, without effort. I need to put the effort in. I’m good at dissociating. That’s the skill I needed as a child to survive. But I need other skills now, to thrive. I need to *live*, not just

not die. I need a brain that's able to be present in the here and now. So I've got to put the effort in.'

I can see she's both trying to remain neutral and also wanting to break out in applause.

'Is it still hard?' she asks and I know she's trying to keep me balanced, to stop me going all gung-ho on my new-found confidence and then fall flat.

'Yes.' And I want to tell her that some mornings, even the thought of meditating makes me want to panic. Sometimes it fills me with nausea. Sometimes I can't stay present long enough even to start.

'It's like a mental space, like the living room of my head,' I explain, 'and I'm used to dissociating when I'm in it. Like turning the telly on. And I'm trying to train myself instead to read. But it's this automatic thing I do, when I walk into the room, to grab the remote. My brain defaults to dissociation, to drifting away from the here-and-now. It's an effort to stop it.'

'It's a habit that has served you well. It helped you survive.'

'Yes.' And a new thought occurs to me. 'So letting go of it, stopping doing it—it feels sometimes like I might die.'

'Mmmm.' I think it's a new thought to her too.

'That's the resistance I felt to it. Taking control of your mind, telling it what to focus on, directing it, bossing it... it doesn't feel right. It feels alien. I'm so used to my mind going off and doing its own thing. I'm used to not being able to control it. It's strange...'

I trail off, because I have a sudden pang of wishing that she really understood, and knowing that she doesn't. But she is with me, and she is trying, and I decide that that is enough.

'It's a new experience for you...'

I hate the way that therapy is full of new experiences. And I love it too. I'm learning, but the learning involves lots of failing. And the learning shows me what I've failed to learn, what I missed out on. I shouldn't have had to learn dissociation as a habit in the first place. I certainly shouldn't have to be putting so much effort into unlearning it, and replacing it with 'presence'.

'But it is what it is,' I say, echoing back to the therapist her favourite phrase. And then it occurs to me, like a shock of cold water. 'And that's mindfulness too,' I say hurriedly, before the thought evaporates.

‘Mindfulness is about what *is*.’ I tumble the idea around in my head for a bit. ‘It’s about noticing what *is*. Dissociation is about pretending that what is, *isn’t*.’

Once again, the rush of self-loathing unfurls through my spine. Once again, reflexively, I hate myself for having dissociated for so long.

‘But it kept you alive,’ she says, as if she can see my self-hatred strumming along the surface of my mind. ‘It kept you *sane*...’

I’m confused. ‘How can something be good, and yet it’s not good *now*? If dissociation kept me alive and sane, then why am I trying to stop doing it *now*?’

I suspect I know the answer, but it’s eluding me, like it’s hiding under the rim of my mind.

‘What do you think?’

She knows I know. But sometimes it’s such an effort even to think.

I grumble an out-breath and track the answer down, rooting it out from a dark corner of my mind. ‘Dissociation is what you want to do when you’re in danger,’ I say, taking my turn on the slow conveyor-belt of words. ‘But it’s not a good strategy for when you’re safe, when you’re doing daily life. It stops you connecting, being present, feeling your feelings, relating to others. It makes things numb and empty.’

I pause and listen back to what I’ve just said, to make sure I’ve understood it.

‘It’s context, then, isn’t it?’ I say. ‘A raincoat is great when it’s raining but uncomfortable on a hot sunny day. Dissociation is great when you’re in danger, but not so great when you’re safe. That’s the difference.’

‘Yes, that’s the difference,’ she says, and I think we’re both willing for this information to enter my brain this time and stay there, because it could make all the difference.

‘So you don’t need to beat yourself up for dissociating,’ she adds, giving me one of those looks, like I’m being reminded to pack my calculator in my school bag.

’No,’ I say, pensive, and something settles on the inside of me. The self-hatred has boiled off. For a moment—even if it’s just for a moment—it feels okay to be me. And suddenly I become aware of my breath, rising and falling, *in*, *out*. It *is*. And I *am*.

‘No,’ I say again. ‘I don’t need to beat myself up for dissociating.’

6

WHAT IF I START CRYING AND I CAN’T STOP?

‘It’s okay,’ she says, but of course I don’t believe her.

So I look at her, this therapist, and dare her, with my eyes, to prove it. She has seen this look before, many times. Early on, she used to rise to it. Then she realised that to win this battle she has to stay out of the battle. So she waits. She is good at waiting.

I hadn’t realised until therapy how many games I played. Because, to me, they weren’t games. They were just how things happened. The way things were. The way you relate to people. I hadn’t realised that you pick up these strategies during childhood. I hadn’t realised that there are other ways to relate, sometimes better ones. I hadn’t really realised anything. Therapy is that process, long and slow and hard and cringeing, of realising the games you play.

Eventually I relent. ‘It’s not okay,’ I say, surlily, like a teenage part of me is speaking. ‘If I start crying, I’ll never stop.’

I hadn’t even realised that I believed this. It sounds silly once I say it out loud, but so much of my behaviour, so many of the ways that I approach each and every situation in life, have revolved around this silent, odourless belief: that feelings are overwhelming and that feelings are out of my control.

I wonder what she is thinking. I used to struggle with her silence, convinced only and always of her hatred for me. But lately I’ve begun, in some small measure, to mentalise: to be able to imagine, at least in part and if only partly accurately, what she might actually be thinking, rather than what I assume, from my previous experience of other attachment figures,

she *must* be thinking. So in her silences I remind myself that she is allowing me space to think; that she doesn't want to dominate; that she wants me to feel safe enough to think and feel, and to do so without pressure.

'But no-one ever cries forever,' I say, only realising this as I speak it. Of course. Even when I've been *really* upset, even when the tears have poured like a river bursting its banks, I've only cried for a while. An hour maybe, rarely more. The emotion wears itself out.

'Emotions move,' I say, echoing her words to me from years previously. 'Emotions have motion. They don't stay the same. So if I let them come, they might feel overwhelming for a while. But then they'll pass. They *will* pass.'

She nods slowly, pulling the muscles up around the corner of her eyes into what I imagine should be a smile, but right at this moment I can't read facial features. It's never been my strong point. In the intensity of a therapy session, I often lose the ability altogether.

Is it true though? I ask myself, internally. This is what so many sessions for me are like: the outward conversation, with the therapist. The inward one, with myself. Or rather, with my *selves*. It took years for me to to learn to tune in to the dissociated parts of my self. I switched, they took over, and I had no sense of it happening. It was as if the centre of my consciousness had stepped into a different room, and I was left alone in silence: suspended, unthinking, unfeeling, unexisting. Until that centre returned and I realised that time had passed and things had happened, things had been said, things had been done, and I had no awareness of it. The dissociation back then was overwhelming, and complete. It had taken many years to join the dots enough for me to become aware of my parts, to tune in to my parts, to communicate with my parts, but without switching to my parts. It was still an effort.

If I feel these feelings, is it true that they will pass? Or will they overwhelm me? I direct my question internally, as I've learnt to.

Inside I feel suspicion. *Is it a trick?* This is my Switch part, sensitive, alive, visceral, relational. 'He' (the closest pronoun to fit 'his' sense of self) fears rejection. He feels things deeply. His emotions are always close to the surface, but never shallow. He does gut feelings in a way that I never could. He sounds the alarm. He is our look-out. Sensitive and deeply empathic, Switch is a very valuable, very vulnerable, part of me. The therapeutic relationship means everything to him, and so... suspicion.

He is afraid, as always, that it is a trick. I prod a question at him, on the inside, wanting more detail about his concern. *Is it a trick?* he says, or rather thinks, again. There is an edgy, antsy prickliness about it. Then the words come thick and fast, tumbling over one another, melding into one another, a stream-of-emotion: *We'll feel it, this feeling, we'll feel it, and we'll get upset, and then she'll hurt us, she'll humiliate us, she wants us to cry so she can tell us how pathetic we are, it's a trick, it's a trick, we shouldn't do feelings, we shouldn't show them to anyone, it's not safe, if we feel our feelings, she'll hate us, she'll send us away, she'll say we're too much, she won't let us come any more, she'll...*

His fears spin into a circle like the end of a hot wash. Most of this, as usual, is transference: imposing on the therapist what we've experienced from others, pattern-matching previous relational encounters and predicting the same for the future. It is good, defensive, back-brain work. But it isn't thought-through. The front brain isn't engaged. It's a valid fear—because people *are* dangerous sometimes. But it's a generalisation: *my mother mocked me for having feelings; my mother was a woman; you're a woman; you will mock me for having feelings.* And it's catastrophising: *if I have feelings, you will hate me and send me away and refuse to let me come back ever again because you will find me completely overwhelming*.

I remind myself to breathe. Switch's anxiety is churtling up through my ribs and clenching tight around my throat.

I realise that time is passing. I suspect she understands I am having this internal debate, but I don't know for sure.

'If I feel feelings...' I offer, letting her know that I am still in the room, still engaged, but just working something through.

Another voice, on the inside. Or rather an emotion, surfing into mind on a rip-tide of thought. *She's going to hurt us. Get away.* It is stern, and authoritative, and I feel I should obey it. And right next to it, a smaller voice, giddy with terror. *Please hurt us*. I have a double-take. There's no 'don't'.

I used to think this was me going mad. I used to be terribly, terribly ashamed at this intermingling of apparently random thoughts and feelings and ideas, as if it meant there were loose wires in my head and I was hearing interference from another line. But nowadays, I know what is happening, and I know that it is sane. I just need to tune the knob. Every

communication makes sense. Everything has its genesis somewhere. I'm not mad. I'm sane enough to be attuned to what *all* of me thinks.

'If I feel feelings...' I try again, and slowly, I push through the noise: 'If I feel feelings, there's a part of me who's afraid that you'll mock us and humiliate us and reject us. And there's a part that thinks you'll use it—use our vulnerability somehow—to hurt us. And then there's a part that actually *wants* you to hurt us.'

She's heard this before, but I think it always comes as a surprise, being so contrary to her thought and intention.

'Why do they want me to hurt them?' It is said with sadness, not incredulity.

Six voices, all at once. I close my eyes, frowning to concentrate. Time passes.

'So they can be close to you. Because being hurt is the only way to be loved.'

'Aah yes.' She nods knowingly and sympathetically. 'Infanticidal attachment.' We've been here before: that part, clingful, needy, believed pain was a requisite for connection to another human being. It resulted in a broken hand in a session a while ago. It took a long time to learn that pain and real love don't go together.

'And partly because that's what they expect. But that's not what happens now—not here.'

'No.'

I get a sudden wave of frustration, that time is passing and we're moving at the pace of a dead snail and nothing, really, is getting resolved. The emotion must flash somehow across my face, because the therapist picks up on it and says, 'So what do *you* think *now*? Is it dangerous to feel your feelings?'

'It *feels* dangerous,' I admit, acknowledging the voices on the inside. 'It feels terrifying. Because it always was. It was never safe to feel feelings. The only defence we had, when the abuse was happening, was to hide our feelings. If we'd shown them, it might have made things worse. They might have hurt us more. They might have exploited it. And it was the only thing that was ever private...'

I trail off, realising the importance of that. I dwell on it for a few moments. Everything has gone still on the inside, like they're all waiting and listening too.

‘They can do what they do to you, but if they can’t see what you’re feeling, they can’t really get to you,’ I explain, almost to myself. ‘I’ve never realised it before, but hiding my feelings was super-important. It was a way of cocooning myself away from the abuse. They’re invading me, violating me, hurting me—but they don’t know what I’m thinking and feeling. They can’t reach the real me.’

The room has gone entirely still as if the walls are listening too. Even the therapist seems to have stopped breathing.

‘So what’s happening is awful, but it’s happening somewhere else—on the outside. Or to another part of you. But they’re not getting anywhere near your feelings. They can’t see them. You’re never, ever going to show them those.’

She nods, wanting to encourage me, not wanting to interrupt me.

Go on, says a voice on the inside. I feel like I’m speaking for them.

‘But that was then. This is now.’ There is an ache that I cannot possibly put into words, of the child who suppressed so many feelings as protection against unspeakable malice. ‘The upside is that I protected myself emotionally. The downside is that I never stopped hiding my feelings. I lost touch with them. I grew up not knowing how to do them. And now I’m afraid of them. They feel so huge.’

‘It feels that if you start crying, you’ll never stop?’

‘Yes.’

I am sitting in sadness.

‘And will you?’

For a moment, I don’t understand. I look at her, enquiring.

‘If you start crying, will you never stop?’

Like so many fears, as soon as I name it, it loses its power. It was a bully in the darkness.

‘No,’ and I half-laugh at the thought of crying tomorrow, and the next day, and next week, and at Christmas, and Easter, and all through the summer holidays. The headaches, the snot. Oh, the snot! I know it won’t happen.

‘No,’ I say again and some of the sadness has lifted with my momentary amusement. ‘I’ll cry and it’ll be painful and then I’ll have a headache and feel tired, but the tears will stop.’ I omit the snot.

‘So you’re not really afraid of the crying being uncontrollable?’

That was what I started with, but now as I think about it I realise it's a screen.

'No, I'm afraid of what might happen if I'm vulnerable with my feelings. If that means that people will hurt me. If that means you'll find me too much. Lots of things. But it's not really that I won't be able to stop. It's more how people will respond to me.'

She nods, and I nod to myself, on the inside. *There, I've said it. I've named it.* And nothing bad has happened.

There's silence for a bit, and then the therapist leans forwards slightly, eyes narrowed, serious.

'Crying is a social signal for support,' she offers.

My thoughts swerve to the side to accommodate this new idea. 'Pardon?' It's not that I didn't hear. It's just that the thought hasn't penetrated my head far enough to produce meaning.

'Crying is a social signal for support, not just a catharsis of emotion.'

She's saying this for a reason, not just to state facts. She never says anything just for the sake of it. There must be a connection here. If only I could think...

'Crying...'

Suddenly I realise that I'd only ever seen crying as that thing you do because you can't control it. That it comes out of nowhere. That it serves no purpose. That it's a vicious beast whose aim is to destroy you, or at the very least to humiliate you. That you're standing by your uncle's graveside and the air is thick and heavy with people's grief and *crying* wants to slit open your throat, but you have to resist it. Under no circumstances must you let it win. You have to push it down, conquer it...

I'd never thought of it as a positive before.

Even the 'catharsis' bit... I'm not sure about it. Right there, in that moment, in the therapy room, I've still got an edge of my mother about me and I want to despise it. *What good is catharsis? Just pull yourself together, get a grip, move on...* But I'm willing to allow it, for this moment. Or at least not to argue with it.

But the big idea: 'a social signal for support'. What does this mean?

I push my thoughts together until they start to coalesce. *By crying, we're asking for help from other people*. I recoil at the thought, albeit temporarily. I'm also entranced by the possibility. What is the therapist saying? That it's

okay? That it might be okay to ask for help, for support? That crying is a way of doing this?

Another voice on the inside sounds the warning: *It's a trick*. I sigh. Here we go again. Again, more firmly: *It's a trick.* I wait. *She's not saying it's a good thing*, the voice continues. *It's a bad thing. Crying is a social signal for support. It's a signal of weakness. It's a signal that you are vulnerable and people can come and hurt you*.

Suddenly, I'm irritated by myself, at the constant bent towards negativity. *Not everyone wants to hurt everyone*, I counter, brusquely.

And, not realising I'm talking out loud, I say it again: 'Not everyone wants to hurt everyone. So for some people it's okay to cry. You're letting them know you're upset. And that gives them the opportunity to come and comfort you. It's pro-social. It helps bonding.' I have lapsed into science talk, to make the idea feel safer, but I'm still heading in the right direction. 'It's not manipulative. It's normal. It's a way of getting support.'

I notice the therapist and realise that she's wondering why I'm trying to convince her.

'I'm talking to myself,' I explain and she smiles, but in a way that feels okay.

There's a quizzical feeling on the inside. Parts of me aren't convinced, but they're not resistant either. It's a new thought. A big thought. Maybe feelings are safe to feel. They won't overwhelm. They won't last forever. They're a signal to receive help. With safe people, they're good to show.

A sudden wave of exhaustion.

'Enough for today.'

'Enough for today,' I agree, relieved at least that we've only talked about crying and I haven't actually had to do it. So far, only parts have cried in session, while other parts have beaten them up for it. We have a long way to go.

And I leave with more to ponder. More new ideas, more insights into this world after trauma. Is it right? Could it be? Could there really be this world where people aren't out to hurt each other? How do I know? How do I stretch forwards, bravely, into this brave new world, whilst honouring the fears of my parts? *Enough for today*, I remind myself, and I almost feel like I'd like to cry. *If I do cry*, I say internally, *it won't last forever. If I do cry, it won't be forever.* They're not entirely convinced, but they don't argue. That's enough for today.

7

THE FALLACY OF GROUNDING

My therapist is on extended leave and so here I am instead, in a strange town, in a strange counselling centre, in a strange room, with a *very* strange woman. I've met her previously: my principle therapist and I came to see her before the start of her break, as a kind of 'handover'. And, overwhelmed by the agony of the perceived abandonment, and the terror of coping with flashbacks and breakdowns and dissociation and chronic illness without the support of an attachment figure, I reluctantly agreed to see this 'substitute'.

But she's not a substitute. She's a prison guard.

That is the first conclusion I jump to even before our first session starts. But I am being driven by fear of the unknown; fear of attachment; fear of rejection; fear of being shamed. I'm aware, just about, that I'm not being entirely fair.

I drive the hour or so to her counselling centre with a sense of dread and foreboding. I park down the road and fumble incompetently to get a ticket. I can't decide if I am anxious or hypoglaecemic. I don't know whether to stride confidently into the building or skulk silently into the waiting room until noticed. I don't know what the rules are. And I feel twisted up within myself at the terror of getting it wrong. *Here I am, an adult, and I can't deal with normal life*, I think to myself, brimming with the kind of self-hatred that is meant to serve as a defence but which only hurts me more.

Through the front door, there is a little reception area, separated off with frosted glass. I stand awkwardly, hovering, incapable of decision. Eventually a woman glances up.

‘Yes?’

I glower at her on the inside. It feels rude and dismissive—she can’t even be bothered to smile, but instead looks annoyed by my presence—and the shame of it sears deep into my bowels.

‘I have a ten o’clock appointment,’ I say, wanting to look through her so that her eye contact won’t hurt. It doesn’t matter—she doesn’t even bother looking back. *Am I being oversensitive? Am I misinterpreting everything?* Probably I am, but that’s the legacy of trauma. Right now, all I can do is survive. The stress of the newness of this, the perceived threat to my life of abandonment or rejection—outside my window of tolerance, way up high in the amber zone ready for fight or flight—is compromising my ability to relate normally. I can’t help but see everyone and everything as a threat. *Breathe*, I tell myself, not because I can, but because it’s what my therapist would say to me. I haven’t yet twigged why it’s so important and that it does, actually, help.

‘Take a seat.’

I can just make out a couple of other women at desks in this admin area. I have timed my arrival to be 9.55 am exactly: literally counting down the seconds, and pacing my stride, so that I won’t be a second too early or a second too late. Three minutes to ten feels like I am pushing it: what if my watch is slow? Anything more than five minutes beforehand feels inconveniently early. And I don’t want to be an inconvenience.

Will she come out to me at exactly 10 am, and therefore will we eat into the hour by finding the room? Or will she allow me time to settle into a chair before the clock starts ticking? *These things don’t seem to matter to therapists*, I think. *But they matter to us*. Every second counts.

I sit, numb, alert, agitated, removed. Everything and nothing. And I sit. The seconds crawl forwards. My watch registers 10 am. Perhaps she is with another client still. It occurs to me that I didn’t give my name; nor was it requested. I hope, panicked, that I have the right day. Yes, I have the right day. I checked it ten times.

I can’t shake the feeling that I don’t belong here; that I’m not welcome here; that I would be better off dead. This is a recurrent theme, and it will be many years until it begins to shift.

As the clock shuffles past 10 am, one of the women behind the screen stirs. She scrunches her papers together, stands up, and appears from behind the glass. She smiles at me wetly. ‘Shall we go up?’

I hate myself at that moment for resenting the lost time. I am convinced that she will kick me out on the dot, but we haven't started on the dot. I have driven an hour to get here. I have made childcare arrangements. I have journalled. I have spent most of the night awake, distressed at the thought of coming. I have had three bouts of diarrhoea this morning. And when it comes to it, my therapy hour will run short. *Get over it,* I try saying to myself, but I feel crushed and ashamed. *I'm not even worth a whole hour*. And she's been sitting there all along, shuffling papers. I hate her. But more than that, I hate myself, for overreacting. After all, I don't have a right to counselling. I don't have a right to be helped. I should be grateful, I should be thankful, I should be... *Stop it.* I pull air into my ribs to overcome the urge to not be.

I follow her up through narrow, stale-smelling corridors where the lightbulbs glow a dirty orange. We pass doors with signs on them: 'Quiet please. Counselling in progress.' I feel ashamed on behalf of the people inside, that I know why they are there. We lumber up two flights of stairs, each step creaking loudly, and I wonder if I will be able to focus against the background of footsteps on stairs. *It's the worst sound in the world*, I think, but I don't yet know why.

Inside the room, the carpet is threadbare and the walls a filthy cream. A single vase of dusty plastic flowers sits on an IKEA coffee table. An IKEA print on the wall. An IKEA cushion on the chair. That at least is familiar. The woman herself looks as dreary as the room. I feel ashamed to be here, as if the emotional poverty of the setting is a reflection of my worth.

Coats off, sitting down. In a brown chair with a stain on it. With wooden arms like the teachers used to have at school, twenty years ago. It is very upright. I don't feel I have enough strength in my spine to sit in it. Everything in me collapses down within myself. I just want to huddle up and hide. I really *really* don't want to be here.

'How have you been?' she says and I become conscious that her dyed-chestnut perm is not dissimilar to my mother's. She's a bit older than my main therapist, and plump, like a well-stuffed bean bag. I don't want to see her as the enemy right now, but that is the feeling overwhelming me. I try to push it back underneath. I need to get this right.

We talk unpleasantries for a few minutes but everything about me is unsettled. I resent her because she's not my main therapist. I resent her

because of her perm. I resent her because of the room. I resent her because we started late. And most of all I resent her because she doesn't know me.

Of course, she thinks she does. And that's what bothers me. She thinks she knows me, and she's patronising with it. I feel the power differential between us distinctly, like she's the middle-class sorted one, and I'm the feral screw-up. I particularly don't like the fact that the counselling is free. I feel pitied and patronised. *I should be grateful... Yes, but stop it anyway.*

We sit in silence for a bit and I realise how pent up I am with negativity, and that I don't want to be. *Get over yourself*, I say to myself, unencouragingly. But then I hear it: the wail on the inside. There's a terror, and a desperate yearning for connection and to be heard. I don't know what this is. I don't know *who* this is, but something that we're talking about (somehow we've strayed onto a family member's birthday), or maybe just being here, is activating this cry within me, and it's slicing at me from the inside. It's like an instinctual need to check out if we exist here. Or if we have to play 'the game' and hide.

I start to fall away within myself. Downwards. A long way downwards. I can feel myself falling, but there's nothing I can do about it.

She's looking at me sternly when I next become conscious. I don't know where I've been, only that I haven't been *here*. My on-leave therapist has recently provided a word for it: 'dissociating'. I only started therapy six months previously, and I don't really know what it means. I only know that it's become routine for me to miss part of my session. And that, apparently, is what has just happened now.

My main therapist is kind about it, empathic. She explains it to me in terms of my mind being overwhelmed, and a kind of shut-off mechanism kicking in to prevent total overload. She suggests that it makes sense, even though she doesn't really understand it either. Although I feel alarmed and ashamed, she makes me feel less so. She sees it as both a problem, and the solution. She gives me confidence that together we will work to find a way through: to figure out why it's happening, and to resolve the underlying issues. And there's no rush.

Or at least there wasn't. But then she went on leave.

And this therapist is staring at me now with a face that looks like I've stolen her purse. I don't know where I've been. I don't know what I've done wrong. But it's evident that I *have* done wrong.

‘We won’t be able to work together if you dissociate in the session,’ she says.

I stare blankly back at her. I’m not quite sure why she’s telling me this. I’m not quite sure what she wants me to do about it. I’m not quite sure what the problem is.

So I say nothing but I sink in my chair under the weight of her disapproval. A sticky layer of nausea coats my guts. ‘Okay,’ I say at last, so that the silence doesn’t become offensive.

Inside, I want to cry. Out of nowhere, I feel a wave of pain scalding my innards. I feel totally, irreparably, unacceptable. A long, low wail from within.

‘You need to ground yourself if you feel yourself starting to dissociate,’ she explains.

But I have no idea what she means. I don’t know what ‘grounding’ means. I don’t know how to do it. I don’t know *why* to do it. And I don’t know how to identify the feeling of starting to dissociate. At this point in my recovery journey, I don’t notice it. It just happens. So what she’s asking of me is, currently, impossible. It’s like asking me to slow my heart rate to 50 beats per second—I just can’t.

My guts freeze over with dread. I don’t know what to say or do. I feel ashamed with the impossibility of being me, and being traumatised.

What I want to say to her—now, years later, after figuring this stuff out through thousands of therapy hours and tens of thousands of hours of studying—is that she’s got it the wrong way around. It’s exactly because I start to dissociate in session that she needs to work with me.

Telling a client that you can’t work with them if they dissociate in sessions is like telling a cancer patient that you can’t work with them while they continue to lose weight. The weight loss is a symptom of the cancer; all the more reason to work with them promptly, to deliver effective treatment as soon as possible. Likewise with dissociative clients, the fact that they ‘dissociate’ in sessions, switch to other parts of the personality, lose contact with present reality, are in denial about their trauma, can’t manage their eating or drinking or drug use, or have a dozen other ‘diagnoses’ and labels—all of this is exactly why you should work with them. You don’t tell them to go and sort themselves out, and then you’ll help them recover once they have done so.

And I want to tell her too that grounding is not the answer. It's become a buzz-word, devoid of meaning. It has taken on almost mythical status and in many cases is applied as a generic, magical panacea. It's not. And the way she's referring to it is as if it's the answer, rather than merely a stepping stone towards the answer.

The work of trauma recovery involves bringing the front brain online and feeling safe again in the body. Being able to control switching and 'dissociating' (by which we mean an altered state of consciousness) is a vital component of that, but is not an end in itself. Developing co-consciousness and collaboration between parts is also important, and it's true that traumatic memories are only properly metabolised and processed when the front brain is online. But grounding is only one small technique in that entire process: grounding is not the point.

What she really ought to be doing right now is focusing on connection and attunement, on being present with me in a supportive, empathic way. And there is little more disconnecting or misattuning than shaming a client for reactions which are currently outside their conscious control.

The end goal of trauma treatment is for the client to be able to consistently operate in 'the green zone', a physiological and emotional state of being where we're able to both think and feel at the same time, where we're calm, relaxed and alert, where we feel safe, and where our 'social engagement system' is fully operational. Trauma survivors instead spend much of their time either in the hyperaroused state of amber, characterised by fight and flight, or the hypoaroused state of red, characterised by dissociation and freeze. It is thus a defence against danger. The work of recovery from trauma involves a gradual resetting of the body and brain's default state away from amber and red and more onto green. It takes time. It takes practice. It takes repetition. And it involves far, far more than just 'grounding'.

Grounding can help us get back in the green zone, but used inappropriately it can spiral us further away from it. Too often grounding is used as a weapon to enforce compliance—'stop dissociating': then it becomes entirely counter-productive. Too often it is used to regulate the therapist's anxiety and sense of inadequacy, to manage a client who is presenting in unfamiliar ways. Grounding is an effective tool when used appropriately, but only if it's for the client's benefit, not for the therapist's.

The therapist's false assumption is that switching to another part is a bad thing, and should be stopped: as if by saying no to the symptoms of trauma, we can heal the trauma. But that is merely an attempt at behavioural control—it does nothing to resolve the underlying root cause. And in the case of dissociation, all it does is serve to disrupt the trust and attunement between therapist and client.

But if instead our end goal is the establishment of the green zone as our default state of being, we're going to have to learn what it feels like to be there. We'll have to get used to the green zone. It's a habit we'll have to develop—and habits take time to grow (and this habit should not be a prerequisite for receiving therapy). We'll have to know how to move back into green when we've been triggered in some way into amber or red. We'll have to develop an awareness of our physical and emotional states, to know that we've drifted out of green, and we'll have to build a repertoire of skills, of things to do, in the moment, to begin the shift back into green—what is sometimes termed 'affect regulation'. Sometimes—not always—these interventions include things that we could term 'grounding'. But true grounding is about coming back into the green zone; it's not about preventing switching.

And affect regulation is where the therapist is key: to act as a coach, to help to soothe and reassure, to regulate our emotions as a parent does with a baby, until we can learn to regulate them from ourselves; to remain in the green zone themselves and calmly, gently, draw us into their state, by their eye contact and steady tone of voice, by their regular breathing and metronomic heartbeat, through unconscious and non-verbal right brain to right brain communication.

We learn to come back into the green zone through a thousand opportunities in therapy, where we're triggered out of it and the therapist helps gently soothe us back in. This may be for us in our 'adult' part, or for us in our more developmentally younger, distressed or traumatised parts: whoever we are, the therapist can help us learn to down-regulate or up-regulate, down from amber or up from red. Their presence, their 'with-ness', is key. By maintaining that human connection, we light up the attachment and relational parts of the brain, which in turn douse the rest of the brain with soothing chemicals, feel-good neurotransmitters. We do it again and again and again, until habits in our brain begin to form. And we

do it best when there is a strong connection to another human being, and when our ‘social engagement system’ is fully online.

So switching isn’t a problem, and grounding isn’t the solution. It’s bigger than that, and wider than that. The problem we’re trying to solve is the way that trauma hijacks us, switching us away from daily life mode (the green zone) to danger mode (amber or red) and how little control we have over our physiological and emotional reactions. Grounding techniques can help us to slowly develop more control over these reactions, but they are not the goal in and of themselves: we do not go for therapy in order to merely learn how to be ‘grounded’.

And we can’t be expected to know how to do it when we start therapy either. We can’t even be expected to know how to do it without being shown: so much of what we’re trying to achieve takes place in the primitive, non-verbal, non-conscious parts of our brain, which is impervious to words. We don’t recover from trauma by thinking our way out of it. We have to learn, like a baby, to manage our physical and emotional states from scratch, and we mainly do it through being in a room with someone who is speaking unconsciously through their physical and emotional states to ours.

It’s true that over time we have to learn to bring our front brains fully online, and that controlling our switching makes a huge difference to both our quality of life and to resolution of the trauma. But it’s incorrect to leap from that proposition to the idea that dissociative clients should be prevented from switching in session, and that the goal should be to get them to ‘ground’ to mitigate such behaviour.

It’s much more helpful to think in terms of the overall goal: living in the green zone—and to ask, ‘What will help this person, right here, right now, feel connected to me as a human being (because the green zone is the realm of the ‘social engagement system’)? What will reduce their shame (as shame disconnects us from other people and so shuts us off from the green zone)? What will help to soothe their bodies and brains back into the green zone? What will be a reparative experience for them?’

Dissociative clients will dissociate. We cannot keep telling them that they need to stop doing that before we will work with them. In the early stages, when we’re working primarily on safety and stabilisation, it’s far more productive to go with them in their switches, and to welcome each

and every part of them that ‘appears’ or ‘presents’. This is one person, with many parts.

You are not reinforcing the dissociation by talking to parts. But you *are* reinforcing the dissociation if you shame them: the default response to rejection, abandonment, exclusion or humiliation in a dissociative person is to go into the red zone of dissociation or freeze. Therefore, at the very least in the early stages of therapy, the best thing you can do to promote the green zone and thus recovery is to stay connected to them, wherever they go, however they present, whatever emotion is expressed or altered state of consciousness arises. The social engagement system is activated by human contact: therefore, keep in contact.

Over time, as that connection is established and as together you develop strategies that quickly soothe the client when triggered, you can work on limiting switching so that it becomes more a matter of choice, and planning, and control—rather than replicating the powerlessness of trauma, and being something which causes shame and a sense of a lack of control. But that takes time, and will happen naturally. If we work on resolving the root causes of dissociation—the trauma—then we will not habitually dissociate.

That is what I wish I could have said to her. But of course I couldn’t, because I didn’t know it then.

Instead I sit, stuck, ashamed, and with this wail on the inside that simply will not stop. ‘Okay,’ I say again, because I don’t know what else to say. I need to be a good girl. I need to be allowed to come back.

The following week, I warn myself sternly that ‘dissociating is not allowed’. It happens again, and I don’t understand why. The therapist talks about me ‘maybe not being in the right place at the moment for therapy’—I decide in the end that this means that she can’t cope with me.

What I don’t understand is why my brain, which should be trying to protect me, instead seems to be sabotaging me: it is causing me to ‘behave badly’ in therapy, which risks curtailing this help that I am offered. But then I suddenly realise it: I don’t feel safe in this therapy. Because I feel perpetually ashamed and inadequate and incapable. I feel like I ought to be someone other than who I am: that I am *too* mad, *too* bad, *too* messed up. And that triggers painful, overwhelming feelings on the inside of me, and clearly there are parts of me who are trying to keep me safe by keeping me away from this therapist. And so, we ‘misbehave’ by ‘dissociating’ during the session.

I don’t go back for a third session.

The curious thing, I reflect, is that my principal therapist was too inexperienced to know the wrong thing to do. She hadn’t heard the ‘switching is bad, grounding is good’ mantra, so didn’t impose it. Instead, she flew by the seat of her pants. She did what was instinctually right, and what hadn’t yet been trained out of her: she offered deep, empathic human connection, regardless of what happened, in every single session. She simply didn’t know enough to get it wrong.

I eagerly awaited her return.

8

WHY DON’T I BELONG?

‘I don’t fit in,’ I complain, earnestly, full of pain. ‘I don’t belong. I don’t belong *anywhere*.’

The therapist looks at me steadily, brimming with compassion for me and probably a little stuck about how to respond. If she contradicts me, she’ll risk being misattuned. If she agrees with me, she’ll reinforce my misery. So she sits and waits and eventually she says, ‘When did you first feel like this?’

I look at her, puzzled, like she’s being really stupid. ‘I’ve *always* felt like this. I can’t remember a time when I haven’t.’

‘Tell me about some specific times when you’ve felt it in particular,’ she insists.

I want to wave her away with a dismissive, ‘Oh, but there are *so many* times...’ but actually I can’t. Because, at least in this moment, I’m finding it difficult to pinpoint specifics. The feeling of not belonging is so general, so intrinsic to how I experience the world, that individual episodes don’t leap to mind.

‘I don’t know,’ I say at last, lamely.

She looks a little surprised, as if she was expecting me to regale her with innumerous exclusionary tales.

‘It’s more just a general sense, just a kind of... fact...’ I try to explain.

‘It’s a belief?’ she proffers.

I want to reply, ‘No, it’s a fact. It’s true.’ But I can see where she’ll go with that. For a moment, I feel affronted, like she doesn’t believe me: here I am again, having to prove myself, having to justify my experience, having

to insist that I really have experienced what I have experienced, because no-one ever believes me, just like the abuse, that was hidden away, and no-one ever believed, even when I told them about it...

Stop it.

I realise with a jolt that I've fallen into a head-rant as a reaction to something that may not even have happened.

'When I was at school, no-one ever liked me,' I explain. 'I never had a real friend—someone that I could count on to be my friend. I had a few friends, but I never really thought they liked me. I never thought they actively wanted to spend time with me. No-one wanted to sit next to me in class. And I didn't belong to any of the groups. I didn't fit in. I wasn't like other kids...'

'In what way?'

'I was a geek. I wanted to work hard and behave myself. I never wanted to get into trouble. I wanted to learn. I didn't understand about teenage stuff. And I was ill all the time, and I missed a lot of school...'

'Who did you want to fit in with? Who did you want to belong to?'

Again, this deceptively simple question has me flummoxed. Because what I wanted was more nebulous than that: not 'belonging at any cost' but acceptance. I didn't mind being a geek. But I wanted to be one *inside the group*. Any group. Just not the outcast I always felt I was.

'I was different. It was like I had the mark of Cain on my forehead. Not because I worked hard and behaved myself, but because...'

'Because...?'

I shrug my shoulders frustratedly. 'I don't know. Just because!' It's a ridiculous answer and I know it, and she knows it. For some reason, I'm getting activated, like the pain of adolescent exclusion is rippling through my bloodstream. My pulse is thrumming in my ears and my legs have started jiggling, like I want to run away. I'm beginning to feel upset, and with it a little faint and distant-dreamy.

She pushes me with her eyes.

'Because I'm bad!' I say, knowing it sounds even more ridiculous, but I have to say it, because it's the truth.

'What makes you bad?'

I'm really frustrated now. Why can't she understand?

'Being me!'

For a moment I think I sense a flash of frustration on the therapist's face, that sense that we've been here before and I don't seem to have assimilated anything that we've previously discussed. This, of course, just confirms my badness, and I sink shamefully into myself at the perceived disapproval. *Oh I hate myself.*

'So you don't fit in, you don't belong, because you're bad?' the therapist says, with scorching tenderness. I feel as if I ought to realise how thin it sounds, but it doesn't: it's a perfect statement of fact. This is my life. This is me.

In justification I want to talk about all the ways that this is true: how I stand apart from the other mums in the playground; how I don't get invited to parties; how in a group I am always on the outside of the conversation; how I'm not part of a big family get-together at Christmas; how I always seem to be the one who has to initiate first contact with friends.

It's this generalised, endemic sense that I'm not wanted in this world, that everyone else is in on the joke and I've misheard the punchline. It's a sense of running to catch up but never quite making it, like a French class after being ill so you don't understand the vocab. I live life from the edges, peering inwards, but even the glass through which I look is frosted, and the sounds muffled and dim. I live in my own world, alone, rejected, set apart. I don't know what the rules for joining are. I don't know where the sign-up form is.

The feeling of shame is one of being ineffably defective. It is not that I have done wrong. It is that I *am* wrong. And there is nothing I can do about it. It is a searingly powerless place to be. If I was born wrong, if I was born to *be* wrong, then what is the point to me being alive? How can I expect to belong, when I don't have the right credentials? How can I ever expect anyone to accept me, when I am intrinsically unacceptable? I deserve to be on the outside. I deserve never to fit in. I deserve only for bad things to happen. And how can I shift those beliefs when they appear so inarguably true?

And that's what I expect the therapist to say to me now: 'I think you need to get over yourself. Of course you don't belong. You never will. Stop being so arrogant to think that you ever could.'

But of course she doesn't. She sits with me in the crushing hurt of feeling excluded. Until that moment, I hadn't realised how painful it has always been, to feel that I don't belong. I hadn't realised that this corrosive

ache infests every interaction I have with another human being: it's the longing, unspoken, but always in some way expressed, that says: 'Please accept me. Please let me in.'

I feel ashamed of my neediness. I feel ashamed of wanting to belong. And I feel ashamed that I don't belong—that out of all the people in the universe, only I (so I believe) have been excluded.

'Do you think other people feel like this too?' the therapist asks, as if reading my thoughts.

Of course not, I immediately think. *It's only me that's this bad.* But then I realise that she never asks questions for the sake of it. She's implying, by asking it, that they do. *Do they? Do they really?* I can't believe it. When I look at other people, they're always so happy, so likeable, so 'in'... *Am I seeing them through a filter?* That's where the therapist is going.

'No, I don't,' I say at last, remembering to speak. 'Or at least, not like I do...'

She holds me in a steady gaze and I know that she disagrees, and I realise that other clients sit on this butt-torturing chair too and that maybe she hears us all say the same kinds of things. But mercifully she doesn't press her point.

After a long pause, because I'm not saying anything else, she speaks. 'It sounds to me like the sense of not belonging, not fitting in, of being bad... it sounds to me like it's a core belief, something that has taken a hold very early on in life.'

She looks at me, as if for confirmation that she's on the right tracks. She hasn't said anything to disagree with yet, so I just nod and frown and wait.

'It sounds to me,' she says, carefully, 'that this is all about shame.'

Shame. How is it possible to feel so ashamed of being ashamed? Because as she says that single word, I feel small and stupid that, as ever, the problem boils down to shame. I lower my gaze and huddle up small and try to hide, even here with the therapist. I don't want to have a problem with shame. I don't want that shame to be noticed. I

just want to be like other people, who aren't ashamed. I want to fit in...

'Shame is the sense that we don't belong,' the therapist begins to explain. 'It's a conviction that we are intrinsically defective, even in a way that we cannot identify. We believe there is something wrong with us, and so we are excluded and unwanted. We are outside the group, with no way

in. We don’t belong. It affects the way we view everything about ourselves and other people.’

I look at her sadly, because I resonate with everything she has just said. This is me. I am shame.

‘How do I fix it?’ I say, plaintively. I still can’t look at her.

There is a long pause before she answers.

‘Well,’ she says, at last. ‘Firstly, we can talk about it. We can try to dismantle some of your beliefs and help you see where they don’t fit reality or where they’re not helpful any more. Secondly, we can work on you experiencing the opposite of shame here—belonging, being wanted, having your needs met, being connected, being acceptable. And then thirdly I guess the biggie is that you can work too on accepting yourself.’

‘Accepting myself?’ I can’t understand what this has got to do with shame.

‘Yes,’ she says, earnestly but quietly. ‘We can’t control other people, and force them to show us that they accept us. But we can control our reactions to ourselves. We can ‘belong’ to ourselves. We can ‘fit in’ with ourselves. We can be part of the group—of ourselves. We can show ourselves that we are okay.’

I am dissatisfied with her response. It seems a facile pretence. If I don’t feel loved and accepted by others, I just need to love and accept myself, and pretend that I’m perfectly happy being Billy No Mates Who Loves Herself? It doesn’t sit right with me. I say so.

‘No, no, not at all,’ she responds, hurriedly, seeing my confusion. ‘It’s not about denying your need or your desire to be accepted by others and to belong somewhere. It’s just that however much people might accept you—and I believe that some people do, because I do—you won’t be able to experience that unless you accept yourself. Shame—a belief in your own intrinsic unworthiness—tells you that you don’t deserve to belong. So even when you are accepted, you’re unable to receive it. That’s what I mean by accepting yourself. So that you can be accepted by others, when that acceptance is offered.’

‘But what if it’s not offered?’ I feel the need, as always, to wear the black hat of identifying the most negative outcome.

‘It won’t be by everyone,’ she admits. ‘That’s unrealistic. You can’t be loved or liked by 7 billion people. But you don’t need to be loved or liked by multitudes. You need to be loved or liked by yourself, and then by a few

key people in your life. But unless you accept yourself, you won't be able to receive it from even those key people.'

She has a point. *Oh, she always has a point*.

'But how can I accept myself if I am in fact unacceptable?' I counter. 'If I *am* bad, then how can I pretend to myself that I'm good? I *hate myself*.'

'I know,' she says, almost groaning with gentleness. 'And that's a problem.' She looks at me with sadness and a depth of empathy that makes my heart hum, but I push against it because it feels too nice. It feels dangerous to feel nice.

'You know, you don't have to be a victim of your own shame,' she says.

'How do you mean?' I'm bristling a little, but I try to hear her. Shame makes me prickly and reactive.

'I mean that you are putting your shame out there as something over which you have no control. It's your boss. It tells you who are, how to feel. It's defining your identity. It's abusing you. You wouldn't tolerate being treated like that by anyone else, so why by yourself—by your own shame?'

I'm holding my breath.

'Shame doesn't have to be in charge of your life,' she continues. 'You don't have to accept what it says about you. It's only an opinion, but you've taken it to be a fact.'

I've never seen it like this before. I've never personified shame in quite such a way—as a cruel master abusing me, and whose opinion, whose perspective on the world, I don't have to heed. I suddenly realise that I can in fact step back from shame. That I can disagree with it, if I want to. The question is: do I want to? It feels dangerous to disrupt the status quo.

'If shame doesn't tell me who I am and what to feel,' I say, ponderingly, 'then who does?'

Surprise registers fleetingly on her face. Again, I feel ashamed that I've surprised her. It shows the gap between who I am and who I feel I should be.

'*You* do!' says, and her voice rises with passion. '*You* get to define who you are. You're in charge of you!'

Uh-oh. This is what I didn't want to hear. I don't want the responsibility. I don't want to be in charge of me. It's a role I'm not used to. All my life, other people have determined who I am and what I feel. In their absence, shame has covered for them.

'That sounds scary,' is all I say, in case I say too much.

‘I know,’ she says again, and for a moment I doubt her—how could she know what it’s like to be me?—but I dare a glance up at her eyes and I can see that she knows.

‘After trauma,’ she explains, ‘it can be easier to stick with what’s familiar. New things, even new ways of thinking, can feel dangerous. It’s part of your neurobiology, to guard against danger. But it also limits you. It keeps you stuck in painful thought patterns and beliefs, because it feels safer than trying something new.’

I nod. This I know all too well. Better the devil I know. Better the shame that scolds. Better to be bad.

I need to change the conversation, to give myself time to think about this. There are outstanding questions from earlier, and so I return to them.

‘But the reality remains that I don’t fit in, and that I don’t belong anywhere. I am alone.’

The therapist sighs. Not, it seems, because she’s frustrated with me but because she is feeling my pain.

‘Where do you want to belong?’ she asks, reiterating her point from earlier. I shrug my shoulders in frustration. ‘*Why* do you want to belong then?’ she asks instead.

‘I don’t know. It’s normal, isn’t it, to want to belong? To have a base?’

‘Like a secure base?’ She’s referring to attachment theory, and I nod eagerly.

‘Yes, like a secure base. To have a place from which you can go out and conquer the world, but you know that it’s safe to come back to it. You can do anything if you know that you belong,’ I say, wistfully.

‘What do other people belong to?’ she asks. ‘Where’s their secure base? How is that different from yours?’

‘I don’t know. I guess it’s partly about family, about having a family that loves you and supports you. Having someone who’s got your back. Having someone who’ll be there for you, no matter what. Like, if you went on X-Factor, who’d be backstage cheering you on?’

‘They are good things to have,’ she agrees, ‘and people are blessed when they have them. But,’ she pauses here, to make sure she’s got my full attention, and she drills her eyes into mine, ‘you could have those things and still not *feel* that you belong.’

My head drops, because I know she’s right.

‘And,’ she adds. ‘The reality for you right now is that you don’t have that. So you’ve got to find a way of managing it.’

She never backs off from the difficult thing. She never patronises me with reassurance. *Jab, punch, hook.* I feel winded.

‘Why is belonging so elusive?’ I cry.

‘Is it because it’s the flip side of shame?’ she asks in response. ‘I know people who don’t have family, who don’t have partners, who don’t have much in the world at all, and yet they don’t have shame either. And they are secure. There’s a sense about them that they belong to themselves. They are their own tribe. They know that they will be there for themselves—they love themselves and are endlessly supportive and positive about themselves. Whereas you...’

She breaks off, as if she doesn’t want to level an accusation, despite her current feistiness. I take it up for her.

‘Whereas I don’t love myself, and I’m endlessly unsupportive and negative about myself,’ I say, grimacing, because it’s true. ‘I’m looking for a place of belonging ‘out there’ because I don’t have a place of belonging ‘in here’.’ I point to my chest.

‘And maybe it’s easier to belong ‘out there’ once you belong ‘in here’?’ she adds. Then she shakes her head slightly and looks at her hands. ‘I’m not saying that it’s easy or that people will always love you or accept you if you love and accept yourself. You still can’t account for other people’s behaviour, because if they’re going to reject you, they’re going to reject you, whatever you’re like and however little shame you live with.’

I’m glad she qualified it, so that it’s not my fault. Too easily I interpret every difficulty I face as my fault, as having caused it myself. That, too, is the legacy of shame.

Shame is an interpretative framework for the world, a lens through which we can superimpose meaning and intention and feeling and blame, derived solely from our innate defectiveness. The world stops being a complex matrix of interconnecting elements, a million contributory factors feeding into every single outcome, and is reduced instead to the simplest of formulae: this thing has happened only because of me, and only because I am bad.

Shame is therefore, by its very nature, paradoxically self-obsessed: we both want to obliterate ourselves and also place ourselves at the centre of everything, the sole cause, the sole effect, the sole intervening variable. ‘I

am bad,' we cry, 'and my badness has caused everything that is bad in the universe to happen.' And then we are ashamed to realise our own overblown self-importance, that we are putting ourselves front and centre, when all we want is to be out of sight. Shame is the most contradictory of paradoxes.

I sigh and look up at the therapist from my focus on the floor. 'If I don't believe shame any more,' I ask, 'if I don't believe that I'm intrinsically bad, then will I feel like I belong?'

The therapist looks at me with an expression that I can't read. It's as if she's going to say something, and then checks herself. 'What do you think?'

I smile humourlessly at her deflection.

'I think... I think...' I dig deep inside to figure out what exactly it is that I think. Often, like now, I don't know until I say it. 'I get that shame makes us feel that we don't belong, that it's a belief that we don't deserve to belong. But I still need to find something or someone to belong to.'

'What about yourself?' says the therapist.

I shrivel my nose up. 'It feels like a cop-out. It feels like you're saying, 'Oh, you need to belong to yourself because you're actually alone in the universe.''

She shakes her head. 'I'm not saying that as you mean it. I mean it in the sense that everyone, ultimately, is alone in the universe. Our secure base in adulthood has to come from within. Childhood is where we learn to internalise the secure base that our attachment figures provided for us, if we were lucky enough to have that. And we take it onto the inside of us, so that we can be secure within ourselves. And then we can offer it to others.'

'So in that sense, we create our own secure base within ourselves?' I ask. This is a new idea to me. I'm not sure I agree with it, but I'm piqued.

'Maybe.' She shrugs. 'These are just theories, or ways of understanding the world. They're not necessarily perfectly true. But the feeling of not belonging may have its roots in shame. And actually there's nothing, really, excluding you from belonging in the world, wherever that belonging is. You're good enough as you are. You're acceptable.'

The words sit warmly on the inside of me, like a Petri dish for my soul. It would be nice to think that I'm okay as I am. It would be nice to find a secure base within myself. It would nice not to be under the caustic nastiness of shame.

‘Why don’t I belong?’ I say, again, because I need to verbalise it one more time.

Her belief in me rises to meet me.

‘You do belong,’ she says. ‘But shame tells you otherwise. And maybe’—a long look, drinking in my level of receptivity, my level of defence—‘maybe you need to start challenging that shame.’ I can’t meet her gaze, but I want to. ‘Because you do belong. You’re not defective. You’re okay, just as you are.’

‘Okay,’ I say, a little weary, but a little hopeful too, although I’m not about to admit it. ‘I’ll try and think about it.’ Because that, for now, is all I can do.

9

DEALING WITH DENIAL

‘But if I accept that this is real, that this stuff really happened to me, then I don’t think I’ll be able to cope.’

The therapist looks at me as I splutter out my confession. I have used denial all my life to cope with my abuse. Now, a couple of years into therapy, I sit perched on the edge of a precipice. Will I free-fall into life without dissociation?

She says nothing. Instead her eyes narrow and she breathes slowly and deeply, looking intently right into the front of my brain. I feel like she is trying to draw more out of me, before daring to respond. The silence is uncomfortable but I refuse to comply.

‘Go on,’ she prods.

I sigh and growl out my frustration with myself.

‘It can’t have happened,’ I say, plaintively, and for a moment everything in me wants her to agree. I desperately, oh so desperately, want her to side with my denial.

But then the kickback: ‘But if it didn’t happen, then I’m just attention-seeking. I’m just a self-obsessed, manipulative, lying, despicable human being. If I’ve made all this up...’—I wave my hands, trying to convey that I mean the entirety of my existence, not just the memories of abuse—‘… then... then...’

‘*Have* you made it all up?’ she asks, gently. She isn’t asking to find out the answer. She is asking so that I confront myself with the answer.

‘No,’ I say, surlily. I glint a frown at her, displeased with her trickery. And then, erupting again, unsure of myself, twisted into confusion: ‘But

maybe I have! *I don't know*!'

'Have you *consciously* made it all up?' she asks, more precisely. I wonder how much courage it must take for her to persist against my volatility.

'Definitely not,' I say, more calmly, and with determination, because I know this isn't true. 'But maybe—you know—maybe they are false memories?'

At this point I didn't really know any of the background of the idea of false memories, the politics of them, the monumental efforts of PR by a group of accused parents to craft a defence. I had just imbibed the vague concepts, from strategic propaganda in tabloid newspapers and lifestyle magazines, that false memories were a thing.

'And how did you acquire these false memories? Where did they come from?'

She has me stumped here. I have no idea. The accusation from the false memory brigade is largely that therapists implant false memories in their clients, although I was yet to discover this. In my case, it was a moot point as my first memories of abuse had surfaced whilst at University, a good 13 years or so before ever starting therapy. Flashbacks and slivers of these memories then bombarded me during my breakdown in 2005. I came to therapy *because of* these memories and the impact they were having on my day-to-day functioning, not as a blank slate ready to be inscribed upon by a malevolent therapist fostering dependence.

So if they are 'false', where have they come from? I don't have a good answer for this, and I fall back on defaults.

'Because I'm bad?' I suggest, unconvincingly. Even though this *feels* true, I can at least see that it is poor logic. I haven't defined what 'bad' is, and I haven't demonstrated how this has led to 'false' memories. Or why the only memories that I have that are purportedly false are those of abuse, and not any others. I don't for one moment doubt family holidays in Spain, or the family blue Ford Cortina, or the tree I sat in after falling in the river. Why are these not 'false memories' too?

All I can see, sitting there at this moment, is that my brain spontaneously generates images in my head of unspeakable things: terrible abuses that I don't know how to imagine, because I don't know that they *can* be true. I know, from previous discussions, that neither my therapist nor other 'normal' people are assaulted by these kinds of images. Are they

psychotic delusions? That always feels like a tempting possibility—to ascribe them to a malfunction of my brain. But then they are accompanied so strongly by gut-wrenching horror, or terror, or shame: I relive the memory, at least partly, every time. And why else am I so messed up? Surely something has happened to me to be like this?

And then, the very next minute, I argue against myself again. *No, no, it can't be true.* Because the memories don't 'feel' real. They are different to other types of memory. (It will take me several years more to discover that traumatic memories are indeed a different kind of memory, being mediated principally by the amygdala rather than the hippocampus). Sometimes they are 'there' and at other times they aren't. They seem to dance in the shadows in my brain. Surely this isn't right, or normal, or sane?

'What would you gain by creating false memories?' the therapist asks, disturbing me out of my thought-maze.

What would I gain? It seems a strange question. But then, a lot of her questions seem strange, until I dig a little deeper. Usually they end up with a chink of light suddenly illuminating my brain in a new and surprising way. I both like the way she asks unexpected questions, and I'm also quite intimidated by it: I'm never sure I want to know the answers.

What would I gain? I realise that underlying her question is a theory that our behaviours are often driven by something. Freud and his followers would say that it was libido, the pleasure principle, the avoidance of pain, repressed desires... that our behaviours are basically the result of 'something'. Evolutionary neurobiologists see it in terms of defence against threat: how would this course of action somehow, in some way, provide a survival advantage? Whatever the theory, the question is an intriguing one. *What would I gain?*

'I would get sympathy and attention,' I say, somewhat laboriously.

'Hmmm.'

Is this the right answer, or not?

'And how much sympathy and attention do you in fact get?' she prods.

I nearly laugh out loud. Of course, I find it eternally confusing, why survivors of abuse are largely blamed, shamed and shunned, rather than sympathised with or plastered with attention. So if sympathy and attention are my goal, I have picked a particularly poor strategy. Surely there are easier ways than pretending that I've been abused: perhaps something that doesn't make people draw back in fear and disgust.

‘Not a lot,’ I admit. I feel a little deflated.

‘And what would you gain instead by believing that they are false memories, if in fact they’re not?’

I feel stuck in some weird kind of Socratic dialogue: maybe at the end of this process I will emerge wise and learned. More likely I will just be appalled by the scale of my self-deception.

‘It would give me some distance from them,’ I proffer. ‘It would make it easier to deal with them. If they’re not real, then they don’t need to hurt.’ And there, right at the end of that sentence, the thought travels 12 inches downhill and stabs me in the heart. Suddenly I get angry, to mask from myself this whorling pain.

‘But I don’t know if they’re real!’ I protest. ‘And I can’t just pretend that I think they’re real when they might not be! What if I’ve made it all up? What if I’m just utterly nuts? What if a messed-up part of my subconscious is just wanting to believe I’m abused so that I have a reason and an excuse not to be good at anything in life? What if I’m putting two and two together and coming up with five? You don’t *know* that I was abused!’

She nods slowly at me and in a way that is telling me that she hears my pain and is wanting me to take a breath and calm a little.

‘No, I don’t know that you were abused,’ she says eventually. ‘And it’s neither my place nor my role to decide that. I’m not an investigator. I’m a therapist. I’m here to sit with you while you discover your truth.’

I butt in because I’m still too angry with myself to stay quiet. ‘But what if ‘my truth’ is a lie? What if I’m too screwed up to know what’s true from what’s not? You don’t know if I was really abused or not, if I’m just making it all up, and neither do I. So how can I recover from all this stuff’—I’m waving my arms again—‘if I don’t even know for sure what’s causing it? Maybe we’re spending all our time focusing on what happened when actually it didn’t? What a waste of time and energy and emotion that would be!’

She’s unruffled by my outburst and that on its own is enough to surprise me into silence. I realise that I’m expecting her to be cross with me for wasting her time with this massive lie, but she’s not. Even as I feel that I’m falling into a cyclone, she’s sitting calmly by, without a breath of wind on her. I feel even more insane. Why isn’t she bothered by my confession?

‘I don’t know whether you were abused or not,’ she says again, calmly. ‘At least, not in a legal, beyond reasonable doubt kind of a way. My job isn’t to declare that something is definitively, historically true. You might be remembering some aspects right, and others wrong. Memory is fallible. It gets distorted in the process of encoding it and then recalling it. We can’t rely on it to be 100% true. But I think it’s reasonable to rely on the overall gist. And the body doesn’t lie...’

I feel annoyed with her for not believing me, when I say I’ve made it all up. I am contrary and paradoxical. I feel unheard that she doesn’t believe my deception, and in five minutes I’ll feel unheard because she doesn’t seem to get the fact that I was abused. I am only vaguely aware of this. It is as if both viewpoints within myself are separated by a wall and I can only see the side on which I’m currently standing.

She carries on, in the same quiet way, with the same steady pace. It is infuriating.

‘We do know that people don’t develop dissociative identity disorder for no reason. We do know that certain experiences in early childhood lead to disorganised attachment. And we do know that trauma is behind both of them. What they don’t tell us is exactly what that trauma was, on what day, how it happened, who perpetrated it. But we can be fairly confident that your responses today, your emotions and your behaviours, your symptoms, the way your brain processes information, your shame and self-loathing, your hyperarousal and dissociation, your lack of affect regulation... it’s not random. It’s trauma.’

I resent the balance in what she’s saying. I feel ashamed of my all-or-nothingness. I wonder how on earth you become the kind of person who can weigh two opposites and hold them at the same time, like this. I feel defective and empty and worthless, even at her measured response to my frantic panic. I am so struck by her way of being that I don’t really take in the words themselves.

‘And we also know,’ she continues, ‘that the natural response to trauma is avoidance. The brain is wired to avoid something aversive. So it makes sense that your brain wants to avoid the reality of your trauma by denying it, by thinking that you’ve made it up. That’s what gives it the sense of ‘other’—it’s an emotional, distancing technique. Denial and dissociation are two sides of the same coin. You deny that anything bad happened to you and this is the flip side of dissociation, which says at the moment it’s

happening that it's not. It wouldn't be consistent for you to have a dissociative disorder and not to employ other forms of denial.'

I am at last struck by her logic and I fall silent within myself, feeling both reassured and horrified. *Thank goodness I'm normal*, I want to say, and also *but I wish I wasn't*. Because I wish it were not true.

I know, for certainty, that she's right when she says I'm traumatised. That's what all my symptoms add up to: I am classic, gold standard, textbook. There is nothing atypical about me. My brain acts and reacts exactly the way you'd expect a traumatised brain to. *Damn*.

I scrunch my face up with displeasure. 'I know, I know...'

'What do you know?' I think she's just pushing me to engage with her, to put into words what is going on in the silence of my brain, so I acquiesce.

'I know that I was traumatised. That's the only explanation for my behaviours. I'm not mad, and I'm not bad. I'm just traumatised. I know that makes sense... it's just... it's just... I wish there were another explanation.'

A huge sadness seems to have curled around me all of a sudden and I feel small within myself as I look up at her.

'But if I accept that it's true—that something bad happened to me, even if I can't ever be 100% sure what that is—then I'm afraid it'll overwhelm me. I'm afraid it'll hurt so bad that I won't be able to cope. I'm afraid it'll send me mad.'

She nods sympathetically. 'I know. And you've protected yourself from that all your life through denial and dissociation. It's a big ask to move beyond that. It's a different way of coping. No wonder you're scared. No wonder you don't know if you'll cope. Because you've never done it before.'

I know where she's headed, so I jump in. 'But you'll say that just because I haven't done it before, it doesn't mean that I *can't* do it. My default will be to believe that I *can't*, because I don't have any evidence that I *can*. But you'll say'—I'm referencing previous discussions here—'that it's about transferable skills.''

She nods and smiles a little. I think she's genuinely surprised that I take in anything at all from our discussions as I spend so much time fighting her. In reality I feast alone in the dark for hours on every word she says.

'But how do I do it, practically?' I say, because I'm not content to base my faith on 'transferable skills' alone. 'How do I cope with the painfulness of it all if I don't use dissociation and denial? What do I do instead?'

‘What do you think?’

She must think I know the answer, to have asked me. Maybe the answer is lurking somewhere on the inside of my skull and I just need to hunt for it. I screw my eyes together to focus on the search. It takes me a while and I only see glimpses of it to start with.

‘Denial and dissociation are based on coping with what *is* by saying it *isn’t*,’ I say, to myself, rather than to her. ‘They’re not about facing reality, but distorting it. They’re good strategies if you don’t have the skills to cope.’

It’s her turn to butt in. ‘They were good skills for you up until now. But now you’ve got the opportunity to develop better skills.’

I open my eyes, suddenly puzzled. ‘But why?’ I’ve forgotten the point of it all. ‘Why not just keeping using denial and dissociation if they’re good strategies?’

She cocks her head to one side, as if unsure if I’m being serious. I think she’s genuinely surprised by my denseness sometimes. But she realises that right here, right now, I can’t access that information. So she reminds me.

‘Because they keep you a prisoner. They limit you. You have to put an awful lot of effort into avoiding reality. It’s an exhausting strategy: you have to keep on denying and dissociating, because as soon as reality strikes, you’re helpless to deal with it. It’s much better, surely, to resolve the pain and the trauma so that you don’t have to expend all that energy avoiding it any more?’

I nod but I’m confused. Sometimes my brain is laser-sharp but right now, as often happens in therapy, it’s fuggy and thick.

‘But isn’t it better *not* to feel overwhelming feelings, than be overwhelmed by them?’ My logic seems, for the moment, at least to me, faultless. After all, it is what my entire life has been based on to this point.

‘Hmmm. But dissociation is a scorched-earth policy. It doesn’t just eradicate negative feelings. It eradicates positive ones too. It stops you feeling alive, knowing that you exist, enjoying yourself.’

Ah yes, that. This is what I always forget, no matter how many times she explains it to me. Because although I understand her words, I don’t understand their meaning. I don’t think I really know what it is like to feel positive feelings, so I don’t crave them. They’re a nice idea, but nothing more.

As if she can read my thoughts, she adds another layer: ‘And you can’t separate your feelings from your body. The feelings are still there, even if they’re dissociated. Instead they come out in physical symptoms.’

Damn.

This I know to be true. This is the best explanation I’ve ever had for years of sickness: chronic fatigue syndrome, medically unexplained pain, a malfunctioning immune system. The best medical science can suggest by way of a cause has always been ‘psychogenic’ or the slightly more stigmatising ‘psychosomatic’. Meaning exactly what the therapist is now saying.

‘So I either feel my feelings as emotions, or I feel them as sickness?’ I ask, miserably.

She pauses as if to acknowledge my pain. It’s filling up the space between us, like an invisible fog. Then she nods. ‘Either way, they are going to be felt,’ she says, almost apologetically, as if she is responsible for this law of the universe.

I feel everything in me sinking down towards the floor. It feels like there is no escape, and I say so. ‘There’s no way forwards without suffering, is there?’ I say, abject and genuinely scared. ‘I either carry on being sick and dissociated, or I have to feel overwhelmingly painful feelings.’

She sighs too. ‘I know. It’s rubbish.’

My eyes plead for hope from her.

‘But it won’t last forever,’ she offers. ‘The thing about feelings is that they don’t persist. You can spend forever avoiding them. But if you actually face them and feel them, then they change. They move on. Remember: emotions have motion. They never stay the same. They only stay the same, painful and overwhelming, while you’re not feeling them.’

It seems a lot to hope for and believe, that you can walk through a fire and you won’t be burned to death in the process.

‘But what if I *can’t* cope?’ I say, genuinely weighing up what she’s saying. ‘What if I get overwhelmed? What if it sends me mad?’

She leans towards me, earnest and compassionate. It’s everything she is in this moment that is speaking to me, more than her words, because for once I don’t feel alone in the universe. ‘You coped with far worse in the past. You coped with it actually happening. This is nothing compared to that. You’re stronger than you think.’

‘But I coped with that with dissociation. We’re talking here about not dissociating away my feelings any more. Maybe that’s what I’m not capable of...’

There’s something about the fervid steadiness of her, her belief in me that is permeating the air, that is beginning to settle a strength in me. I know that she won’t convince me with logic. It’s less tangible than that. She believes me. She really, actually, believes in me. I can feel it. The question is: can I believe in myself?

The clock is ticking away, rudely. I catch her sideways glance at it and realise that I have no idea if I’ve been here ten minutes or ten hours. No, time is up. *Saved by the bell*, I think to myself, wryly. But there’s time for one last thought. Although still fearful of feeling feelings and being overwhelmed by them, there is something tantalising about her belief in me.

‘I suppose I need to at least try...’ I venture. ‘After all, that’s why I’m here, isn’t it? I want fewer symptoms. I want a better life. I don’t want to keep on being affected by trauma. I want to live, and I want to live well...’ I trail off, suddenly anxious that I’m naming my wishes out loud. Who am I to want such things?

‘We can’t go over it...’ she says, in a frequent refrain, inviting me to join in.

‘We can’t go under it...’ I’m tempted to point out that it’s never wise to go with small children on a bear hunt (the origin of the refrain) but I desist.

I get up to get ready to leave.

‘Oh no,’ I say, without much humour, but she’s confident in me for a reason and somehow her right brain is speaking silently to mine, and for this moment I can feel it. ‘We’ve got to go through it...’

THE SHAME OF WANTING TO BE LOVED

I'm sat rigid, my muscles steel rods, and I have no idea why. We were talking about my family and now I'm reacting to something the therapist said, but even seconds later I can't remember what it was. Something is thundering through my innards. The longer we talk, the more I want to curl up. My legs feel vacuous. There's a faint, queasy sense in my middle. On the edges of myself, I am shutting down: the dissociation that blocks out information before I'm even consciously aware of it. So I just sit, stiffly. I can't look at her. I don't want her to see *me*.

I try to take a deep breath, but there's only space for air in the uppermost part of my lungs. Really I want to run away. Or hide. Or cease to exist.

She bobs her head slightly forward, trying to find me because she knows I'm avoiding her.

Don't look for me. Don't find me.

These 'voices' weren't always audible to me. I used to have memory blanks instead. I was either this part, or that part and never the twain would meet. Now, in what I am yet to realise is only the 'middle' section of therapy (being a third of the way through a nearly ten-year process), I'm tuning in to thoughts and feelings and impressions that previously had been silent. It's deeply unnerving. It's like a committee in my head—a committee that can never, ever agree.

'What's going on for you right now?' she says, quietly and gently. It's a trick she often uses, although I doubt she's even aware of it: lowering her tone, going quiet, reducing the sense of threat. She's the human equivalent

of a horse whisperer. And in this state, like this, I feel strangely like a cornered animal. How can a simple question, in a therapy session, with a therapist I've been seeing for 3 years, be so threatening?

I have no idea what's going on for me right now. I sink further into myself, feeling a failure. I really don't want to be here.

'Shame?' she prods, gently.

I push myself to the fore. I need to rouse myself, because I am ashamed at the visibility of my shame. I need to hide it. I move myself in my chair and feel suddenly more present, as if I've reactivated the connection with my body just by moving. I sit forward, determined not to fall back into other parts of myself. Because although I want to retreat there, it also feels too vulnerable.

'Shame?' I say, my voice little more than a monotone. It feels an effort to get the muscles in my face to move. I feel a dull, thudding confusion.

Come on, I say to myself, silently. I don't want her to see me at such a loss.

I shuffle myself upright. 'I don't know what's happening,' I say at last, trying to sound confident. 'But maybe you're right. And shame is an interesting reaction.'

I've gone into analytical, adult mode to try to get a grip on the collapse of emotion on the inside of me. She knows it and sits back in her chair. We have this tacit agreement that analytical me wants more space, less intimacy.

'What might the shame be a reaction to?'

She's playing along. We're going to tackle this, for the moment at least, as if it's some bug in a section of programming code. We'll sit shoulder-to-shoulder and assess it. At no point will it refer to *me*.

'Shame is...' I'm wracking my brain. *Come on, this information is in there somewhere.* It takes huge effort to locate it because the pull to drift away is exceptionally strong just now. It's like red warning lights are strobing along the surface of my mind and my instinct is to retreat psychologically—mental flight into another part. But I'm also learning to try to stay present, at least for a while. And I don't want to draw any more attention to my distress.

'Shame is an interpersonal emotion,' I say, as what I recently read comes back into view at the edge of my memory. 'It's what we feel when we risk being excluded from the group. It's a survival thing. Our survival is

at risk if we're not part of a group—a group affords the greatest chance of surviving. There's protection, there's reproduction, there's shared resources. So if that membership is threatened, our neurobiology reacts as if our life is in danger.'

She's weighing me up, trying to see how close to the edge I am. She is brewing. There's something, evidently, that she wants to say.

'What about shame towards *yourself*?' she says.

I look at her blankly. I have no idea what she's talking about, and my face evidently says so.

'I don't disagree with what you're saying about membership of a group,' she says. 'But given what we've just been talking about, I'm more interested in your membership of *yourself*.'

Membership of myself? I don't understand. It will take me several years more to truly grasp this: how I need to belong, not just to a clan, but first and foremost to *myself*. It is the antithesis of dissociative identity disorder: the sense of belonging deep within yourself, feeling 'at home' within yourself, it being safe to be 'you'.

'What were we just talking about?' I ask, focusing on the least threatening part of her last sentence. But I immediately regret it.

'Do you not remember?' she asks, a little superfluously. Obviously I don't. And she knows it. But she's prodding me towards the edge.

I shake my head and feel that terrible lurching feeling in my stomach again. I want to draw all over myself with a magic eraser.

'I *can't* remember what's happened when I'm in other parts!' I say, a little angrily, but really just to try to deflect her. It's like a warning shot across her bows, that I don't want to go there.

She is not to be deflected.

'Hmm. Maybe. I think sometimes you can, and that you could if you wanted to.'

I feel warm with a tiny flicker of rage. *What gives her the right to say that?* But I also know she's right. Many times, she's offered to talk about what other parts have said to her while I've been 'gone', and I've declined. I haven't wanted to know, because at one level—amorphous, wordless, indescribable—I *have* known. It's been like trying not to remember a particularly vicious dream, so looking away, turning the music up, cluttering my mind with busyness.

I fall silent, heavy under this accusation, and yet also, strangely, feeling freed by it. Because somehow, in a way that I can't yet articulate, there is hope in it. My dissociation is not as out of control as I tell myself it is. I *could* know if I wanted to know—perhaps not perfectly, perhaps not in the same way as rewinding and playing back normal life from yesterday, but in some shape and form.

She's absolutely right. *I could know if I wanted to know.* It's exactly because I think it's too overwhelming, too unbearable, too *shameful*, that I don't want to know. The thought sits heavily upon me, like treacle on a sponge.

'I can't,' I say sulkily. 'The shame is too overwhelming. I don't want to know about my parts. I hate them.'

'And that's a problem.' She says this very softly, like mist landing on autumn leaves, and so somehow it doesn't sting.

'I hate having parts. I hate what they represent. I hate *having to have* parts. I hate being different. I hate being messed-up. I hate everything that all of this'—big wafty circles with my arms, because words won't do —'represents.'

There is an aching sadness now in the room between us.

'I know.'

'I'm so *ashamed*...'

There aren't words big enough to describe this feeling. It is a sense that I would rather be anyone other than myself. It is a belief that I am fundamentally and impossibly flawed, that I will never change, that there is no-one in the universe as unacceptable as me. It is an expectation that I must cling to the edge of the room because if I dare to take my place in the world, to show my face, to announce my arrival, I will be rejected. I am only allowed here as long as no-one notices me, as long as I don't get in the way, as long I don't need or demand anything.

And here I am, in therapy, the centre of attention, full of neediness, grasping for connection, disclosing my feelings, daring to *be*. It is dangerous and mortifying and delicious all at the same time. But I get my revenge each week by self-harming to restore the status quo. Only then is it acceptable for me to come again. The therapist doesn't know this yet. It is one more shameful thing that sits in the space between us.

'You're ashamed of being you?'

'Yes.'

That's it, exactly. Of course I am. Wouldn't she be? Wouldn't anybody be ashamed to be me? It seems so obvious, a truth that has always been true. And even admitting it feels shameful, because I know the next step will be to challenge it and to try to change it. I steel myself. *Time to be told off for being ashamed*, I think.

But she doesn't. She sits with compassion creasing her face.

'That's a very hard place to be in.'

Ouch. I hadn't expected that. I hadn't *wanted* that. I want her to hate me, and be cross with me, and chastise me, tell me how stupid I am for being so ashamed. Because that's what I deserve.

All session I have been feeling desperately alone. The metre or so between us has felt like a mile. Many times, I have thought that I would rather be on my own than alone in a room with another person, when connection is so close and yet so far. And suddenly, in that aloneness, her empathy has touched me, and I look at her—just for a moment. I look deep into her eyes, to make sure there's no mockery there, and I allow the uplink to complete.

'Yes' is all I say, because I want her to know that I'm here now.

The tautness in my muscles slowly begins to subside. I feel less on guard. Gradually I begin to soften, like she's warming me in a pan. And then I sigh out my sadness.

'I don't want to hate myself so much...' I offer.

'I know,' she says, full of sadness too.

'But how can you even begin to not hate yourself when you're so hateful?—when, intrinsically, deep down, you really are so shameful?' This is the nub of the impossibility for me. The belief overrides all other options.

She shuffles in her chair slightly, as if she's been holding my tension too.

'Your shame has served a purpose,' she says, and she immediately catches my attention. I had always, and only, thought of shame as negative—the shame to be ashamed of. I glance at her, surprise furrowing my brow.

'Go on?'

'Your shame kept you alive,' she explains. 'You can't afford to hate the people who hurt you, or failed to love you, so you had to hate yourself. When your needs weren't met, you couldn't afford to get angry that they weren't being met, so you concluded that you were wrong to have needs instead. Your shame prevented an uprising.'

‘An uprising?’

‘It’s wrong to be hurt, and it’s wrong for basic needs like love and comfort to be denied as a child,’ she says. ‘The natural response, Bowlby said, when our attachment needs are thwarted is anger. But if you had been angry, you would have been hurt or rejected even more. It was too dangerous. So instead of labelling it as wrong, and rising up against it, you labelled *yourself* as wrong. It’s what most survivors do. It’s a smart thing to do at the time. It helps you.’

My mind is reeling. As usual, I had only ever seen my shame in terms of *me*: this is truth, the badness of me, the defectiveness of me. I am self-evidently bad, therefore the shame is just a reflection of reality. But this idea flips that. So I stagger a little.

‘But it’s not helping me *now*,’ I counter, eventually, just because I feel I need to say something. What I really want to do—and what I will do—is go away and sit on my own and write down what she has just said and ponder it, alone, for days. Because that’s how long it takes for my brain to process *anything*.

‘No, it’s definitely not helping you now. But it did help you then... So it’s not a bad thing in and of itself. It was adaptive then, but it’s maladaptive now.’ She looks at me, I think to check that I’m still with her. I am. I’m on-the-edge-of-my-seat curious. ‘The question is whether you want to keep using a strategy which has outgrown its usefulness, or whether you want to start using a more appropriate one.’

It feels like she’s edging back from my emotion, so as not to push me too far in one go. But it helps. There is space in my lungs to breathe.

‘What other strategy is there?’ I say, because I literally have no idea at all: shame is all I have ever known.

She pauses and seems to be spinning through a rolodex of options in her head.

‘What about self-compassion?’ she suggests at last.

Rush. It’s like a sudden avalanche, of terror mixed with disgust. I feel thrown back by the reaction and my body instinctively withdraws from her.

‘Self-compassion?!’

I spit it out, like it’s maggoty apple.

My muscles are suddenly ablaze and it’s all I can do to hold myself in the chair and not get up and run out of the door. I have no idea why I’m

reacting but suddenly the therapist feels like a stranger and I don't know if I can trust her any more.

'Alright, alright...' she says, softly but with a certain amount of authority. 'You didn't like that... Let's calm things down...'

And then suddenly something breaks on the inside of me and I switch to a young part who's sobbing and crying and all their hurt plasters itself across the room at the therapist. I stand somewhere at a distance, watching it, appalled, trying to look away. I'm not sure how long this outburst lasts. I'm not even sure it's me. I'm not sure of anything at all, but when I come back into myself I have to sniff up my snot and my breathing is jerky and shallow.

'Shame certainly feels like a safer option for you right now than self-compassion,' she says gently.

I nod blankly, not quite sure of what's just happened, and certainly not sure of why. But we have uncovered something important, and I know enough by now to realise that herein lies the route of healing, however much I may wish to retreat. Shame has been my ally and my friend and I am being asked to switch sides. And evidently parts of me don't yet feel that they can allow that.

I dig around on the inside for a little while, trying to understand myself. I'm shocked at how painful this all feels. As if she can read my thoughts, the therapist breaks the silence and says, 'Shame can feel like a matter of life and death.'

Yes! That's exactly it!

Suddenly I don't feel quite so bad at feeling so bad. I hadn't realised that it's normal to be this reactive. I hadn't realised it wasn't just me.

I prop myself forward, leaning on my knees. The chair I'm sitting on always seems to want to swallow me up, sagging me into its bowels, and I'm sure it contributes to my sense of stuckness. So I force myself slightly forwards.

'It feels dangerous to let go of shame,' I say at last, slowly and carefully, as if picking peas out of paella. I become acutely aware that right at this moment, battling with shame, I want to shield myself from the therapist's disgust and displeasure.

'Go on.'

I stare down at the floor and try to summon the words. 'Shame is what stops me doing bad things,' I explain. 'If I didn't have shame, then who

knows what I'd be capable of?'

It feels like this great, vast expanse of badness on the inside of me, like a skate rink filled with black ice. And I'm expecting the therapist to spit at me.

But she mirrors my body position, like she's leaning in towards me. She seems to *want* to make contact with me. The thought makes me shudder slightly, with fear.

'You're using shame as a form of self-control?' she clarifies.

'Yes.'

'Does it work?'

I want to say, *of course it does*, but suddenly I'm unsure. I feel stuck, not knowing what the right answer is, so I shrug my shoulders.

'What might you be capable of if you didn't shame yourself?' she asks instead.

Of course I don't know. I have never identified it. It's a nebulous dread based not in fact but in primal beliefs about myself. Bad people do bad things; I am a bad person; therefore I will do bad things. Shaming myself—the brutal, censorious self-deprecation of constant criticism and judgment upon myself—is the only thing that holds back vile atrocities. *Obviously*.

Again I shrug. We are stuck in a Catch-22. Of course the therapist doesn't believe how bad I really am: if she did, she wouldn't let me come. I mustn't tell her, or show her, or let her see. So she will never believe me when I tell her that I'm bad. How then to move forwards?

But there's something strangely comforting about her presence here with me even as I grapple with these thoughts. There's something disconfirming about her whole way of being. And I see, in a sudden flash, that she is not my mother, and that she doesn't hate people and judge them and write them off. There is instead everything in this moment that I have experienced all the time I have been in therapy with her—patience, generosity, tolerance, compassion. Could it be that she sees me differently to the way I see myself?

I have failed to speak for a good few minutes now. Because everything I feel, and everything I am, seems beyond words.

Still she persists: 'There's a part of you—the part that was out just now—who's desperate to be loved,' she says. 'They hate being controlled with shame. It's painful to them—painful to the point of being unbearable. It's torturing them...' She pauses and we tacitly acknowledge the significance of

this word, both knowing that for me at least it is not a metaphor. ‘They’re not bad, and they don’t need to be controlled with shame and hatred. That’s the way you were parented. But you don’t have to parent yourself like that...’

She trails off, perhaps wondering if she’s pushed it too far, or wondering if she’s not pushed far enough. How do therapists ever make these judgements? How do they ever get it right?

The reflex strikes within me: like a punch in the guts, I recoil at the thought of loving this little part of me. To me, it is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Appealing and charming to the therapist, I see it as conniving, manipulative, deceitful, narcissistic. It wants love. It would grab for it. It would cling to the therapist and never let go. It would scrape out every last shred of affection and attention and adoration and love. It would ruin it all. *I hate it*. It’ll get us into trouble with its craving for acceptance. It’ll turn people against us, lead us into a trap. With its need for affirmation, it’ll make us vulnerable to abuse.

I’m not sure if I say any of this out loud. It’s as if I’ve suddenly stepped sideways within myself, but the therapist is now looking at me, straight down and through my optic nerve, right to my brainstem, and she’s saying, ‘No, no she won’t. It’s not that part’s fault that you were abused. It’s not wrong for her to want to be loved. You weren’t abused because you wanted to be loved. You were abused because your abusers chose to abuse you. It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t *that part’s* fault by wanting to be loved.’

I sit feeling crumpled and lonely and confused and drained. I particularly object to the use of the pronoun ‘she’.

We mustn’t be loved, comes a voice inside, desperate and fearful. It’s a strange voice, little more than a child’s, but it’s urgent and serious. And I realise that the badness that I most fear being capable of is the badness of looking to be loved. While I shame myself, and insist that I am immutably unloveable, I am trying to keep myself safe. I am trying to avoid ever being abused again. Because somewhere, at some point in time, somehow, I have taken on the belief that I caused the abuse by needing to be loved. I have no idea of its genesis, only that it takes the form of a self-evident belief. And if I shame myself continually, if I detail my badness, my unworthiness, at all times, then I can keep that part under control: and we will never, ever, seek to be loved, and we will never, ever, allow ourselves to be abused.

But the therapist's words scorch through me. 'You were abused because your abusers chose to abuse you,' she says again. 'It wasn't your fault.'

There are many layers to my shame, but this is one of the thickest: the way I have needed to cast myself as the villain, to ensure that the love-needy parts of me don't get their way.

I ache now with the pain of it all.

The therapist looks back at me, no doubt wondering what I'm thinking. I want to believe her. I think, actually, that I *do* believe her. But it still feels wrong.

'If I hadn't needed to be loved, I wouldn't have been abused...' I proffer. As the therapist bends her head in towards me to catch my words, I realise how quiet my voice has become. This too is shame.

I look up at her. 'So if I shame myself, then I'll believe that I'm bad. And if I'm bad, then I don't deserve to be loved...'

'… and it keeps you safe.' She finishes my sentence with me and just for that moment I feel profoundly understood.

'Yes.'

'Except it doesn't.'

I don't know what she means, but I know she's right, and I have a sudden rush of my own insight.

'Because it keeps me away from people,' I say. 'It keeps me away from nourishing relationships. And then that drives me towards dangerous people, into relationships where I'm abused. So it doesn't actually keep me safe at all...'

'No.' Sadness, like a shimmering of sand.

What would it be like, instead, I wonder, *to allow myself to be loved*? For the moment I can't get over how dangerous it still feels. But there's a window, a tiny glimmer of light of a life-beyond. And I want to peer through it.

'This week,' says the therapist, with a subtle glance at the clock, 'how about you journal about what's safe and unsafe about letting yourself be loved, and not loved? Four quadrants: one for each position?'

Her 'homework' is par for the course. And she always expects me to do it.

I nod. I am beginning to appreciate that the therapy hour is just the first card in the deck, and I have all week to deal them all. None of the things we touch on are resolved within the session. They are merely activated, and the

principle work is in the gaps between sessions. How much I utilise those gaps is as important as what we do in the therapy room. But as always, the loneliness of the intervening week looms upon me, and I don't want to leave.

And it occurs to me that I *do* want to be loved: otherwise, why would I be here, and why would I want to come back?

And so I do leave, and then I come back, and the process continues. And bit by bit I edge towards the belief that I don't need to be ashamed of wanting to be loved.

THE POWERLESSNESS OF GROOMING

‘It’s just a terrible sense of guilt,’ I explain, ‘but I don’t even know where it comes from. I just know that it was my fault. That it was always my fault. So how can I sit here in therapy and complain that I was abused if I caused it?’

The therapist looks steadily at me like she’s trying to balance a spoon on the end of her nose, and if she twitches a single muscle in expressing a response, it will fall off. I feel slightly disturbed that she is so still. Either she’s going to throw me out—because she’s realised how wrong it is for me to be here—or she’s going to demolish my belief in a single retort. But I don’t yet know which.

She doesn’t speak. She just keeps looking at me. It goes on for about three hours. Or maybe three seconds—I’m not sure. Time has gone scrunchy.

Eventually she takes a deep breath and shifts in her seat, moving slightly closer. *Here it comes*.

‘Would you say to your foster children that it’s their fault that they were abused?’

Ouch.

But she doesn’t stop there.

‘Would you also, by extension, say that they don’t deserve to be looked after, because they’ve caused the situation they’re in?’

I look away and a strange feeling rushes through my belly, like the moments before vomiting. Up it reaches into my chest and then sits, spiking in my chest.

‘No.’

I sit, full of petulance, at the unfairness of her tactics.

‘But surely that’s different, isn’t it?’ I retort at last. ‘Because they *didn’t* cause it. Whereas I...’

’Whereas you... what? How did you cause it?’

‘I don’t know.’

And I don’t know. Right at this moment, sat here, in this Thursday morning gloom, the rain spattering lazily against the window, my calves aching from the tension of wanting to run, a boiler in the background murmuring a low growl: right at this moment I have no idea how the abuse could possibly be my fault or why I’ve come to believe it. I have a lot of beliefs like this: beliefs that just *feel* right. Beliefs that declare themselves to be true. Beliefs that sit like too much treacle in my guts and refuse to budge or be digested. This is how I live. I don’t know how I know what I know. I just know it. And my guilt and responsibility for the abuse is a foundational piece of knowledge, of how I am in the world, and how it all came to be. So her question is moot. Stupid. Irrelevant.

But she presses the point. ‘How did you cause the abuse? What did you do that led to you being abused?’

She’s looking at me with an intensity that says, ‘This is what we’re talking about. This is what we’re working on today. We’re going to sort this.’ And when she’s in that kind of a mood, I know by now that there’s no arguing with it. It’s not coercive, but it is strict. We’ve talked in other sessions about how she needs to balance pushing me to overcome trauma’s natural avoidance, with not pushing me beyond my autonomy. Somehow, mostly, I experience her occasional forcefulness as the passion of empathy, driving me to heal, rather than the coercion of abuse. But it’s a fine balance. I don’t envy her responsibility.

But all the same, right now I want to avoid, and I want to run away. My self-blame sits like a plug in a hole, and I have no idea what will come gushing out if I dislodge it.

‘Think of one or two incidents,’ she says, breaking my thought-space with further instruction. ‘One or two times when you were abused, as we’ve talked about. And tell me what you did in the lead-up to those incidents that caused them to happen.’

I shift myself into gear. This must be important. There’s a certainty about her, a confidence, that is leveraging against my own fear. Maybe I can

trust her. If we go there, maybe it will be alright.

But still the words won't come. I want them to, but my mind won't focus. It's not a DVD I can slip in and then hit rewind. The memories don't work like that. I can't remember a before, a during and an after: that's not the nature of traumatic memory. The 'incidents' sit as little islands, fragments of remembering, and there is no lead-up to them and no follow-on. They just are.

But.

I'm also making excuses.

Because I do know.

'With Michael,' I proffer, and then splutter to a halt again, like my first car: the old red VW Polo which could run and run once it was going, but I had to avoid stopping, or parking, or basically anything involving first gear.

She nods, encouragingly, like she's giving me a push-start.

'With Michael...'

Michael was the son of a farmhand. He was an adolescent—to me as a 3 or 4-year-old, he was a giant, but he was probably only 14. Part of my denial was because I didn't know that children abuse children, but they do. My mind overlaid the template of the stereotypical abuser—dirty man in a mac—on everything that happened to me. And because it was a child, or a woman, or groups of respectable people with barely a mac in sight, I rejected what happened to me as abuse. Or at least, as 'proper abuse'. It can't have happened if it didn't fit the mould. *I wish. Oh, how I wish.*

'With Michael...'

And then it comes. Memories that seconds ago were inaccessible come crashing down upon me, like shards of falling glass. In the hay barn, in the stables, in the fields, the ditch that runs along the track, by the woods, in the grain store. Bales of straw. I can feel the stalks scratchy and dry through my trousers, on my skin, against my back.

I do remember.

He gave me sweets. He tickled me. It was fun.

He talked to me. He listened. He touched me.

He said he liked me. No-one had ever said that before.

And I wanted it. I wanted the attention. I wanted the sweets.

It was my fault.

The therapist straightens herself and her neck clicks so loudly that I can hear it. It reminds me, for a moment, that she is here, and it reminds me, for

a moment, that she is real. Because everything has gone faint, like diluted pastels, watery and thin.

‘That still doesn’t make it your fault,’ she says, all serious and weighty, like cold-pressed sadness.

The shards of memory are piercing against me painfully and I want to wipe them away. All I can feel is my guilt, forcing itself upon me, pinning me down. I shouldn’t have taken the sweets. I shouldn’t have gone to see him. I shouldn’t have liked him. I shouldn’t have enjoyed his attention. The horror of it is hot and rancid and I hate myself for it: *stupid, stupid, stupid girl.*

‘It *wasn’t* your fault,’ the therapist says, gravely, darkly, forcefully, achingly. ‘It’s grooming.’

I look up, surprised. *What does she mean?*

I have worked in child protection. I know what grooming is. *Grooming is... grooming is...* My thoughts stick together in clumps in my mind and I can’t make sense of them. Whatever grooming is, it didn’t happen to me. I realise, suddenly, that I don’t actually, really, know what grooming is. It’s just a word I’ve heard of. Its meaning is vague, academic, irrelevant to me and to my experience. Grooming is what dirty men in macs do to get children into their car, isn’t it? I realise I’ve never stopped to ask what it is. It’s a word devoid of fleshed-out reality, mere jargon. *Grooming happens to children. And I wasn’t a child.*

I hear the voice inside that says this. It is deadly serious. This is what I believe. Even in this edge-of-sanity state, I know it’s incongruous.

‘Grooming happens to children,’ I repeat, out loud, for the therapist’s benefit. ‘And I wasn’t a child.’

Her eyelids flatten, but she holds herself steady. She’s adept at not reacting. Instead, her head tilts slightly to one side.

‘Weren’t you?’

I know, I know. It’s crazy. But I can’t have been a child.

‘Anyway,’ I say, deflecting, because I need time. ‘What is grooming?’

Now she does look surprised. I have more knowledge of these things than she does. But right now, I have no knowledge of anything. I glimpse my dissociation—this vacuous state of not-knowing, when all the information that is stored somewhere in my head has been unplugged, and it’s as if I’ve never known it.

Normally she might deflect the question back to me, but she's holding the tension in the room like a taut rope across fragile cargo. She's not going to let go.

'Grooming is the transfer of responsibility from the abuser to a victim,' she says, slowly, poising each word next to each other as if they might topple over. 'It's the way that the abuser passes their shame and guilt onto the victim, so that they can sleep at night and not feel bad about what they're doing. It's the way that they set the child up to be abused with the child feeling that it's their fault, so that the child doesn't disclose what's happening. It's a devious and manipulative way for the abuser to avoid detection and to keep the child trapped in an abuse scenario because they're too ashamed to tell anyone. Grooming is a deliberate act.'

She pauses, looks straight into me, and says, 'Grooming is what Michael did to you.'

It's like being pressed against a flame. I don't know why it hurts so much. I don't know why it seems to cover my body with unremitting, putrid effluent. Being abused is bad enough. Realising that it was a set-up, and that I was powerless to stop it, is worse.

I ache agonies in that moment.

Tears.

I vomit.

Because I grasp, in that moment, that by blaming myself for the abuse I have been able to control it. It wasn't someone deliberately harming me. It wasn't the twisted evil of someone setting me up to take the fall—all these years of trauma and damage and pain. It was just that I chose to be abused, and I caused it. And thus, I was in control of it. I could hate myself and blame myself for it, but that was better than acknowledge that I was entirely powerless, and that malevolence had overwhelmed me.

'But I wasn't a child.'

We come back to this point: this tiny point of light in my brain that has dessicated all reality from it so that I can shield myself from the pain of the powerlessness of abuse by refusing to accept that I was a child, and a small child, when it happened.

I wasn't a child.

Back and forth in my mind, arguing.

What was I then, a 3-year-old adult?

It has been a trick of my mind, to cast myself back in my memory as more competent, more autonomous, more responsible than I was. The reality was that I was 3 or 4 years old. Tiny. Helpless. Naive. Dependent.

Ugh.

I twist and wrestle within myself at the biting realisation that no 3-year-old is responsible for the paraphilic machinations of an abuser. I don't even know how to describe what they did: I have to coddle it in abstraction.

'I wasn't a child.'

I have to cling to this unreality to save myself from the horror of it. Because how can someone do that to a human being, to a child who's barely learned to hold their wee or tie their shoelaces? *Ugh, ugh, ugh*. The pain of it runs hot and prickly over my entire being.

It is too much. So I switch away into a different part of me. Not because it is a good thing to do. Not because it is a bad thing. But because it happens. It just happens. The therapist goes with me. She soothes. Casting the magic of her empathic, attuned presence, eventually the pain subsides enough for me to dare to be myself again, in the room, and I come back. It's not a question of whether I should have dissociated or not. The reality is that I did. And the therapist has learned to work with whatever comes, without judgement, without pressure, without expectation.

We sit together now, breathing through the soreness of it all.

'You were groomed,' she says again, and this time, with some of the emotion burnt off from switching, I nod, gloomily.

'It almost feels worse than the abuse itself,' I say and my fists tighten and clench, back and forth, like a spasm of anger. 'But what's so horrific is the idea that someone planned it. They set me up. They *tricked* me.'—Here then is the genesis of why I always fear trickery and deceit, am hyper-reactive to the merest scent of it.—'They wanted me to feel that it was my fault, so that it wouldn't be theirs.'

I look up at her as it bursts over me like a balloon filled with wet.

'It *wasn't* my fault. Because I was just a child.'

I'm saying it like I'm trying to convince her. She holds the contradiction of my assertion now and my assertions earlier as she always does, knowing that this is the nature of a dissociative mind. I both know and I don't know. I feel and I don't feel. I am, and I am not. Instead, she binds these opposites together in patient acceptance, reconciling my discrepancies. She holds my mind together even when I cannot.

‘And what I haven’t been able to cope with,’ I continue, ‘is the fact that I was so powerless. Not just because I was little. But because I was set up. I was trapped. There was absolutely nothing I could have done to avoid being abused, in those circumstances. And all my life I’ve coped with it by pretending to myself that there was. That I chose to be abused, that it was my fault. Because that’s easier to bear than the helplessness. Being so powerless... it makes me feel so pathetic. I would rather be wrong, and guilty, and at fault, than be so pathetic...’

Here it is now: the explanation for so many of my behaviours, through the years, growing up, into adulthood. Better to be bad than to be powerless.

‘And yet, I wasn’t bad,’ I say, sadness upon sadness. ‘I was powerless. That’s the truth.’

‘Yes,’ she says, and her voice is vibrant with compassion. ‘Yes, you were powerless.’

We sit for a while and the rain spatters some more, like tears against the window. The scalding pain of it all begins to ebb because she sits with me. There is compassion, but she doesn’t despise me. This is what should have happened after the abuse: someone should have sat with me, heard me, validated me, hurt with me, soothed me. It is thirty years later, but it is not a moment too soon.

‘But you’re not powerless now,’ she says, at last. She’s earned the right to say this by sitting with me in the rain-spattered pain of it.

It’s a new thought, whilst also being an old one. Because while I’ve denied for so long that I was powerless as a child, I’ve been unable to see that I’m not powerless as an adult. All of my ‘can’ts’ have stacked up silently around me, the legacy of the freeze response of trauma. But I have denied their cause: I have seen my stuckness, my terror, my *patheticness*, as being inherent to *me*.

‘I really was powerless back then,’ I say, chewing on it. I can’t explain, in this moment, why this is so liberating, when all my life it has been the thing that I have worked hardest not to know. ‘Because I really was a child...’

And it dawns upon me that my denial of my helplessness has contorted my view of myself: defending against my powerless entrapment, I have instead projected onto the me of thirty years ago the agency of adulthood, who could have done something, who invited it, who wanted it, who was to

blame. But that is not me. That's not what happened. I was groomed. I was tricked. I was not to blame.

'I'm not being groomed *now*,' I say, almost in a frenzy, because I can see an acute distinction between reality and my magical thinking. 'I was powerless and helpless *then*. I really was. Because I was groomed. I was set up. I was tricked. But I'm not being groomed *now*.'

'You were rendered powerless by the grooming,' she agrees.

I nod, eagerly. 'But it's not intrinsic to *me*. I'm not, by my very nature, powerless, or pathetic.'

'No, you're not. Not at all. Not in the slightest.'

And we sit again for a while as this drips into me. I was groomed, and thus made powerless. But powerless is not who I am. Powerless is not who I need to be.

I am angry and hot with the wrongness of what happened to me. Grooming isn't just about wearing down a child's defences, as I'd always understood it—getting us to like them, getting us to trust them. Grooming is the dark art of shovelling their shit into our back yard, and blaming it on us. Grooming says, 'You caused this. You deserve this. It's on you.' And we believed it.

But no more.

'I'm angry,' I say, as I realise it.

'Good,' she says, surprising me. She smiles at me, noting my confusion. 'Anger is the energy not to act powerless any more,' she says. 'You just need to harness it and point it in the right direction.'

But this is a big topic, a new vista of wide-open possibilities, and there's no time for it in this session. But as I leave I notice that my forearms are tingling. Hands that reached out for sweets and couldn't push back against his weight on me feel connected again. *I'm not powerless*, I think, as my fingers open then clench. *I was groomed*.

I CAN’T, I COULDN’T AND I CAN

‘But I can’t.’

Why, just at that moment, did the therapist not understand? Of course *I couldn’t*: it was impossible. I felt ashamed to have to say it. They could be obtuse sometimes, these therapists. Downright unempathic. Cold. Harsh. Uncaring. Was she even human?

She said nothing, obviously hating me. Her silence sat like a pool of disgust around my feet.

‘I can’t,’ I said again, trying not to say it too firmly, worrying that my throat would swallow back the defiance before my breath could expel it.

Another pause.

The silence hurt, full of contempt.

I was convinced I would see hatred. I was convinced her lips were upturned in a snarl, despising me, goading me, willing me away. I was convinced for that moment that she hated me every bit as much as my mother had hated me, at times in the past when I’d pleaded, futilely, with her that *I couldn’t*.

Eventually I dared look at her. I sucked my courage deep into my belly, seeking the strength for it. Meeting her eye felt like abseiling rope-less, into the dark.

But even in my transference, even in this triggered, not-quite-me state, *even I* could see the softness in her gaze.

‘I can’t’—for a third time, but something about that softness had disarmed me, and melted my rage.

In the space of seconds, I had descended into a four-year-old's transference of therapist as 'bad mummy', convinced of my hopeless, despairing, *un-agency*, and then ascended somehow back with one look of softness to tenuous reality. This therapist didn't hate me, right here, right now. I just thought she did. And her softness betrayed it.

'Why can't you?' she asks me, at last, closing the silence.

'Because I... ' But I trail off and frown at myself, sensing a trap. 'Because I...'

I sigh, exasperated. 'I can't because *I can't*. Because I don't think I can. Because I couldn't. So I still think I can't.'

I've answered myself with what I think she'll say and I can see it myself now, even if only for a moment.

It's my default response: 'I can't.' It's an emotion, not a fact. I *feel* that I can't, and therefore I can't.

This time, she surprises me. She speaks: a rare event, if only because she holds silence so well.

'It's the freeze response,' she says, and nothing more. She's coaxing me to think.

I root around in my brain to finish the meaning. There's a faint stirring of something, but I don't know of what and it might need a shake as well as a stir.

The freeze response. I know this, but only as fact. I haven't grasped it fully, not yet seen its relevance to *me*.

'What about it?'

I feel all quivery inside, like in the gap between lightening and thunder. This is what therapy is like: my mind popping open, little balloons of insight bursting wet upon my thoughts.

'You know about the freeze response,' she says and she doesn't mean to cause it but I feel a shivering of shame. 'First there's fight, then there's flight. If that doesn't work, then freeze.'

My front brain grinds into gear. 'It's natural, automatic,' I say. 'It's instinctive. It's an evolutionary thing, for survival. We don't choose to go into flight or fight, or freeze. It just happens.'

She nods slowly, like she's teasing mackerel on the end of the line, afraid to spill them. 'Go on.'

Suddenly my brain hurts, like I'm resisting some knowledge. This is normal, for me: I know stuff, and I don't know it. I know the theory. I know

the facts. But I can't push them over into *being*. I can't get the knowledge to dissolve into my *within-ness*. It just sits on the surface of my mind, not impacting me. It's frustrating. It's dissociation.

My frustration erupts: 'Why is this relevant?'

She's used to me reacting. She stays calm. 'Go on,' she says, softness upon softness. 'Think it through.'

I push boulders in my mind. There are emotions, big ones, dancing right behind them. I'm afraid they'll crush me. But the softness is still there, in her eyes, in the bent of her back, leaning towards me, inviting me to trust. It will be okay for me to know this.

'So when we're faced with danger, with threat to our life, we don't respond rationally. We respond primitively. It's not our front brain, but our back brain. It's instinctive and automatic.'

Aaargh! screams some emotion quietly, warning me. It flutters a bit and I remember to breathe, to settle it. Then I go on: because it is okay for me to know this.

'When we're in freeze, we become immobile. Immobilised. Frozen. Stuck. We play dead.'

Nods, even more slowly.

'And so...'

'And so...?' she prompts.

'We can't do anything. We can't move. We can't...'

This is it.

'We can't...' she says and I don't know whether it's a question or a statement. It sounds like both.

'I can't...'

For a moment I am still blind, although I know that it's there, this glimpse. 'I can't...' Maybe by repeating it, it will take shape in the gloom. 'I can't...'

Gently, oh so gently, she helps me.

'And 'I can't' is what you always say...'

I look at her, astonished.

'I can't...'

Surely it's not that simple?

'When I get stuck, when I feel like I can't... it's the freeze response?'

'Maybe an outworking of it,' she agrees. 'A habit. A way of thinking. A belief.'

‘A belief is an habitual way of thinking...’ Something is quickening on the inside of me, like I’m about to flick a switch. ‘I’ve had so many experiences where I went into the freeze response...’

‘… which wasn’t your fault. There was nothing you could do to stop it. It was natural, instinctive...’

‘… so the freeze response itself became a habit. And when you’re frozen, you literally can’t. You can’t do a thing. You can’t lift a finger. You can’t move. You can’t think. You can’t act. Your biology is stopping you. You have to be still, to try to survive. You can’t move. You simply can’t. You can’t act. You just *cannot* do a thing. Not a thing. When you’re in freeze, you *can’t*...’

The words are tumbling out now like a slinky down the stairs.

‘So I ended up always believing that I can’t. Because I couldn’t. At the time, I couldn’t. I couldn’t do a thing. I couldn’t do a thing to help myself. I couldn’t protect myself, defend myself, save myself.’

I pause, suspended in mid-thought like that scene from *The Matrix*. I look around at myself, wondering.

‘But it was okay that I couldn’t. That was the best thing I could do at the time to survive. *I was supposed to ‘couldn’t’.*’

I feel triumphant, like I’ve had the thought of the decade. But on she pushes, relentlessly.

‘And so...’

‘And so...?’

‘Make the connection,’ she prompts, like she always does, but gently. ‘Bring it into now.’

‘And so...’ I’m suddenly very tired. I take a deep breath and force my brain through the fog. ‘And so... I *couldn’t* then but it doesn’t mean I *can’t* now. *I couldn’t* then was adaptive. It helped me survive. But I *can’t* now isn’t adaptive. It’s not helping. It’s keeping me stuck. It’s a belief that fits *that* world, but it doesn’t fit *this* world.’

‘That’s right.’ She’s talking to let me breathe. ‘It helped you then, but it doesn’t help you now. It was a good belief then, but it’s not so good now. Every time things get tough, your brain wheels out this old belief of *I can’t*. It’s its best attempt to help you. But it doesn’t help now, because your circumstances have changed.’

‘I’m not a child any more,’ I interject, eager to finish my own thought. Damn these talkative therapists. ‘It helped me when I really was powerless

and had to freeze. It was an effective strategy *then*. It's not an effective strategy *now*. But it's not wrong that I think it. It's my brain offering solutions that worked in the past. But I need to find better options for what will work *now*.'

The near-scream emotion has retreated back within itself. The alarm is over. This thought, this feeling, this glimpse hasn't been as scary as I'd feared. That too, is a habit: the way my brain resists anything new, any insight, in case it's dangerous. Better the devil we know, it says. So it warns me, screams quietly, not to go there, not to think, not to *make the connection*. It wants us to stay as we are, because we've survived as we are.

'I've survived but I want more,' I say out loud, forgetting she wasn't on board this train of thought in my head. 'When you're under attack, all you can do is survive. But I'm not under attack any more. It just feels like it. But I'm not. So I can do more than survive. But to do that, I need new strategies. Not the same old, same old ones. They helped me survive *then*, but they don't help me thrive *now.*'

She's used to my tangents so says nothing. Often, one glimpse leads to three or five or ten. It's as if my brain has to get into a certain mode and then the whole pack of cards comes tumbling down. It's magical when it happens. So I waft my arms around expansively, tumbling every last card.

'*I can't* is a belief, like a memory. It's a strategy I had to survive. It was a good strategy. But it's outdated.'

I'm feeling smug now, like I'm not so bad at this therapy malarkey after all. I've forgotten, for a moment, how evil the therapist really is. Even shame has retreated. It all seems so obvious now: from this vantage point I can see the blight on my life of the instinctive, freeze-response reflex of *I can't*. In this moment, now, I can see its genesis. And for this moment, now, it is hard to remember how physical it is, how it grabs me in the guts, how the thoughts fall out of my head in freeze and how *I can't*. But for this moment, now, I see through it.

'I can,' I say, and suddenly the clock exists again and time unfreezes too and I know we're nearing the end of the session. And that sudden inrush of fear—that we're nearing the end of the session—for once is quiet because *I can*. 'The freeze response,' I say, with all the gravitas I can muster. 'The freeze response... it's everywhere.'

And she nods, her eyes narrowing, because I've got it.

‘It’s not just a thing that happened back then. It’s a thing that *happens.* It *keeps on* happening. It tells me *I can’t*. Because my brain thinks it’s safer not to. My brain thinks it safer not to act, not to try, not to do, not to move.’

And she nods in the ‘end of session’ way. I need to consolidate my thought quickly.

‘But it’s not safer *now*. When I feel *I can’t* now, it’s not necessarily true. It’s a strategy for staying safe, to believe that. That’s all. There will always be some things that *I can’t*. But I need to figure out what they *really* are. Not just believe them by default. I need to open my eyes.’

And I look up, and the gentleness is there still and it’s smiling. And I smile too because today has been one of those days, in amongst wasted sessions and rupture sessions and stuck-in-freeze sessions, when therapy works. When it really, actually works. When *I can*.

WHEN SAFE FEELS UNSAFE

‘Are you going to keep yourself safe this evening?’ asks the therapist. It’s nearly the end of the session. And it’s been a tough one. We’ve done some good work—knowing what I’ve previously been unable to know, feeling what I’ve previously been unable to feel—but I’m quivering right at the edge of my window of tolerance. And after previous such sessions I haven’t coped well.

I don’t know how to answer. I don’t really know what she means. I don’t know what the right answer is. And I don’t want to get into trouble.

‘Yes,’ I say, looking away and down and wriggling slightly in my seat.

She knows I’m bluffing.

She bites her lip and her eyelids squeeze together a bit. A long pause. She’s seeking me out and I’m watching her without looking at her.

‘*What* are you going to do to keep yourself safe?’ It’s a subtle change of question, but an effective one, because I’m caught.

‘I have absolutely no idea,’ I say, deciding that honesty is the best policy.

She pushes her lips into a faint smile and with enough lightness that I don’t feel in trouble. But I can’t not notice her seriousness.

‘Well, you need a plan,’ she replies.

Stalemate.

I have no idea how to formulate a plan for staying safe. I don’t understand the concept. I feel like she’s asking me to play chess blindfold. But I can also sense, from the way that she’s looking at me, that she’s not going to accept my excuses.

I sigh, angry at myself.

‘Let’s look at it the other way around, then,’ she offers, defusing me. ‘What would unsafe look like? Let’s identify that at least.’

This feels a bit easier. Breaking things down into steps for me is always effective. It is a skill that I have for other people, but never—so it would seem—for myself, or at least not here. Because I have never stopped to consider any of these issues before. Life has always just happened to me. It is a new idea that I can formulate plans to manage what life throws at me—what *I* throw at myself.

‘Self-harm,’ I say, beginning the bullet-list in my head. ‘Driving dangerously. Going missing. Going back to where the abuse happened in a dissociated state. Taking an overdose. Drinking too much. Getting into a ‘state’...’

The list sounds a little stark now I’ve verbalised it. For the first time, I glimpse it from the therapist’s perspective. Yes, I can see why she wants me to develop a plan to stay safe.

But as soon as I have that thought, I have another one to contradict it. *But I don’t care if those things happen. I don’t care if I’m not safe.*

Something must happen on my face to reveal my thoughts, because she leans in towards me, solemn and warm and investigative. ‘What are you thinking?’

I shoot my eyes up towards her for half a second and then look away, feeling that too-familiar feeling of shame wash through me like the flush of a toilet. I fold myself forwards and down, trying to go small and find some comfort in disappearing.

‘I’m thinking...’ I reply, but then I pause, as a new realisation hits me. ‘*Part of me* is thinking... that they don’t care if I’m not safe.’

I feel annoyed with myself, partly for saying it, admitting it, and partly because I hate this constant push-pull of conflict within myself. And, of course, because I hate having parts.

The therapist waits.

I wait.

I want things to be different. I want to care about my own safety. I feel like I ought to. But I don’t know how.

‘Why do you think that part of you doesn’t care if you’re not safe?’ she asks at last.

I shrug. I've never thought about it. I reflexively distract myself from thinking about my parts. But the therapist wants an answer, so I start speaking and hope that the words will come.

'I don't know. I guess maybe they don't feel that we're worth keeping safe?'

The therapist's face scrunches up into a look of acute sadness. 'Ohhh!' she says, as if she's just trapped her finger in the door.

I look up at her, surprised. That wasn't the sound I was expecting.

What does it mean? That I am worth keeping safe?

We sit for a few moments with the sound still echoing in my chest, and I'm shocked by the reflexive honesty of it. To me, it's just a statement: *I'm not worth keeping safe*. Of course not. Never have been. *That* was my experience in childhood. What else are you supposed to believe when you grow up living with your abusers?

'I think you know that I think you're worth keeping safe,' she says eventually, breaking up the confused sludge of thoughts in my head. *Not until just now*, I think, but I don't say it. I just nod and stare at her shoes.

'What else?' she says. Somehow she knows there's more. 'Why else doesn't that part care if you're safe or not?'

I focus my attention inwards, effortfully, doggedly. I'm not used to seeking out what my parts think and feel. It's like looking for a black object in a dark room.

'I guess maybe they feel guilty at being safe.'

'Guilty?'

I shrug again. I don't know why that word came out of my mouth, but it feels true and relevant and real.

'Maybe guilty because we survived, and we shouldn't have done. Other children didn't. And maybe we don't feel that we deserved to survive. So maybe we shouldn't be safe *now*. And...'

The thoughts are coming thick and fast, like things that I've always known are pushing themselves into consciousness. Each one of these thoughts could be expounded in its own session.

'And... that it's a kind of betrayal to feel safe now. Because then I'll forget the traumatised parts. I'll ignore them again. They need to keep me feeling unsafe so that I don't forget them.'

What I've just said sounds terribly, terribly crazy. I pinch a look upwards at her face, but she's just looking steadily back at me, furrows in

her brow.

I take a deep breath and press on. ‘And anyway, safe feels... safe feels... *weird*.’

‘Unfamiliar weird?’

‘Yes, like it’s too quiet. Scary quiet. When we’re agitated and distressed and feel unsafe, it’s as if all is well with the world. We know what to expect. We can handle it. But we can’t handle feeling good and peaceful and safe.’

‘Because?’

‘Because... because that’s when the bad stuff will happen—when we’re safe. If we allow ourselves to feel safe, that’ll be our undoing. We won’t be on guard. We won’t be ready for the bad stuff. So we mustn’t feel safe—because it’s not safe to...’

She nods slowly, looking intentfully at me, like she’s trying to absorb it all and make sure she doesn’t miss a single beat of what I’m saying. I’m expecting her to laugh at me incredulously, like I’m insane and that I’m talking rubbish. But it glows warm on the inside that she’s taking me seriously. Maybe it’s okay to say this stuff, and acknowledge it.

‘So you’re actually trying to keep yourself safe, by making sure you don’t *feel* safe?’ she says.

I look at her like she’s just said something extraordinary. I turn it over in my mind. *Could this be it?*—Therefore what I’m doing, not wanting to feel safe, is actually a smart thing to do, rather than insane?

‘Yes,’ I say once I’ve fully grasped it. ‘Yes, I think that’s it.’ And I breathe out the tension I’ve been holding. *I’m not mad*. At least, not entirely.

She nods again. ‘That makes a lot of sense.’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘But it’s not very helpful, is it?’

She bounces her head from side to side. ‘Yes and no. It’s helping and not helping at the same time. It’s your best attempt to manage the fall-out from trauma. And you’ve found a way to cope, so let’s not rubbish it. It’s been important. But, yes, it’s got some ‘side-effects’ too.’

‘Does it matter, though?’ I say, with sudden passion, as I switch sides within myself and take up the contrarian position.

‘Does what matter?’

‘Does it matter if I don’t keep myself safe? If I self-harm? If I go missing? If I...’ I wave my hands around to fill in the blanks that I don’t

want to articulate.

She clasps her hands together and looks down, then says slowly, ‘It matters to me.’

Ouch.

I’d forgotten, as always, that I matter to anyone. I’d forgotten that my actions have an impact on others. I feel irrevocably broken—entirely incapable of mentalising and empathising—that it doesn’t even occur to me. My significance to others is constantly dissociated from conscious thought.

I sit sadly, not knowing what to say.

The therapist instead speaks. She looks up at me and burrows into my head with my eyes. ‘Recovery from trauma involves learning to feel safe again. So it does matter when you don’t keep yourself safe, because that just perpetuates the trauma. It reinforces your trauma responses.’

This is a new thought to me. I’m not sure I understand it.

‘How do you mean?’ Asking this, too, will give me time.

‘I mean that trauma has hyper-activated your nervous system, to prepare you for danger. Part of the work of therapy is to get your nervous system to calm back down to baseline,’ she explains, patiently, kindly, gently. ‘And every time you put yourself in danger, it ramps it back up again.’

I squiggle my face around to try to understand.

‘But I don’t intentionally put myself in danger,’ I counter, defensively. ‘It just *happens*. It’s not always me, it’s parts...’

She smiles, maybe laughs a little—I’m not sure which—like she was waiting for me to make this excuse. She looks at me earnestly. ‘I know,’ she says. ‘I get that. But nature abhors a vacuum.’—*Where is she going with this?*—‘And so if you don’t plan to keep yourself safe—if you don’t take charge and make a determined effort to self-soothe and manage your distress and put yourself into a safe setting, with safe activities which will help to lower your hyperarousal—then unsafe-feeling parts will come in and fill the vacuum. You will default back to coping strategies from the past.’

She pauses. I pause. Her words are like little thunderclaps of revelation on my mind. But I’m not sure I like them.

‘And I’m not saying that those coping strategies are wrong,’ she adds, remembering my shame-default which takes everything as criticism. ‘Like we just said, they were your best attempts to survive. But you’re here in therapy to develop better ways. And so I’m encouraging you to take charge

of yourself—of your selves—and to come up with a plan to keep yourself safe. Because ultimately, learning to feel safe is the bedrock of recovery from trauma.'

I sit and let it sink in a little, and throw the thoughts from side to side in my brain, to see if I can rattle them into making sense.

'So if I don't plan to manage my distress,' I say, slowly, concentrating really hard to try to understand it, 'then that's going to keep me traumatised?'

'Yes.'

'But what if I don't know how to manage my distress?' I say.

'That's what you're here to learn. And you *do* know how to do it a little bit, at least in theory. You're just not so great at putting the theory into practice—coming up with a plan, and then actually implementing it. That's what I'm encouraging you to do.'

I shift uncomfortably on my seat. *She's right.*

'I guess it's the conflict on the inside of me,' I say, because I know that I can always think of at least one thing I could do to self-soothe, but I always fail to do it. 'It's the conflict between wanting to be safe and feel better—which is why I'm here—and the parts who want to keep the status quo of feeling unsafe.'

She nods.

'So how do I deal with that conflict?'

She seems to be about to say, 'What do you think?' but changes tack at the last moment. 'How do you deal with any conflict?' she says instead. 'What are good principles for that?'

I shrug and want to laugh her question away, but I realise that the clock is ticking and I need to make the most of these last few minutes.

'Understanding each other's perspective? Finding common ground? Negotiating? Communicating? Making it a win-win?'

She nods. She's doing a lot of nodding today. 'How can you apply that to you and the parts you're in conflict with?'

I wince. *I hate this bit.* 'I need to understand what those parts are trying to achieve—that they're trying to stay safe by making sure that we don't *feel* safe. But then I need to help them understand that we *are* safe now—mostly—and that we don't need to be on guard like we had to be as a child. So they don't need to keep using that old strategy, because times have

changed. I need to understand their perspective, and they need to understand mine.'

'And how are you going to do that?'

This is the million-dollar question. How do you 'talk' to 'parts of yourself'? It all feels so nebulous and vague, faintly ridiculous, maybe even a touch insane. When I'm 'me', I'm not 'them'. When I'm 'here', they're not. So how do I talk to someone who isn't 'here'?

And it makes me deeply uncomfortable. I have survived all my life by dissociating from these other parts of me. It feels counterintuitive, dangerous even, to communicate with them. If I talk to them, they might talk back. And then what will they say?

I realise, with a gulping unease, that I know full well what they will say. Because I hear it. I just pretend that I don't.

From some parts—the younger, terrified, traumatised parts—I hear their constant wail, their agony, their distress, their neediness, their fear. It is mostly inarticulate, but it is unmistakeable. And unbearable. It is the scream of a traumatised child, unremitting, unheard, unsoothed. Like living next door to a neglected baby whose screams of abandonment fill the night, the only response is to block it out with headphones.

From other parts—the critical ones—all day and all night I hear their rabid, frothing disgust towards me: utter disdain for who I am. Their angry, desultory shaming of me, pointing out my magnificent crapness as a human being, highlighting every error I make, pulling me apart, undermining me, running me down. I don't want to tune into it.

And then there's the fearful parts. I hear their anxieties like the constant screech of fingernails down a blackboard: *everything* is a source of concern. *Everything* is going to go wrong. *Everyone* is going to hurt us. We're going to mess *everything* up. And we will be hated by *all*.

I look up and realise that some of this—I'm not sure entirely how much—has been vocalised out loud. *Damn.*

'No wonder you don't want to talk to them,' the therapist says, sadly.

I'm off the hook. She understands.

'It sounds like *all of you* needs to think about how you to talk yourselves,' she adds.

Damn.

I hang my head, ashamed, but also relieved. She has called me out on my self-abuse. She has called me out on the internal attitudes which are

holding me in trauma. They are not the entirety of the problem, but they are at least the portion of the problem over which I have some control. I *have to* stop hating my parts. I have to stop being so discompassionate towards them, and blocking them out, and refusing to care. I have to accept that they are me, and I am them, and only together will we heal. That is the way forwards.

'So, what are you going to do to stay safe?' she asks again, shifting into the body position that says, 'We're finishing soon.'

It's strange how I can feel both chastened and supported by her at the same time. She gets it. She gets *me*. But she also won't let me make excuses. She demands change. She demands that I treat myself as she treats me. She refuses to be the only one who is responsible for compassion here.

I sigh and then pull myself upwards into a resolute, taking-action kind of posture. 'I'm going to go to a coffee shop on the way home and journal,' I say. 'I'm going to write down what we've been talking about, and think about it. Then I'm going to potter around at home and do a few jobs and get on top of things a bit. And then I'm going to get myself some tea, have a shower, and watch a box set in my pyjamas.'

It sounds silly. It sounds mundane.

'It sounds great,' she says.

Is that really all it takes?

I realise, with alarm, that I've never planned even for these trivialities. I've left therapy every single week with no plan at all, feeling powerless at what might happen next. And then hours later I have been surprised to find myself somewhere else having done who-knows-what.

Walking out of the therapist's door is the hardest part of the week. I move from the safety of containment and support back into the lawlessness of conflict within myself with no referee. I move from connection to aloneness. I move—too often—from hope to despair. These are the feelings which emanate from deep within me, from deep within the traumatised parts of myself, who feel this departure as abandonment and rejection. In my adult self I know that it is seven days, and I can cope, and I will be busy, and there is life to do. But these younger parts cannot envisage a future; they cannot imagine their return. To them it is the end, and they are stepping into the void. Shame overwhelms me every single time, at this hidden neediness within. And—I realise without saying—often I drive myself into unsafeness as revenge for the abandonment.

But this final conversation in itself has been grounding. I realise that it doesn't matter so much *what* I plan to do, as much as that I do plan. And that I commit within myself to taking care of myself. To staying safe. And that I resist the temptation to counteract the healing effects of therapy by returning to the status quo of agitation and unsafeness.

'Be kind to yourself,' she says as I leave. *Easier said than done*, I want to reply, but I don't, because I know I'm making excuses and leaving the door open to myself to resort to abusiveness.

'I will,' I say, and once the words are out I accept it as a promise, and a determination, and a plan. My stomach crunches up inside me at the prospect of it—*being kind! what a thought!*—and there's an immediate rush of panic, that it's not safe. But I've said it. And so I'll do it. At the very least, I'll try.

FORGIVENESS

‘You just need to forgive.’

I hang my head as shame courses through me again. I wish I hadn’t said anything. I wish I hadn’t asked for help. Because this is where it always lands: that it’s my fault. I’m only traumatised, Irene says, because I haven’t forgiven my abusers. If I would just forgive them, her theory goes, the flashbacks and dissociation would simply melt away.

Even as the shame nags at my guts, part of me is dubious. Part of me wants to look her in the eye and tell her that she’s wrong. But she’s powerful, and I’m not, and years of abuse taught me not to stand up to people more powerful than me. So I retain the self-protective shame posture of submission, and I mumble an apology, and promise myself silently that I will never initiate another conversation with Irene again.

I was a few months into my breakdown when this conversation happened. It was only one in a series of similar conversations that I’d been having with people for some time. I didn’t understand what was happening to me—my symptoms, my multiplicity, the flashbacks, the dissociation—and the only answer that ever seemed to be offered to me was that I needed to forgive. That my symptoms were evidence, only, of my unforgiveness.

And so for weeks I tried desperately ‘to forgive’. I didn’t know what it meant. I didn’t know how to ‘do it’. I would journal about it, writing the words out meticulously and with no conscious awareness of their futility: ‘I forgive x’. When that didn’t seem to change anything, I concluded that my forgiveness hadn’t been deep enough. I journalled at greater length, with more detail. ‘When x did x to me, it made me feel x. It caused me x. But I

now forgive x for the hurt and consequences I have suffered, and I discharge all debts and I choose not to seek revenge or recompense.'

My paragraphs become more and more ridiculous. But if this was the answer—if this was the solution to my ever-increasing suffering and torment—then I was quite prepared to write a million ridiculous paragraphs in order to ease it.

Nothing changed.

And of course nothing changed, because forgiveness wasn't the issue. Trauma was.

'If someone had shot you in the arm,' my therapist later explains, 'you would have a bullet in your arm, and damage to your bones and muscles and blood vessels.'

I nod, not understanding where she is headed.

'That damage would be there whether or not you 'forgave' the person who shot you.'

Aah, yes. Of course. Why haven't I seen it like this before? She has a knack of saying profound things simply.

'So forgiveness doesn't matter?' I ask, flipping straight from 'all' to 'nothing'.

'What do you think?'

Good question. What do I think?

I realise, after much thought, that I have no idea what I think. I think what I am supposed to think: that has been my strategy for surviving life. I try to figure out what the 'right' thing to think is, and then I think it. When I was trying to get help from Irene, when she unwittingly stepped into the role of attachment figure and activated my primal need for someone 'stronger and wiser' than me to rescue me from my pit, I automatically adapted my thinking to whatever she thought, in order not to alienate her: she wasn't going to help me if I disagreed with her. Naturally I didn't realise that this was what I was doing: I just assumed she must be 'right'.

But now, in this therapy session, is a new attachment figure who's playing hard to get. She won't tell me what the 'right' thing to think is. She wants me to figure it out for myself. She wants me to find my own truth. *She wants me to think for myself*.

And it strikes me, at just this moment, that forgiveness is a uniquely controversial issue, where so many people try to impose their views on so many others. You can support your football team of choice, your political

party of choice, and even your *Strictly* or *X-factor* star of choice—you can disagree with everyone else about your choices—but *you must forgive, and if you don't you'll deserve everything that's coming to you*.

We explore it further in another session.

'What is forgiveness all about?' I say, trying to sound nonchalant. Maybe I'll catch her out and she'll tell me what she really thinks.

'What do you think it's all about?' *Damn. Didn't work.* Now I'm stuck, because I started this train of thought, and I don't know what to say. Because I really, actually, don't know what it's all about. I stammer in silence for a little while.

'Everyone says you have to forgive,' I say. 'And it sounds like a good idea. Because no-one wants to end up bitter and twisted. But...' I'm risking something now, but in for a penny, in for a pound... 'Do they tell us to forgive for their sake or for ours?'

Predictably, back comes the answer: 'What do you think?'

Something is stirring in me now, so I go for it.

'It always strikes me that as soon as you mention to anyone that you've been abused, their response hinges on forgiveness.' I'm aware, as I'm sure my therapist is, that I'm generalising, but I let it go, and so does she, because something is emerging from the depths. 'They don't tend to respond with shock or horror or even sympathy or compassion that you've been abused. They just bang on about forgiveness.'

We have a tacit agreement, right now, that 'they' is not everyone; 'they', right now, is Irene.

'So is it a way of avoiding our pain?' I ponder, and there's a little tremor of anger stirring on the inside of me. 'Is it a way of controlling us? Because what right do they have'—I'm getting upset now—'what right do you they have to tell us how to respond? It's none of their business! What right do you they have to jumpstart the process we're in and tell us that we should be at point D when actually we're only just at point A? We've got A, B and C to go through yet. It's like they're saying it because *they* can't handle it. They don't want to have to sit with us while we work through A, B and C. So in effect they're saying, 'Please can you sort out your trauma quickly so that I don't have to be disturbed by it? Please can you fast-forward to point D, because I really don't want to be bothered by all your hurt and pain as you work through A, B and C.' Is that what's going on?'

I look at the therapist and she's with me. I'm afraid she's going to answer my question by asking me what I think, so I fill the gap with more of my rant.

'It pisses me off,' I say, unnecessarily, as everything about me now is expressing my outrage. It seems to have come out of nowhere, but in reality it was a bomb waiting to go off. 'Terrible things happened to us. Appalling trauma. Criminal acts. Unbelievable stuff. Literally unimaginable. And rather than acknowledging that, or going 'ouch' at it, people like Irene...' (I become more honest as the anger takes hold) '... just blame us for it. They're insinuating that it's our fault, somehow.'

There, I've said it. I wait for the blowback, but there is none.

'What would you want to happen instead?' asks the therapist instead.

Unexpectedly, this question brings with it more emotion. Because just for a moment, there I am, the lost child, walking back to the farmhouse after being raped, full of the longing for comfort and care and understanding and acknowledgement. But instead I get in trouble for having mud on the knees of my jeans. I hadn't made the connection with my rage before. But I see it now, suddenly: the child who wasn't acknowledged and instead got into trouble for being raped, ends up as the adult who isn't acknowledged and instead gets into trouble for having been raped. Because she just needs to 'forgive'.

What I wanted to happen is obvious, but it sears through me like a hot skewer.

'I want them to drop the forgiveness agenda,' I say, quietly, the pain blunting my rage. 'I want them to actually notice what it is that happened in the first place that needs forgiving. I want them to get angry with the person who did those things, not with us—not with *me*—for not having forgiven them. I want them to notice. I want them to care.'

I sit and quiver with the pain and the rage and it's a comforting silence for a while as the therapist sits with me. She doesn't need to say anything. I just need to know that she is with me, and that she is for me. I know that she sees. I know that she cares, and that is enough.

Eventually, I speak.

'You can't fast-forward to forgiveness,' I say, talking almost to myself. 'You can't let go of something that you haven't yet taken hold of.'

It's one of those moments where what I say doesn't hit me until I've said it. And I realise, at that moment, that all my life I have tried to push it

away, to disavow, to dis-remember, to deny what happened. I've tried everything in my power to *not* take hold of it. I hadn't even got to point A, let alone point D.

'Forgiveness is too easy,' I say, and I'm not quite sure what I mean, so I wait for more words to come to explain it to myself. 'It's easy to forgive when you haven't really acknowledged what happened. I've spent my whole life forgiving them. I *wanted* to forgive them. I *did* forgive them. You get abused, and you don't want to cause a fuss. You don't hit back. You don't lash out. You just take it. You blame yourself, rather than them. You don't want to hate them. At the end of the day, you just want them to stop hurting you. And you want them to love you...'

I trail off as sadness wraps itself around my throat. There are moments in therapy, and this is one of them, when the pain is unbearable. If it were not for the empathic presence of another human being, supporting me, holding this space open for me, giving me hope, I genuinely believe I would die. She doesn't even have to say anything. This is the fruit of a multitude of sessions: the 'with-ness' of another human being, which makes the unbearable bearable.

'Forgiving them is easy, because it's not real forgiveness,' I explain. 'Because you're not really blaming them. You're blaming yourself. Forgiving yourself is so much harder. That's what's impossible... nearly. You blame yourself for the abuse, so it's not really about forgiving *them*. That's not the big issue. So all that tells me is that people like Irene don't get it. They don't get it at all.' I feel surly and teenage-like and part of me wants to kick the coffee table by my feet.

'They're telling us to forgive because it makes *them* feel better. They're controlling us. But if forgiveness is about cancelling a

debt...'—I make this leap out of nowhere and I'm not sure of the logic, but it feels right, for the moment, so I press on with it—'then surely you need to know what that debt is first. Surely there needs to be a bill. Surely you need to know who owes what.

'And there is a bill!' I cry, getting impassioned again. 'It's like the Irenes of this world are saying that the debt is only five pence, so we're being churlish not to cancel it. But it's not true. The debt is millions—it's billions!'

I look up, away from my rant, to see the therapist nodding slowly, willing me on. She wants me to follow the thought through, because it is *my*

thought.

‘Surely we’ve got to acknowledge that *first*,’ I say. ‘We can’t just write it off without knowing what we’re doing. We’ve got to count the cost of it.’

Something is still bothering me. There’s something I haven’t seen yet. I press on to find it.

‘And forgiving them doesn’t solve it,’ I say, edging closer. ‘It doesn’t change anything. It just means that we don’t stoop to their level. It just maintains our integrity, that we don’t become abusers like them. So whatever they’ve done to us, they can’t make us be like them. That’s what forgiveness does—it breaks the chain. So they can’t influence our behaviour. Because if they abuse us, and then we abuse them back—however justified we might feel doing that—then we’re becoming abusers like them. *Forgiveness just means that we don’t abuse back.* But it doesn’t change the damage that’s been caused to us.’

I pause for breath, but not for long.

‘The damage has been caused, and it still has to be fixed. We’re still traumatised. Forgiving them, writing off the bill, doesn’t miraculously fix the damage. It just means that we agree to pay it, because they won’t. So instead we focus on fixing the damage, rather than getting even. Because if we spend our whole time insisting that they pay the bill, we don’t heal. That’s all. Because there is nothing they can actually do, now, to make it better. They can’t undo the damage.

‘Forgiveness isn’t saying that the damage doesn’t need to repaired. It’s just saying that we’re not going to pursue them to pay it. We’re not going to go an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That might be within our rights, but it doesn’t undo the damage. It just continues the cycle of violence. It puts us on their level.’

I stop, overwhelmed with sadness again.

‘I don’t want to be on their level. I want to be better than that.’

Something like tears is trying to force its way out of me. It’s like being strangled. I’d be happy to cry, but it’s as if the tears can’t find the way to my eyes. They stick in my throat instead. So many feelings, and I don’t know what to do with them.

This isn’t an academic discussion, as so many debates around forgiveness are. It is pain and guts and suffering and shame. I feel split open.

‘Just breathe,’ the therapist reminds me, gently. Sometimes I’m irritated when she says this, like she’s being patronising or changing the subject, but for some reason right now I hear the compassion in it, and I realise that my chest is tight with the effort of not breathing.

I sigh it out, deliberately. And then the words come again.

‘No one has the right to tell me to forgive.’

‘No,’ she agrees. ‘It’s none of their business.’

I feel relieved, like a pressure has been lifted.

‘It feels like control,’ I explain. ‘It feels like someone is making me do something I don’t want to do.’

‘Like the abuse?’

Aaah...

‘That’s it, exactly. That’s what enrages me about it so much. Someone is making me do something I don’t want to do, without caring about my feelings. Just like the abuse.’

The someone, again, is Irene, but I can’t name her just now.

‘It’s not her decision to make. It’s mine,’ I add. ‘I don’t want to not forgive. Because I don’t want to be an abuser. But that’s a decision that I have to come to within myself. It’s personal. It’s *my* decision. It’s not something that can be thrust upon me. Otherwise it doesn’t count. It’s just forced. And forced forgiveness is no forgiveness at all.’

I sigh, in exasperation, angry again.

‘And anyway, I don’t know what she expects. It’s ridiculous. I’m not causing myself to be traumatised by not forgiving. It’s the trauma that traumatised me, not my response to it.’

‘It’s the bullet in the arm, not your anger at it.’

‘Exactly. And actually I’ve got every right to be angry at it.’

‘You have.’

‘Forgiveness is scary,’ I say, as another thought occurs to me. ‘Because it feels weak. It feels like we’re saying that it’s okay. But it’s not okay.’

‘It’s definitely not okay.’

‘All I’m saying by forgiving someone is that I’m not going to become an abuser and abuse them back. But I’m not condoning it. I’m not saying it isn’t wrong. I’m not saying it didn’t cause damage. The way Irene talks about it is scary. It’s almost like it’s an invitation to abuse. It’s a free pass, a get-out-of-jail-free card.

‘And that’s how society treats it. It’s not doing anything about the damage that the abusers cause. It just puts the blame on us as victims. Like it’s our fault that we’ve got mental health difficulties. But the damage was caused by the abuse. And we’re just supposed to forgive and forget and move on. But no-one is holding them to account...’

My anger rises another notch.

‘And that’s what’s dangerous about cheap forgiveness. They should still be holding them to account. We have to be angry about what happened to us because it’s wrong. Anger is our way of saying no. If we’re not angry about it, maybe they’ll do it again?’

‘Anger is entirely appropriate.’

Suddenly, again, I’m confused. ‘Then why is everyone always trying to persuade us to let go of our anger?’

She smiles, softly. ‘What do you think?’ Inside, I groan.

‘Because it makes them uncomfortable? People are scared by anger?’

‘Hmmm?’

‘And I don’t want to be angry forever,’ I add. ‘I just want to be angry long enough for it to count. For it to be effective. I need to be angry enough to make sure it doesn’t happen again. I need to be angry enough to say no. But I hate being angry. I hate what it does to your body. I don’t want to live like that...’

I point out to myself, internally, that I am a bag of contradictions. It seems there is no other way.

‘And does it make a difference,’ I ask, thoughtful and serious again, ‘what form our anger takes? Because we think of anger just in terms of the fight response. We think of it in terms of rage, being out of control. But anger can just be energy for action, can’t it? We need anger to right wrongs, to stand up against injustice. Maybe people on the whole aren’t angry *enough*.’

My thoughts tumble against each other noisily. There’s not enough space to get them all out in one go.

‘Maybe the problem is that *Irene* isn’t angry enough?’ I ponder. ‘Maybe rather than trying to get me to forgive my abusers, she should be angry at what they are doing? Maybe she’s just scared of the reality of abuse? Maybe she can’t handle it?’

It’s an interesting exercise in mentalising. I might be wrong, but in the course of this conversation I’ve gone from feeling victimised by Irene to

pondering her viewpoint. It's progress.

'I don't think most people can handle the reality of the abuse of children,' says the therapist, unexpectedly, and with a startling gravity. She seems deeply moved. It suddenly occurs to me that she is moved by what happened to *me*. It also occurs to me that she has never once pushed me towards forgiveness.

'I'm full of contradictions,' I say, articulating the thought I'd had moments earlier. 'I'm offended at the likes of Irene wanting me to forgive my abusers. But I don't want to *not* forgive them. I don't want to be full of hatred and nastiness. I don't want them to be able to influence my behaviour like that. I want to be who I want to be. I don't want that to be determined by *them*. And if I stay all bitter and twisted and angry and rageful, then ultimately they've won. So I do want to forgive. And ultimately I do forgive them. But not in a sentimental, silly way. Just in a very pragmatic way. Because I'm not going to hunt them down. I'm not going to get my own back. I'm not going to abuse them as they've abused me. I don't want anything to do with them, but that's not the same as not forgiving them. That's just sensible.'

'Forgiveness doesn't mean you have to have a relationship with them,' she says and she's trying to be neutral but I know where she's headed with this one.

'I don't want a relationship with them!' I exclaim, suddenly terrified at the thought of it. 'But I'm not going to do anything to them either. People talk about wanting to see their abusers rot in hell or pay for their crimes or die a slow, lingering, horrible death. I don't want any of that.' Suddenly, I'm quiet, because I don't know what I want. 'I don't want to be the source of pain in anyone's life, no matter how much they might deserve it. I don't want to be that kind of a person. Actually'—I look up, as what I do want occurs to me, 'actually, I just want to get better. I want to heal the damage. And then I want to help other people get better. That's what I want to do with my anger.'

'That sounds like a good plan.'

'The desire for revenge is normal, isn't it? Because it's that sense of justice that we're born with. It's built into us. We have a sense of what's right and what's wrong, and abuse screams at us that it's wrong. So we want to see that wrong put right. It's a righteous thing really.' I pause as the thought reaches deep down into my guts. 'But I guess we get to choose how

we exact our revenge. And we can get revenge by abusing back. But then we become just like them. And we can never, ever get even. There is nothing I could do to my abusers that would be as bad as what they did to me, because I was only a child. I can't hurt them like they hurt me. There is no revenge big enough.'

Silence for a moment while I contemplate what I'm saying.

'But there is a way to hurt them even more. By getting well. By living contrary to their values. By doing what they wouldn't want me to do. They hurt children, they destroyed people's lives. If I live contrary to that, if I help people now, adults who were abused as children, then that's a kind of revenge, isn't it? It's repaying evil with good. It's turning things upside down.'

I feel exultant all of a sudden, like I've found magic treasure.

'Recovery is my best revenge,' I say, bringing it all together.

The therapist nods and smiles. 'Yes.'

'Forgiveness is *my* choice, no one else's. It's my choice to live contrary to the values of the people who abused me. To live a different life. Not to become an abuser, like them. Not to stoop to their level. But to be free to be who *I* am, who *I* want to be.'

'And who do you want to be?' the therapist asks.

The question is too big for me, but right at this moment, I have a glimpse, and I latch onto it greedily.

'I want to be free,' I say, slowly and carefully. 'I want to recover. And I want that to be my revenge. I'm going to get better, and then I'm going to help others get better too. Recovery is my best revenge.'

The rage has gone. In its place is a quiet hum of determination and energy. I feel energised. And I see the contrast—between Irene and the therapist: one who left me sagging, empty, disillusioned in shame, while the other allowed me to find my own truth. I have a clear vision of forgiveness now, but it is not Irene's. It is not for her sake, but mine. *I will not abuse them back,* I swear to myself silently, on the inside. But I'll still get a revenge, of sorts. I won't be defeated. I'll rise again. *Recovery is my best revenge*.

THE COST OF INVULNERABILITY

‘Does that feel too vulnerable?’ the therapist asks me.

Doh. Yes. Of course.

But I don’t say this, because it feels too vulnerable to admit to feeling vulnerable. Instead, I pull my armour tighter and try to figure out how to distract her.

She had asked me how I feel therapy is going, how our relationship is. *I’m damned if I’m going to tell her*, I think. There’s no way I’m giving her that kind of information, so that she can use it against me. There’s no way I’m going to show her what’s really going on, inside my mind, in my guts. I imagine her ten feet away, grappling to reach me, and I savour the safety of that space between us. It feels comforting. It feels a relief. The thought of her coming any closer, touching me, impacting me, *knowing me*, makes me sweat with clammy fear.

I can’t think what to say in reply to her so I just shrug ambiguously, and I avert my gaze down towards the leg of her chair. I’m precarious here: I mustn’t look as if her question has got to me. I mustn’t let her see that I’m trying *not* to look vulnerable.

But of course she knows. She knows every-bloody-thing. She is a therapist.

‘Can we talk a little bit about vulnerability?’ she says, with a sweetness in her voice, like she’s trying to lure me towards the crocodile pen with the promise of ‘cute reptiles’.

I look up, squaring up to her, eyes right in, daring.

‘Hh-hmm,’ I say, saying ‘yes’ while meaning ‘no’. I’m like a goalkeeper dancing on the line to distract the penalty-taker.

‘Vulnerability is a very hard thing,’ she says after a long pause, while she seems to suck up all the air in the room. ‘It makes perfect sense not to want to be vulnerable, after the kinds of experiences you’ve had.’

So? I think to myself, tense with nearly-anger. *Just get on with it. Then we can get this stupid conversation over and done with, and crack on with some proper work.*

But even as I think it, I catch myself. It’s like realising you’ve turned over two pages at a time, and you pause to go back to slice them apart. *Calm down*, I say to myself. *Don’t be so defensive*.

But I can’t. Because she’s stepping on the pain point in me. In fact, she’s jumping all over it with spikes on. And it hurts. I need to kill her, kill myself, or flee the room. I really *really* don’t want to go there on this whole vulnerability thing.

‘Vulnerability isn’t weakness,’ she says, again because my silence is filling the space between us with tension. I think she can sense I’m in a battle with myself. She’s just talking, keeping the connection going, making sure she doesn’t lose a hold of me. It doesn’t really matter what she says. It just matters that she keeps me engaged.

I didn’t think I would react to this, but *oh, oh, oh—here it comes.*

‘Vulnerability *is* weakness,’ I explode, like a crossbow slinging its bolt across the room at her. ‘Vulnerability is what gets you hurt. Vulnerability is what makes you an easy target. And then it’s your fault, because you shouldn’t have let them see, you shouldn’t have let them get to you, to see where you’re weak, to see how they can hurt you, to see exactly how to humiliate you and abuse you...’

The voice is young and the words are tripping over themselves to escape, explosive and beseeching and full of pain. And my body is curling in on itself and I feel everything rush away from me suddenly, like I have been caught in an emotional airlock and this other part of me is being sucked out into the vacuum.

‘When you’re vulnerable, that’s when they hurt you. That’s when they come for you. That’s when they mock you and hate you. That’s when...’

‘Okay, okay,’ she says, quickly, but with authoritative calm. ‘It’s okay, I hear you,’ and she’s nodding, and her whole body is nodding with her, like she’s rocking comfort into us. ‘It’s hard, isn’t it?’

I hate this. I hate the way this happens: how an emotion is triggered, a part is triggered, the trauma is triggered. And I lose control and out it floods, and I as adult me am disengaged into neutral, the steering lock comes on, and no matter which pedals I press or how much I tug, I can't influence the speed or direction of the vehicle. I become a mute, powerless passenger within my own mind and can only watch as things unfold.

'I don't want to... I can't...' says this younger part of me and the agony of it is stretched taut over them, hurting at the edges and tense in the middle.

'I know,' she says, 'I know,' and she offers a hand, and the sobs come loud and jagged and for the next few minutes—or hours, or days: I'm not sure which, as time loses its essence and meaning—I am back there, in the woods, in the dirt, with sour ragged humiliation being poured down my throat, emotions flayed, literal, physical torture and them laughing at me that it hurts.

'I don't want to be vulnerable,' I say, from a distance, somewhere within myself. 'I won't ever be vulnerable, not ever, not ever again.' And the edge is back: *Don't challenge me. Don't challenge this. This is it. Off-limits. So back down. Now.*

But she holds the pain and the anger and the shame and the rage and shushes it gently back down again, with the delicateness of whisking egg whites. Gradually the younger part of me soothes and begins to recede and I feel the steering wheel become stiff and responsive again.

'What happened?' I say. Because I know and I don't know, like in the fuzzle between sleeping and wakefulness.

She looks long at me, seeking out who and where I am.

'We're talking about vulnerability,' she says at last. 'Not surprisingly, it's not easy for you.'

But she says this as a question, inviting me to expand.

She hasn't been intimidated by me—either by my distress, or by my anger. She's holding the presenting issue up to me and I sense that she won't force it, but neither will she run.

Her calm confidence is regulating, helping me to feel safe. Perhaps, just for a moment—just in this make-believe world of therapy, in the room here, where normal rules don't apply—perhaps I can dare to go there.

'No, it's not easy,' I say, and wait for the sky to fall.

She just looks at me, full of compassion. Something about her hurts deep within me, like she's echoing back my emptiness and terror. Unbidden, on the inside of me, something—or someone—is reaching out for her, trying to connect. I slap them back.

'Tell me what vulnerability feels like for you,' she says, tender and compassionate. 'Tell me what you're afraid of.'

I feel queasy at the thought of being vulnerable: light-headed and blurry. Because to be vulnerable is to risk my very life, even if it's only the vulnerability of talking, here, in this safe context, with this safe person. It's so automatic, erupting from my back brain before my front brain has been able to form a single conscious thought. Even being asked this, now, is having this effect.

'If I'm vulnerable,' I say, stepping over each syllable as if avoiding landmines, 'I'm inviting hurt. That's how I see it. Because if I let them see that I'm weak, that's an invitation to them to hurt me.'

'I get what you're saying,' she says, but she's shaking her head slightly, sadly, and looking into her lap. 'But you didn't *cause* the abuse by being vulnerable.' She stops and drills right into me. 'You were vulnerable because you were a child. They abused you because they are abusers, not because of anything you did or didn't do to try to protect yourself.'

Yes, but. I deflect away from this exoneration and I don't understand why. I just know that it needs to have been my fault. That it *was* my fault.

I don't say anything, so eventually she continues.

'Vulnerability is not an excuse to abuse,' she says. 'And being invulnerable, if that's even possible, is no defence against people like that.'

I haven't really taken in her words. My own are vomiting out of me with sudden, urgent need. 'If I'm vulnerable now,' I explain, 'it feels awful. Horrific. It feels like it felt back then, being abused. Just so overwhelming and shameful. I *can't* be vulnerable again. Because I can't bear to feel like that again...'

Hurt hangs in the air.

She nods, her eyes full of pain. She looks back at me like she will burst with yearning. For things to be different. For things to be better.

And suddenly I feel my own pain, penetrating these strident barricades. I want to be invulnerable. I want to protect myself from ever being hurt. I want that invulnerability to lance this pain that is bubbling up from within, but it doesn't. And that hurts even more.

‘You couldn’t stop yourself from being hurt back then,’ she says, softly.

I twist on the inside to stop this being true. But she presses on.

‘You’re trying to stop it hurting by being invulnerable now.’

Yes. And it will. I will. I can. It can. It must.

‘But it doesn’t work, does it?’

How does she know this? I feel a sudden updraft of pain wash over me because she’s right. I’m trying to use a cape of cotton wool to stay dry. And I’m determined that it’s going to work. But of course it doesn’t. I’m sodden, cold, shivering, and clinging to entirely the wrong thing.

‘No,’ I admit at last.

We sit for a long time while I wrestle with this within myself.

‘What are you missing out on, by trying to be invulnerable?’ she says, switching tracks to move me beyond my impasse.

I have never considered this. Of course, it makes sense: for every action, expect an equal and opposite reaction. Just as there is a cost to vulnerability, so there is a cost to invulnerability. I’ve just never

seen it.

I frown and try to peer into the question, but I feel blind. ‘How do you mean?’

She tilts her head, as if she can’t decide if I’m being resistant or obtuse. I want to reassure her that for once I am *only* being obtuse.

‘Well, what would be the benefits of vulnerability that you’re missing out on, for starters?’

The benefits of vulnerability? Is this woman for real?

‘Vulnerability has benefits?’ I mock.

She doesn’t take the bait. Instead, she laughs kindly back at me. ‘Yes! Vulnerability is not a bad thing,’ she says, spreading her fingers out and then closing them in, several times in quick succession. ‘Vulnerability, in fact, is usually a good thing—as long as its risks are mitigated.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘I know you don’t,’ and she’s smiling warmly, but even so shame ripples through me. *This is my defectiveness*, I think, *that I don’t understand life.*

‘Maybe think about it like this,’ she offers. ‘How do you feel with people you’re close to, when you ask them how they are and how they’re feeling, and they just say that they’re fine? When they don’t let you in? Do you feel close to them? Do you feel warm fuzzies?’

The problem with this question is that, right now, I'm stumped on who she means by 'people I'm close to'. For a while now, I've felt closed off from other people, tucked away behind a thick glass wall. I can see them. I can interact with them. But there's no warm touch, and my perception of them is distorted and refracted, like light through a prism.

'No,' I say thoughtfully. For a while now I've been blaming this sense of disconnection on dissociation, on my structurally disordered mind. And that no doubt is true. But I suddenly grasp the possibility that my invulnerability is contributing to it: that my invulnerability *is* the glass wall. That this is more than just an unconscious process, and that I may have some agency over it.

'I don't want to feel my feelings,' I say, pondering this. 'Because I feel like they'll overwhelm me. And it's like I've gotten so used to being afraid of them, and numbing them down, that it's become a habit. But then, everything and everyone feels a long way away. And what you're saying'—I want to pin the blame on her somehow, so that I can retract this idea in a moment if it becomes too uncomfortable—'is that if I wear this armour of invulnerability, then I'm creating distance between myself and other people. I'm erecting that glass wall.'

She narrows her eyes and nods and studies me intensely to see if more is coming. When it doesn't she wraps her fingers apart and together a few times more and then says, 'Having been abused by multiple people, it's understandable that you're playing it safe, and assuming everyone is dangerous, to protect yourself. But that strategy comes at a cost: you're missing out on connection and intimacy with safe people.'

I nod. *That's it, exactly.*

'But if I don't protect myself,' I say, following the thought, 'it will be my fault if I do get abused.'

She smiles gravely and shakes her head a little. 'No. No.'

I don't understand.

She looks at me intently. 'It will never be your fault—and it never was your fault—if you are abused. It's the fault only and always of the abuser.'

I still don't understand. I kick back.

'But if I don't protect myself...'

'You were a child!' she cries, a little too loudly, and the air brims with sudden passion, as if she has leapt into the arena to protect myself from

myself. ‘There was nothing you could have done to stay safe. You were vulnerable *because you were a child.*’

‘But I need to protect myself now...’ I’m becoming less confident of this belief that has driven my behaviours for so many years now.

‘You need to be wise in relationships,’ she clarifies. ‘Yes, you need boundaries with people, and especially with unsafe people. But that is different from protecting yourself against *all* people, from being invulnerable. If you do that, you will miss out on all the richness of real relationship. You’ll be invulnerable to love and kindness and intimacy and support too.’

Thoughts are stacking up in my mind, like planes waiting to land.

But here comes the emergency crash one: ‘But if I get it wrong... if I let myself be abused again... if I don’t protect myself... if I’m vulnerable and I get hurt again...’

The pain, the fear, the shame of this unfurls from deep within my guts and I feel like I will choke on it.

‘If I get hurt again... I will never forgive myself...’

She makes a noise like an injured animal and it tears right through me too, as if I’m suddenly looking at myself from the outside.

‘You cannot be perfect,’ she says. ‘You cannot guarantee to yourself that you won’t be hurt again.’

A weight of sadness and fear presses down on me and I feel like I will be crushed by it. *Don’t tell me that*, I think, and I feel panicked. I want to scrabble my way out of this possibility, like a terrorised mouse in a cardboard box.

‘But I need to,’ I say, honestly and simply, and looking away because I know how stupid it sounds. ‘I can’t be hurt again...’

And then, there it is in me: the long, slow yearn. I am blocking off the therapist, here and now. I don’t want her to see into me. But I also yearn for that connection. I want to keep myself private, keep myself safe. But I also want to be seen. I want to escape this stultifying isolation, the agony of aloneness within myself. But I daren’t look her in the eye. I want everything and nothing, both now and never. I want to be known and not known. I want to risk and also be safe. I am trapped in my own ambivalence.

‘I understand,’ she says, and I wonder if she’s heard my thoughts too. ‘You want to stay safe from hurt. But...’—she’s drilling even deeper into me

now—‘… what about the hurt that comes from being disconnected and alone?’

Ouch.

This pain really is too much to bear. It is a rifle-fire scream within me. It is the hot hurt of being alone in the universe, cut off from humanity, cut off even from myself. It is abandonment and rejection and isolation rolled into one. It is the cost of my invulnerability. In running from abuse, I have run into a prison of loneliness.

The pain pours out of me in wet, gunky globs. My shoulders shake and I try not to let them, try not to feel it, try not to be in this space now. When the therapist puts her hand on me, offering her soothing, comforting, empathic presence, I feel like I will break completely. *I don’t do this*, I think. *I am invulnerable.*

No, says a voice on the inside. *You are human. You need this.*

I can’t have this! I reply.

You need it.

The pain presses out of me in a yawping, primitive sound, between the sobs, between the desperate gasps for air, because I feel like I’m being crushed.

This is why I don’t do this, I think. *Because it hurts too much.*

But of course, that’s the problem. I spend my entire life trying to avoid pain, and yet the avoidance causes more. I am desperate for connection, but don’t feel worthy of it, feel terrified of it, don’t know how to receive it, so avoid it. And then here it is—my suffering met in this moment now with the tenderness of touch—and the pain blows hot across my soul like wildfire.

‘It’s okay,’ the therapist says, balming me down. ‘It’s okay, it’s painful, I know.’

When my lungs have air again, in the ripped-out calm after the upset, I try to force my insights into words.

‘I’m keeping emotions and connection at bay,’ I say. ‘The cost of being safe is to be lonely.’

And I mean the loneliness of a thousand years alone. The loneliness of pitch dark blindness. The loneliness of shame and skin hunger and maggot-crawling unworthiness.

‘It doesn’t have to be all or nothing,’ says the therapist, as she has done a hundred times. ‘You don’t have to keep everyone out, or let everyone in.’

‘But how do I know who’s safe?’ I cry, petulant and irritated with myself.

‘You won’t always. So when you make a mistake, you need to be compassionate towards yourself, and forgive yourself for it. But it’s a skill you can learn. At the moment you’re not assessing risk on a person-by-person basis. You’re keeping *everyone* out—including, a lot of the time, me.’

I nod, sagging down into a forlornness I’ve not felt before. ‘I do want connection,’ I admit.

‘Of course you do,’ she says. ‘You’re human.’

I doubt it sometimes, I think, but stay silent.

‘And being human means that you won’t always get it right. Perfectionism is the armour of invulnerability. To feel, to feel deeply, to feel connection is to risk. So start small. That’s what we’re here for—to risk safely, within the therapeutic relationship. It’s a chance for you to learn to be vulnerable but to do it safely.’

Relatively safely, I think. Can human connection ever be entirely safe?

But she’s stirred it up in me. That craving, the longing, the aching recognition that there is more, and I could have more, and I could be more, and that the sterility of safety is not as soul-satisfying as the danger of connectedness. How much can shift in just one session.

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Okay.’ I harrumph my frustration at myself away, and dare to rise to meet her eyes.

‘Courage,’ she says and there’s fire in her eyes.

‘Courage?’

‘Yes, courage. The courage to connect. The courage to risk. The courage to be yourself, and to be vulnerable. You need courage.’

I thought I needed sympathy. I almost laugh at myself, at this thought. *I need courage*. I don’t really know what courage is. I don’t really know what it looks like. I don’t really know how to get more of it. But that’s for another week.

THE SAFETY OF SELF-HATRED

It is a long, hard winter of therapy. We are trudging through snow and each session is bleak and effortful. The warmth between us has given way to suspicion and a simmering resentment. We feel stuck in drifts. There's no movement. And it's miserable.

'What are we going to do to move forwards?' asks the therapist at the beginning of the session. I feel mild animosity that she's taken the lead, and I want to find fault and complain that it's *my* session and that I should be allowed to lead it. But also part of me is relieved that she's vocalised what I've been feeling. I haven't had words for the stretched-out tension in my tummy. And she's right: we really are stuck and we really do need to move forwards.

I sulk only momentarily. I chance a furtive glance at her and then look away, frowning, displeased. This is my dysfunctional, ambivalent behaviour: it says, 'I want you to know that I want to engage with you, but I also want you to know that I'm not happy with you, so I'm not going to make it easy.'

I grump a bit longer. Then I sigh. And some of the tension escapes with it and suddenly there's space for words.

'I don't know.'

I do know, or at least I do know *a little bit* but I need to say something so that I don't forget how to speak and the silence doesn't deafen me.

'I... I...'

Suddenly I'm irritated with myself and I want the connection back again.

‘I want to move forwards... I don’t know why we’re stuck... I guess... I guess...’ Shall I say it? I know it’ll sound stupid. I beat myself up a little in advance of my mortification. ‘I guess I don’t feel safe any more.’

She raises an eyebrow, seemingly a little surprised. Sudden shame, because I got it wrong. I didn’t mean to surprise her. I thought she knew that’s how I felt. I constantly forget that she can’t mindread me.

‘Go on?’ she prods.

Another self-irritated sigh, and then the words leak out.

‘Nothing feels safe. I don’t feel safe. I don’t feel *you’re* safe. I can’t trust you. I want to trust you, but I can’t trust you. I don’t know who you are. I can’t remember you. I think you hate me...’

I trail off, embarrassed. I expect her to scold me for thinking and feeling the wrong things. Instead—of course!—her face smiles softly. I notice it, even though I’m not looking at her, and it hurts. I hate that softness. I want to be told off. I feel safer being hated and hurt. The softness is jarring. It contradicts my core beliefs about what other people are like, and how I deserve to be treated.

‘Go on...’

I shrug helplessly because the words have dried up and suddenly I feel like I’ve stepped partway into Narnia, into a deep place of unreality in my head. Part of me is with her in the room. Part of me is somewhere else. I’m not sure which world to choose. I’m not sure if I *can* choose.

We’re stuck because I’m perpetually in danger mode, convinced of her hatred of me. We’re stuck because I don’t feel safe enough to ‘do’ relationship with her. We’re stuck because I can’t see the therapist as who she really is, but only through the filter of previous attachment figures; and all I experience from her is threatening, sneering disgust. We’re stuck because we were right on the cusp of a major shift in my acceptance of the reality of my trauma, and it felt way too scary, and I panicked. We’re stuck because I don’t know if I’m up to it: I don’t know if I can be any different to the way I’ve always been. We’re stuck because self-hatred just washes over me like a waterfall after heavy rain. We’re stuck because stuck feels safe.

‘We’re stuck,’ I venture—all these thoughts having meandered through my head in the silence between us—‘We’re stuck because stuck feels safe.’

Softness again. *Ugh*.

‘What feels safe about it?’

A spurt of irritation internally. *What a stupid question*: like asking what's blue about blue. Then shame. Because evidently I'm so defective that I'd rather be stuck and safe than risk being free. I despise myself, and my face must contort with my self-disgust, because she notices it and asks what's happening.

'Nothing,' I reply, surlily.

'Yes there is,' and there's the softness again, coaxing me, saying to me, *I won't hurt you; I won't judge you; I won't think badly of you*. And oh it's so tempting to believe it, to lean right into it. But it also feels like a trick, because surely I don't deserve softness, do I? I'm torn.

The wave of self-disgust manifests in nausea and I want to retch my guts up to be rid of myself. She prods again, and instead of vomit out come my words.

'I hate being like this,' I whine. 'I hate hating myself. But everything I do, I hate myself for it. I hate being stuck. I hate wanting to stay stuck. I hate feeling unsafe. I hate the fact that I won't do anything to feel safe. *I hate being me.*'

Suddenly I realise that I don't hate *her*. I hate *me.*

She allows the words to sting the walls and she remains soft and compassionate. I don't know how she does it. I expect her to strangle me, for sheer aversion to rise from within her and throttle me to death. It's what I think I deserve, right at that moment. But of course she doesn't. She just remains comforting and warm, like a human blanket.

'And how is that helping you, to hate yourself like that?'

There is no hint of accusation in her voice, even though I desperately try to find it. There's no hint of sarcasm, or judgement, or contempt. I feel like I'm testing her a thousand times, in everything she says, the way she breathes, the un-tension in her body, the muscles around her mouth. And she keeps passing the test and proving her safeness. But I don't want to admit this to her, let alone to myself.

What does she mean by her question? *How is self-hatred helping me?*

As I realise that it's a genuine question, unmarred by cynicism, it surprises me. *How could self-hatred be helping me?* She's serious. She's not telling me off for hating myself. She's not even asking me to stop it, to change. She's asking me to notice it and to be curious about it. She's assuming that this self-loathing is there for a reason, and that it's a good reason.

I’m startled and a little disoriented. I force my brain to think even though it’s tempting me to let go, to allow the numbness of dissociation to creep over me. I make a deal with myself that I’ll try to answer the question, I’ll try to engage, but increasingly I’m wanting to opt out.

‘How is hating myself helping me?’ I repeat and I turn the words over in my head because I still can’t comprehend them.

‘There’s usually a good reason for everything you do,’ she says, tethering me to her, helping me to resist the temptation to zone out. ’When you hate yourself like this, what’s it achieving? What’s its purpose and function?’

I don’t know what I’m going to say until I’ve said it, but suddenly the words belch out from within. It doesn’t feel like it’s me talking.

‘It keeps me safe,’ I explain. ‘If I hate me, then I’m ready. I’m ready for you hating me. I won’t be taken by surprise. It feels safe. It feels comfortable. It’s the way it’s always been. It stops me getting angry. I don’t want to be angry. I don’t trust myself—what I’d do if I were angry. If I were really, really angry. And I *would* be angry, if I didn’t blame myself. I’d be angry with the people who hurt me. I’d be furious, bloody furious. And I’m scared of being angry like that, scared of what I’d do, who I’d become. So if I blame myself... if I hate myself... if I think of it as all my fault, then it keeps me safe. It stops me being angry.’

The blood is pulsing in my neck and suddenly I feel alert, as if I’ve stepped into bright sunshine.

‘If I hate myself, I can’t be disappointed with myself. I can’t let myself down. I’m so scared... I’m so scared of having to admit that I’m a thoroughly despicable person, that I deserved what happened to me... so it’s like... instead of going through the shame of a trial, I just plead guilty and put myself in prison. Because I can’t bear to hear the evidence. I don’t want to risk the death penalty. I don’t want to have to go there.

‘I hate myself because everyone else has always hated me.’ I know this isn’t true, but right now it feels true, and that’s enough. ‘It’s this thing... you look at your mother and what you want to see is

softness...’—I’m aware of the word I’m using, and my mental image for what I mean by it is staring right back at me—‘… but what you see instead is hatred. It’s in the eyes. Just cold and despising and full of contempt. Like there’s nothing in the world that she hates as much as she hates me. It’s awful...’

Suddenly I don’t know if I can tolerate this feeling, and a fuzzy cloud starts to descend from the top of my skull and everything in me wants to drift away with it. But I also know that I can fight it, and that if I stay present it will be worth it. I lean imperceptibly towards the therapist, to cling to her empathic presence, rather than retreating within myself. It’s taken a long time to develop ‘approach’ rather than ‘avoid’, and I’m pleased with myself for doing it.

The fog dissipates and the words flurry out of me again like a snowstorm.

‘It’s like... *that’s* who I am. I am someone who is hated. That’s what I think, when I think of my mother. She created me. She made me. And it’s like she’s declared that I’m hateable. That’s who I am.’

I’m squirming now under the pain of it, and something else is forcing its way through my chest as well. Something like grief, but it’s got mushy edges and it feels like it will suffocate me.

‘But it’s not who I am!’ I cry, pushing back from the cloistering emotion rising up along my breastbone. Indignation is dripping from every word. ‘It’s not fair that I’m hated. It’s not fair!’

‘No,’ she says sombrely, and with more compassion than I think I can bear. ‘It’s not fair. And it’s not true. You’re not hateable.’

But then I’m caught again, because what she’s saying is so alluring, and I so want to believe it, that panic rushes through me. My fingers tingle with it and there’s no room suddenly in my lungs for air.

‘No, I can’t believe that! It’s not safe!’ and I’ve got no words to say why, but it feels like a law of the universe. Just as I believe in gravity without being able to explain it, so I believe in the dangerousness of not being ‘bad’.

We sit awkwardly for a few moments. Inside, I’m willing her to perform a Jedi mind-trick on me so that I can believe her and be done with it. I want her to make it all alright. I don’t want to exert my will. I want to be rescued.

I feel exhausted and slightly disgusted by my outburst, especially as the rescue doesn’t materialise.

My mind races ahead, anticipating what she’ll say next. I feel I need to do this, to block off her next ‘attack’. Always predicting, always planning, always trying to secure an advantage in every relational encounter. And always operating from a false basis that people are out to hurt me.

But she doesn’t say anything. She just sits softly. It’s as if she’s breathing out waves of compassion and gentleness and willing me to absorb them. For all I know, she might be planning her dinner. But I’m confused because she’s not acting as I’ve anticipated. Once again she is surprising my unconscious.

At last she speaks. ‘How about we just breathe through that sense of unsafety, rather than trying to dismantle it?’

‘Dismantle’ is an apt word, because the self-hatred feels like a fortified castle: mechanical, metal, all bolts and latches and ramparts and rust. And so it feels impossible to dismantle. Again, I’m surprised. There’s a soft squidginess to ‘breathing through it’. It feels organic and human. It hadn’t occurred to me.

I don’t really know what she means, but my guts glow warm at the thought of it. I nod. We’ve done this kind of thing before, and although I’ve never been convinced that we’ve done anything other than waste time in whooshy, companionable silence, I’ve also learned that if I want a different outcome, I need to try a different method.

‘Hating yourself feels safe,’ she says. ‘So you’re trying to protect yourself. That’s a good thing. Let’s not fight it. Let’s just imagine for a moment that you don’t hate yourself...’—she pauses, because she sees me bristle and tighten—‘… and let’s just relax your body as you imagine yourself not hating yourself but still being safe.’

I’m not quite sure how long we do this exercise for. What matters is that I don’t resist. What matters is that it helps me stand back for a moment and notice that this feeling of unsafety is *just* a feeling. What matters is that I don’t drift off anywhere in my head. What matters is that I stay relationally connected. What matters is that I conquer the panic at trying something new. What matters is that, just for a moment, I don’t berate myself.

Increasingly, this is what we do. We focus on calming the body down when it rises to alarm and action, when it floods with a feeling. We don’t argue with the mind. We just soften the body. It works because her body is soft. Her gentleness anchors me. I feel safe with her even while I feel unsafe within myself.

I can only tolerate it for a couple of minutes, but I know that something small has shifted, and partly only because I didn’t argue back. We return to the familiarity of words.

‘I guess it feels safer to hate myself,’ I ponder, ‘but that’s an illusion. It’s just controlling a feeling with a belief. I’m trying to help myself, and it does help in the short term, but it doesn’t improve anything in the long term, does it?’

‘No,’ she says. ‘You’re just perpetuating the abuse.’

‘And I can’t recover from abuse if I’m still being abused...’ I become thoughtful about this, because although we’ve fiddled around with this idea for months now, I still struggle to grasp its seminal truth. It is hidden in the ground and has yet to germinate.

But all of a sudden I see the self-hatred as a strategy rather than a reality. It’s like I’ve somehow taken two steps back from the montage that is my ‘internal working model’, the collation of beliefs and predictions about the world forged in me since the very first day of my life, and I can see it for what it is. Hating myself doesn’t make me safe. It just perpetuates the abuse. *Ugh*.

I don’t quite know how these epiphanies occur, just that they are happening with increasing regularity in therapy, and that resisting the dissociative fog is key to it. When I allow myself to drift, I don’t see things. It feels safer and numbs away painful feelings, but I don’t have these moments of insight either. The more I’m staying present, the more often the *aha* moments come.

‘Self-hatred has been a survival strategy,’ I say. I know I’ll need to write this session up later, to reinforce the insight. ‘It’s provided the brakes on my anger. It’s felt familiar and safe. It’s maintained the status quo in my head, the sense that this is the way the world is. Stepping out of it feels scary. I don’t know what life is like without self-hatred. And I react automatically to new things as if they’re dangerous because that’s how my brain is wired after trauma. It anticipates that new things will most likely be bad things and so sets off an alarm if I even toy with a new belief or a new experience. So the first thing to do when that happens is to breathe through it, and calm down my panic response. Because then I might be able to see things in a different way.’

‘Good summary,’ she says and I feel like a nine year old being given a sticker. For once I don’t sneer at myself, but allow myself to enjoy the deep ripple of feeling.

At one level, I don’t feel we’ve achieved anything at all this session. It all seems so nebulous. But at another level, it was as if I stepped

momentarily outside *The Matrix*. I realised that my beliefs were a scam. They weren't representations of truth. They were convenient lies to myself. That revelation feels, at least for now, life-changing—as if I've sneaked a raw, brutal glimpse into someone's journal and it has blown my preconceptions about them. Except the journal is my own.

But I don't know what to do with this knowledge. The habit of self-hatred is so ingrained that I don't know how to change it.

'How do I stop hating myself?' I ask, and there's something almost plaintive about my request, and again I feel little and vulnerable.

She pauses, like she's pondering whether her usual tactic of asking me to answer my own question is the right one for this moment. It evidently isn't.

'Don't force it,' she says, and I wasn't expecting that. I defaulted again to anticipating battle and struggle and harsh self-punishment to 'make' myself 'get it'.

'Just notice it to start with,' she suggests. 'Begin to notice your self-talk. Begin to notice every time you feel that rush of self-loathing. And just breathe your way through it. Don't try to change it. Just focus on calming down your reaction to it, soothing the emotion of it, and speaking compassionately to yourself.'

It's all a new concept, but I also know exactly what she means, because she's been modelling it to me for years. What she's really saying is, 'When it happens, be towards yourself as I am towards you.' And again, knowing this, there's a comforting warmth on the inside of me, like a nip of brandy.

We end the session and I realise that we've moved forwards. We're not stuck any more. Maybe we weren't anyway. But the hatred that I was feeling for myself is no longer directed at the therapist. We have thawed.

'It's like you don't fight other people because of *them*. You fight them because you're fighting yourself,' I say, and only too late do I realise that I'm not making sense because she hasn't heard my internal train of thought. But she's used to this, too, and I leave with an urgent need to capture my progress in journalling, and a rare sense that a week is not so long to wait until I see her again, because there's so much to absorb in the meantime.

'See you next week,' I say, and for the first time in a long time it's me who's smiling softly.

LEARNING TO CONTROL SWITCHING

‘I can’t help it though,’ I complain, with a mixture of forlornness and mild outrage. ‘I just... disappear. And other parts come. I don’t *mean to* switch. It just happens.’

The therapist looks at me and nods understandingly, but I can tell she’s not finished. I prefer things to be black-and-white, all-or-nothing. She seems to relish the grayscales.

‘Yes, I believe you,’ she says, but her eyes have narrowed determinedly. ‘But that doesn’t mean to say that you can’t *learn* to stay present and not switch, or that there isn’t an element of choice *sometimes*.’

I frown, bothered.

‘*Sometimes*,’ she reiterates, balancing sternness and sympathy.

I look away because I know she’s right but it feels important to hold to my position of ‘nothing’ in case that means I have to jump to ‘all’. I’m scared that ‘sometimes’ actually means ‘always’.

‘But why?’ I ask, a tad petulantly. ‘Why does it matter that I stay present? Why can’t I dissociate? Why can’t I switch during my session?’—I’m not sure of the difference between the two words and we seem to use them interchangeably—‘All of my parts are *me*, so what does it matter which part of me is ‘out’?’

She thinks for a moment. ‘I’m not saying you can’t switch during session. And you’re right: your parts *are* you.’ She knows that I don’t believe this all the time, but doesn’t remind me of this now, as that’s a different battle. ‘But what I’m wanting us to work on is the uncontrolled nature of your switching. I want you to be able to have more choice about

when parts come, and when they don't come: for you to have a sense of choice, rather than the choicelessness of trauma.'

She pauses, checking that I'm still with her.

'Often what happens,' she continues, 'is that instead of processing something yourself—instead of *you* feeling a feeling—you switch. And so that emotion remains stuck, because it's not being processed and felt by *all* of you. You're delegating it, but in such a way that you have no knowledge or awareness of it.'

Hmm. She has a point.

'Then why is it okay to switch *at all*?' I ask. I genuinely want to figure this out, but I also want to argue, because, having grown up in a dictatorship, it feels delicious to 'talk back'. And it also feels unsafe to agree with everything she says, in case I'm doing it just to be 'good'.

'Because those parts of you hold emotions and memories and beliefs that you don't have access to. And we need them to be shared across *all* of you, so that they can be integrated and worked through. So while you stay just as 'you', then we don't access them and they remain stuck. And stuck is a powerless place to be.'

I feel all the *ouch-ness* of this last statement, so I ignore it—for now.

'But we don't really have access to those feelings and memories, though, do we?' I am, now, genuinely confused. 'Because when I switch to those parts, I don't remember anything.'

'No, that information currently isn't being shared. It's being siloed. And hence is stuck.'

That word again. The 'stuck' feeling is what brings me most shame: a sense of incompetence, of hopelessness, of despair for the future. It makes me feel inadequate and less than other people. It makes me hate myself: that I am uselessly, endlessly 'stuck'. But I can't face that right now, so I edge around it.

'Then how does it get to be shared rather than siloed—dissociated?'

'That's what we're figuring out...' She smiles a little wryly. 'I think what we agreed on as our hypothesis was that if could get those parts to start to feel their feelings and think about their thoughts with *me*, then I could be a kind of network hub for sharing that with *you*, and vice versa.'

'Aah.' Now I remember. We had this conversation a few weeks back. I get frustrated with my frequent forgetting. It's as if I can't always hold

information, even non-trauma-related factoids, across time. It's not that I've forgotten it. It's that I've mislaid that information in my head.

'So...' I'm trying to figure this out. 'So why is it a problem then for me to switch to other parts, if you *do* want me switch to them too?'

This, to me, is my eternal confusion. Unlike many therapists, mine has never 'banned' me from dissociating, or switching, in session. She has reasoned—and, as I've since discovered, the clinical literature supports her perspective—that engaging with parts is more profitable than excluding them. Because by denying their existence and presence, it reinforces the dissociation.

But neither does she swing to the other extreme and allow sessions to be dominated by parts. It's a precarious, middling stance which requires a great deal of attunement on her part, and frequent frustration on mine: at times I want to be dissociated, because it all gets too much, and at times I hate its inherent loss of control. I am in therapy to resolve the dissociation, and yet paradoxically I feel affronted if not 'allowed' to dissociate.

'It's about what we're trying to achieve at that moment,' she explains. 'If we're working on you processing feeling and you run away in your head by switching to another part, because the emotion becomes too much, then we're not really getting anywhere.'

'But if it's processing information, then it's okay to switch?' I say this with a hint of challenge, because deep down I'm worried that she's saying that my parts are unacceptable and so is rejecting me.

'It's all *okay*,' she says, clarifying, because she can see that my shame and sense of failure is rising. 'Whatever happens happens. You are you, and all of you is welcome. We always make progress somehow. We muddle through, don't we? All I'm doing is pointing out a frequent pattern, and encouraging you to think about whether it's a pattern you might want to challenge: the way that you automatically switch to a different part when there's emotion in the room. The way *you* struggle to feel your feelings here, with me.'

She's absolutely right and I'm close to admitting it out loud. And she's also right that *sometimes* I could do something about it, if I wanted to. *Sometimes* I can't—that's a certainty. It just happens and the next thing I know it's minutes or hours later and I feel like I've been a long, long way away, or waking from a dream. But *sometimes* I give into the pull, because it's easier—so much easier—and I don't do enough to resist it. It's like the

difference between a door slamming shut, caught in a gust of wind, and a door blowing gently to. The former I can do nothing to prevent, but the latter I could if I wanted to. And what she's challenging in me is this latter scenario: and the fact that I don't want to.

I feel sad and a bit disgruntled and I can't tell if it's with me or with her. I wish she wouldn't challenge me so much, because it activates my shame. I feel crushed by it and that she just doesn't get me, or get how hard it all is... And those are the times when I want to kick back at her and pout and sulk and argue. But I also, conversely, find it strangely exhilarating. It makes me feel believed in—that she thinks I'm up to the challenge of change—and it evokes in me a deeply satisfying sense of aliveness.

I realise I'm at that point right now, at the crossroads within myself of taking up the challenge or dismissing her help as too hard.

'Some of the time I *could* stop it happening,' I admit, and I feel like I ought to be whispering. 'There's an emotional black hole, and it starts pulling me in. I feel like things are distant and foggy, that I'm drifting away from everything. It's like I stop being in my body, or really in the room. And sometimes, when that happens, I can just about dig my heels in and stop the slide, if I need to. I have to work really hard to do it though,' I say, and I wonder if she believes me.

I wait for her wrath, but it doesn't come. She just nods slightly. 'And sometimes for me,' she says instead, 'I don't know what the best thing to do is. Sometimes I help to ground you, and get you to come back. Sometimes I try it but you're too far gone, or it's happened too quickly. But sometimes too I don't know if I *should* be pulling you back, or letting you go... because it's important that parts get to talk to me too.'

She lets this point linger in the air, almost as a question. I had rather hoped that she would know the answer to it, but she seems to think that I might be the expert on me.

I don't know what to say so I go on word strike and wait for her to speak. Eventually she does.

'It's a difficult balance,' she says, 'because I do believe it's important for every part of you to have a voice and to have that connection with me. But...' she pauses, and we both have a sense that it's more than me that's listening to what she's about to say. 'I guess the ideal would be for you to be in much more control of that process, and for parts to come through a

process of collaboration and cooperation, rather than you being hijacked by them...'

The statement sits awkwardly between us, as if she's not sure—and I'm not sure—if I want to halt the hijacking. I'm momentarily baffled, because the concept that I could control my switching feels alien and almost insulting.

'So what do we do?' I ask and I'm desperately hoping that she'll just pronounce a definitive answer, because this grayscale is uncomfortable.

'What do *you* think?' she replies, predictably and yet infuriatingly.

I sit and think for a moment. *What's the real issue here?* I wonder.

'Sometimes when you try to ground me and bring 'me' back,' I say eventually, cautiously, slowly, as if girding myself from violence, 'it feels like you're saying that my parts aren't welcome here, that they aren't acceptable.' I dare a look direct into her eyes. 'As if they're *wrong*.'

She holds my gaze, softly. I think she can sense my simmering aggression, ready to defend myself, and she's trying to dial it down with the gentleness of her response. Everything about her, in this moment, feels like a winter duvet, soft and saggy and inviting, compared to my brittle, jagged edges.

'They're not wrong,' she says, quietly. 'They're *you*.' She pauses, and then looks intently into me. 'I don't think they're wrong, and never have done. Do *you* think they're wrong?'

I look away sharply. *Ouch*. I feel suddenly naked and slightly drifty. I try to look at her but she's become translucent.

'Do *you* think they're wrong?' she asks again, and I don't have any words with which to reply, so after a little while she continues. 'I'm just wondering if that's what's going on,' she says. 'Because there's a real reaction in you, isn't there, when I try to hold a boundary with them? When I ask, sometimes, for them to stay back and for you to be present? On the one hand, when they come, afterwards you feel ashamed and out of control, so it's something that you want to stop happening. But if I ever suggest learning to take control of your switching, you feel like it's a personal rejection?'

Ouch, ouch, ouch.

I sigh semi-angrily. 'What is the matter with me?' I say, exasperated. 'I don't want to have parts, but unless I feel that you're one hundred percent accepting of them, I feel rejected...'

She swivels slightly in her chair, as if she's trying to come closer without reducing the physical distance between us. 'But I am one hundred percent accepting of them,' she says, 'and that's what's strange...'

'It's shame,' I say, suddenly, and my gaze immediately fixes on the roses outside the window, as if these words are only safe if I absent myself. 'I'm ashamed of having parts. So it feels physically painful if you try to curtail them. Because that shows that I'm right to be ashamed of them...'

We sit quietly for a few moments.

'I hear you. But you're jumping to the wrong conclusion there. When I 'curtail' them, as you put it, it's because I'm trying to do what's right for all of you, therapeutically, in the session. Limiting them is not rejecting them. And that's a typical shame response, to experience a boundary as hurtful.'

'I know.' My voice is full of agony, because I do know. I've seen this pattern before. Sometimes my emotional membrane feels so thin, as if the only filter through which I see life is one which interprets every action as an attack.

I look down, looking for the answer somewhere near my ankles. I push at the carpet with my shoes, trying to force it out.

'It's not you who doesn't accept my parts, is it?' I say at last. 'It's me. I'm just projecting onto you what I really feel and think. Because I am so ashamed of being this messed up, of having parts in the first place... and so the only answer to that is to defend them, to cede control to them whenever they want it, because if I don't then it's like I'm denying them. All-or-nothing. So when I think about controlling my switching—or at least learning to—it's like there's this eruption on the inside of me, that by saying 'shush' to them I'm silencing them, and by silencing them I'm...'

I don't know what the right word is, so I look up at her for help.

'Abusing them?' she eventually offers.

Aaah.

I nod, and study the floor again. 'Yes.'

We sit silently, with the weight and pressure of this confession between us. I feel smothered with a simultaneous sense of shame and relief.

She bends in towards me, seeking me out, because I'm closing down connection with her by huddling into my body and staring at my feet. 'Your parts don't feel accepted by *you*,' she says, gently. 'They don't feel that you're on their side. You don't collaborate with them most of the time. You 'curtail' them. So they hijack you.'

I look up suddenly. ‘I hate them!’ I exclaim, with more emotion than I’d intended. ‘I don’t want them to exist. I don’t want to know them. I don’t want them to even *be*.’

‘And therein lies the rub...’

Again, sadly: ‘I know.’

I sigh. ‘It’s a paradox, isn’t it?’ I say. ‘I don’t want to have parts, and I hate them. But I insist that you allow them to come. I refuse to engage with them, and feel nothing but contempt and dislike for them, but I don’t want to learn to manage my switching. I’m a bag of contradictions!’

‘Yes,’ she says, softly. ‘You have dissociative identity disorder. Which means that you are a bag of contradictions.’

We both laugh a little.

‘So if I were to try to stay present a bit more, rather than switching when emotions come up... what if I couldn’t manage it?’

She looks at me quizzically. She’s not following my train of thought yet.

‘That’s my underlying fear,’ I explain. ‘That I can’t manage my feelings. I need the get-out clause of dissociating, or switching. I need to be able to opt out. By trying to learn to manage my switching, and staying present more, it feels like I’m closing off an escape route. It’s too scary.’

‘But it’s not all-or-nothing,’ she counters, as she frequently does. ‘We’re talking about you starting to make active, conscious choices to switch or to stay present, rather than it being an automatic habit. That’s all.’

‘But I can’t help it,’ I complain, and we’re back where we started. ‘I just... switch.’

She nods, again, apparently unsurprised that we have cycled back to the beginning. ‘*Sometimes* you can’t help it,’ she says. ‘How about we just work on the sometimes that you can? Because it’s not all-or-nothing?’

Doh. I’m momentarily amused at how easily I assume this perspective. And even as I think it, I go further into nothing. ‘But what if I can’t?’

She just smiles and says, ‘Okay, it’s up to you. When you’re ready...’ And that is how we leave it, but the seed is sown in my mind. I leave the session full of contradictions still, but at least a little more aware of the tiny glimmers of choice I have in tackling the dissociation that is both my greatest source of pain, and my greatest source of comfort.

I SEE SUFFERING

‘Too much suffering!’ I say, quickly, determinedly, almost angrily, in response to the therapist’s question. She wants to know what my biggest problem is right now. She wants to figure out how to focus down on what we try to deal with this session. Which strand of wool shall we pull from the tangled mess in front of us that is me, today, here, now?

My answer hasn’t really helped her.

She smiles sympathetically and lowers her eyes. Mine are radiating challenge, fury, and acres of self-pity. Right now, I want to lay into anyone I can justifiably blame for my suffering. Anyone, that is, apart from the people that caused it—that still doesn’t feel safe. But I’m hot with agitation, I’m aching with abandonment, and I have that edgy, dangerous sense of wanting to destroy something. Preferably myself.

The therapist pauses, waits, calms. She’s sucking the energy out of my fight. She’s not looking directly at me, but slightly off to one side, and her upper body is languidly angled away from me too. There’s a soft gaze on her face, her wrinkles crumpled together full of pink lifefulness. She’s present and real and human and here, and it’s all I can do not to be defused by her. I want to fight her, I really do. She’s just not rising to it.

‘I see your suffering,’ she says, the words melodic and gentle. Now she’s looking at me, and she’s evidently not scared of me. She’s wiping down the space between us with tenderness. ‘Tell me about your suffering.’ Something about her softness breaks my aggression and I look down, and sigh. There’s pain in that sigh. It burns to breathe in again.

‘It *hurts*,’ I say, and I’ve gone flaccid and sad. ‘I can’t explain it. It’s like a pain in my chest, all night and all day. Like I’m breaking apart on the inside. I don’t want to move too fast, in case it hurts more. I don’t want to be still, in case I notice it. I don’t want to be alone with it. But I can’t be with people with it. It’s unbearable. It’s just suffering—suffering—suffering. All I can feel, all I can breathe, all I can smell is this pain. And I don’t even know what it is. I don’t know *why* it is. It’s just... just a kind of heart-brokenness. Like all the sadness in all the world has been smushed into a ball and I’ve been made to swallow it.’

I wish I had some tears, but I’m beyond that. It hurts too much for emotion.

This suffering has perched within awareness ever since my breakdown, years previously. Prior to that, I had dissociated from it. Then it erupted, sticky and hot and a poisonous, sulphurous stench, from behind my amnestic walls. It had always been there, but I had been switched off from it. But this torturing slew of post-traumatic affects—flashbacks, switching, high-pitched distress, the low, mad-making whine of constant despair—has blanketed every waking (and most non-waking) moments for so long now that I cannot remember any more what it is like not to wake up nauseous with dread, terrorised by my own feelings. It is all I can do, every single day, to merely get through each day, and to do so without killing myself.

I can’t describe how she responds. She’s not silent, but she doesn’t use words either. I don’t know if she even makes a sound. There’s just something that comes back to me, like a modulated echo. I feel my pain radiate out from me, and I feel her absorb it, and then back it comes towards me, but diluted. Smaller. More pastel.

I feel heard.

I feel understood.

I feel held.

And for just a moment, the pain eases, and moves back a few inches. It’s still there but it’s muffled. It’s more bearable, less intense, and its edges blur.

I don’t know how she does it, especially without words. It’s something about presence. It’s some silent communication between her nervous system and mine. It feels primitive. It is wordless.

We sit.

It’s a relief for the pain to recede, if only a little. I don’t want this moment ever to end. But of course it will. Even still, it gives me hope. I realise, in this moment, that this suffering is fluid. It’s not solid, and unchanging. It can move.

Previously, the therapist may have said, ‘Just notice’ but she doesn’t need to, because I have, and she knows it. So we sit a little while longer.

‘What am *I* feeling?’ she asks, when the silence has run its course.

I look up, surprised. I didn’t think therapy was about *her*. I’m baffled. *Why are we suddenly talking about what she’s feeling? What’s going on?*

She catches my surprise.

‘Bear with me,’ she says, and there’s a steadiness in her eyes, like she’s sure of what she’s doing. ‘I want you to notice what’s going on here right now. I want you to try to mentalise and think about what’s going on in *me* right now. Not for my benefit, but for yours.’

I settle back down out of my alarm-at-novelty reaction and consider this. *What is she feeling?* And I realise, with greater alarm, that I have no idea. *Do therapists feel anything at all during sessions? Do they even feel anything outside of sessions?* It’s as if I’m used to seeing through her, and I’ve never stopped to consider the here-ness, the now-ness, the real-ness of her emotions. In a way, I didn’t think they mattered. I feel embarrassed at my self-absorption.

‘I have no idea what you’re feeling,’ I say, quietly enough that I hope she won’t hear me.

She half-smiles an acknowledgement, but continues to pierce into me. She’s right there, right in my face, challenging me, pushing me, whilst also hanging back, supportive, empathic, giving me space.

‘Have a think,’ she says.

I stare at her blankly. How do I even go about figuring out what she’s feeling? I am totally at a loss.

‘Do you think I’m feeling good or bad?’ she says, breaking it down. ‘Or neutral?’

I shrug my shoulders hopelessly, feeling way out of my comfort zone. ‘Neutral?’ I guess.

She pushes a noisy air-smile out of her nose. ‘No, not neutral,’ she says. ‘Most definitely *not* neutral.’

But I just don’t know how to know. I am, at this moment—as at so many moments—emotionally blind.

‘I’m feeling compassion for you,’ she says at last, sensing my stuckness. ‘I’ve got a huge big pain on the inside of me for what you’re experiencing.’

I look at her, astonished. I still don’t understand.

She speaks slowly, allowing each word to drip into my startled brain.

‘It’s a tight ball of fire in my chest. It’s a feeling like I want to act and that I *have to* act. And it’s painful. But it’s also vaguely hopeful. It’s a feeling,’ she says, looking away for a moment to find the right word, ‘like I need to see your suffering eased, and I’m also strangely hopeful that it can be. It’s a warm feeling, even though it’s painful.’

She takes a long look at me. I’m stymied in confusion.

‘How does that make *you* feel?’ she asks.

I shake my head and clutch myself smaller.

‘Ashamed,’ I say.

Her head bobs down and she makes a noise that is full of pain. I haven’t understood her words, but again I understand that sound. It goes right into me. Something seems to split apart inside me, in my chest. It is both painful and pleasurable. I don’t understand it.

‘Why ashamed?’ she asks. ‘Do you know?’

Suddenly there are words, albeit I don’t know where they’ve come from.

‘I feel ashamed,’ I reply, ‘because I don’t deserve for you to have compassion. I feel ashamed because I don’t want my pain to cause you pain. I feel ashamed because... because it’s like a feeling on the inside of me that wants to run a million miles away from you now. You’re being kind, and yet somehow it feels dangerous. Somehow it feels scary. Somehow it feels unbearable, and I want you to leave me alone...’ I trail off, appalled at my confession.

She nods, as if she’s not surprised. It’s unnerving to work with someone who is less surprised at what I say than I am myself.

‘The feeling of shame makes you want to pull back from me?’

‘Yes.’

She nods again.

‘Let’s look at it another way,’ she says, and I get the sense that she is manoeuvring around behind me, like a sheepdog guarding the stragglers from bolting away through a gap in the hedge. ‘If you told me that you’re suffering,’ she said, ‘and I looked bored, and I began to fidget, or I got up

and started doing something else'—she play-acts it out slightly, to make her point—'then how would you feel?'

This isn't real, so I find it more comfortable to engage with. I like hypothetical. It gives me the space I need to downregulate from the intensity of intimacy.

'I'd feel hurt,' I say, and my confidence rushes back in.

She nods.

'And what about if I told you that you were overreacting and that you needed to pull yourself together, and that you needed to just get over yourself and get on with life?'

'I'd feel ashamed... or maybe angry.'

Another nod.

'What if I cut you off in the middle of it all and started to tell you that, well that's nothing, because I'm going through a far worse time than you, and then I went off on one, and told you an elaborate story about my own circumstances?'

I laugh at the preposterous possibility that this kind, gentle, attuned human being could be so suddenly self-centered.

She smiles back at me, but there's fire in her eyes still.

'How else could I respond to your pain and suffering, but with compassion?' she asks, and it's so simple now that I see it.

I nod.

'And isn't that want you want?' she asks. 'Isn't it what everyone wants, when they're in pain?'

'I suppose so.'

But this is a new idea to me. My life has been full of so much pain, such endless, tormenting suffering, both the abuse itself and then the fall-out from it, and only now, in therapy, am I consistently experiencing compassion in response to it. It seems like such a rare commodity in life, in society, even among friends.

'How often do you respond to your own suffering with compassion?' she asks.

Boom.

Again, she's not making sense. I didn't know this was a thing. I've heard of self-compassion—mainly from this same therapist, who seems to have shares in it—but I've never been able to apply its relevance to me. It's just jargon. I don't see it as real.

She sees my confusion.

‘Think about what I’m saying,’ she says, blocking off another gap in the hedge. ‘You told me about your suffering. It impacted me. It hit me in my heart and in my guts, like I’d been punched. It made me want to do something for you, to relieve this pain for you. It brought a wave of emotion up through my chest, and into my throat. It made me want to cry. And we just sat together with that sadness, with me acknowledging your pain, and maybe holding it for you a bit, didn’t we? And what happened in you?’

I am unusually frank. ‘It helped,’ I say. ‘The pain eased a tiny bit. It felt hopeful. It felt warm. Even safe.’

She nods, unsurprised again. ‘That’s the power of compassion. It really is transformative. It doesn’t take the pain away, but it makes it easier to bear. While your nervous system was struggling to cope under the weight of it, I lent you mine, and for a little while—even if only for a little while—it relieved some of the pressure for you, didn’t it?’

‘Yes.’ As ever, I don’t know how she reads me so effortlessly. It’s like we sit in this room together and there is a one-way mirror between us: she seems to see into me, feel what I’m feeling, sensing what I’m thinking. And in return she is a blank wall. It’s helpful that she’s spelling it out for me like this. I know that she wears her emotions on her face. It’s just that I am illiterate to them.

‘So how would it be,’ she continues, pressing ahead, herding me into the livestock pen, ‘if you provided that experience for yourself?’

The idea sounds appealing, but I still don’t know what she means.

‘I don’t know how to,’ I say. ‘I’m too disconnected from myself—from my *selves*.’ This, after all, is why I carry a label of dissociative identity disorder. Can I play this now as my trump card? ‘I don’t know how to do connection.’

‘Yes, you do,’ she says. ‘You’re connected to me, here, now.’

I shrug, but look away. ‘Maybe.’

‘Why are you? Why do you feel connected to me?’

She’s not going to let this go. I might as well go with it.

‘Because you’re here,’ I say, vaguely. ‘Because you’re listening. Because you care.’ I feel embarrassed almost to the point of unconsciousness to say this last one.

‘You sense my compassion?’

I can’t deny it. I really, really can’t deny it, however much I want to. ‘Yes.’

‘So compassion is a bridge towards connection?’ she says.

I shrug and nod and feel confused.

‘If you want to connect in more with yourself—with your selves—maybe you need to show yourself more compassion?’

Her suggestion sits like a fused firework between us. I feel a surge of abhorrence, and terror, and shame.

‘I can’t!’ I say, suddenly agitated.

I don’t wait for her to prompt me with a why. I plunge right into it, to allow the words to come before I’ve censored them away.

‘I can’t. It’s too scary. It’s too much. If I get in touch with this pain, with the pain that my dissociated parts hold, I’ll be swept away by it. That’s why I dissociated, isn’t it?—because it’s too much? It’ll be overwhelming and I’ll be destabilised and... and...’

‘And...?’ Because there’s something more that I haven’t articulated yet.

‘And it’ll just make me feel so ashamed...’—this word, stretching out like tarpaulin over rotting bodies, to hide the stench of how I feel deep inside me—‘… because I won’t be able to do anything about it. I won’t be able to manage. I’ll lose the plot. I’ll go *mad*...’

This is the fear resident in the depths of me: that I couldn’t cope with my pain when the trauma was happening, and that I can’t cope with it now. My only strategy for surviving it was to dissociate: to block it out of consciousness, to burrow it away in a segregated self-system, away from the realm of daily life, where it can’t disable me. This pain, this suffering, this trauma—it sits like a radioactive core within myself, leaking out its carcinogenic fallout into my life, killing me slowly. It feels inevitable. But to open the casket and bring it up to the surface feels like psychological suicide.

She’s nodding, eyelids pursed together, draining out of every word I speak its full meaning, its emotion, its truth.

‘I *can’t* be compassionate towards myself,’ I say, pushing the stake into the ground and daring her to cross it.

We sit again for a while and I at least feel heard.

Eventually, I look up at her, because I’m waiting for her challenge, but it hasn’t come. It’s as if she doesn’t want to force it onto me, so she’s

waiting to be asked. I know my belief is born of terror. I don't want it to be true. So I ask. Only with my eyes, but I ask.

'I think...' she says, slowly, like tiny drops of rain announcing the arrival of a thunderstorm, 'I think you *can* be compassionate towards yourself—that you can learn to be—and that you *need* to be compassionate towards yourself. Because the alternative is that you continue to suffer this unbearable pain. And that's not an option. At least, not for me.'

Ouch, but good *ouch*.

A spark lights on the inside of me.

'How?' I simply ask.

'I believe,' she says, the raindrops falling heavier, 'that compassion is an innate human capacity. I have it, you have it, everyone has it. But there are things that get in the way of it. And it's also a skill that we need to develop, so that we can respond to people's suffering, but without overwhelming empathic distress.'

I raise both eyebrows, indicating both questions.

'Maybe we could look firstly at what gets in the way of compassion for you, and then we could look at how you avoid being overwhelmed by empathic distress?'

I settle in for today's psychoeducation masterclass. This has a double benefit: not just the insight and awareness that I need to move forwards, but the emotional downregulation from the intensity of emotion between us, which was beginning to push me overboard. She knew it, and that's why we've reverted to the safety of facts. There's only so much compassion I can receive in one go and the box is full for today. But my front brain is zinging with anticipation and I can feel my guts relax.

We talk about the barriers for compassion. Fundamentally, I am afraid that it will overwhelm me. That if I go there, I'll never be able to come back. In my mind's eye, I see the suffering from my childhood trauma as an incandescent rage, an uncontrolled fire burning in an office block. If I go near it, I will die. If I open a door, it will belch out at me, and reduce me to ash. That's my mental picture. And I realise, first and foremost, that the image I have of it in my mind is adding to the problem. I see it as huge, and myself as incapable. That's the first thing I could change: I could repaint the picture.

'And I'm scared of being compassionate,' I add, 'because it's like saying that I'm not allowed to be angry at what happened to me.'

She tilts her head and furrows a questioning look towards me.

‘It feels as if there are parts of me who don’t want my compassion,’ I explain, as these thoughts burst upon the surface of my mind for the first time. ‘That if I say ‘there, there’, it’s as if I’m expecting them to just let it go. But they were hurt. They were traumatised. They were abused. ‘Compassion’ feels like I’m asking them just to get over it.’

I don’t really know what I mean by this. It’s more a stirring on the inside of me than a fully-formed thought.

‘Compassion isn’t ‘there, there’,’ she says in response. ‘Compassion involves an energy to want to act, along with the stillness and the centeredness to ‘feel deeply with’. Compassion is the ultimate validation of your trauma because the hurt from the wrongness of it is being felt. Your view of ‘compassion’ seems to be from your mother’s, which *wasn’t* compassion. It was dismissive. It was controlling. It wanted to shut you up as quickly as possible so that it wouldn’t bother *her*.’

I’m alert with the newness of this. I urge her on with my eyes.

‘True compassion isn’t trying to get you to get rid of your feelings,’ she explains. ‘True compassion feels your feelings with you. True compassion has a sense of wanting to relieve your suffering, but by sitting with you in it, not by wiping it away. True compassion validates every ounce of pain you’re feeling, and gives you hope that it can be soothed. False compassion says ‘there, there’ to get you to shut up about your pain, because the person can’t bear it themselves.’

Hmmm.

‘Your parts maybe feel like you’re saying ‘there, there’ to shut them up from their pain, rather than being willing to feel it *with* them,’ she says, with aching gentleness.

I nod. ‘That’s exactly it. I don’t know what to do with their pain, how to cope with it, so every time I try this self-compassion thing, it’s like it gets thrown back in my face. Like parts are telling me where to shove it. So I stop trying.’

‘These traumatised parts of you need you to be as compassionate towards them as I am towards you,’ she says.

Oh, oh, oh.

Could I ever be as compassionate towards anyone as she is towards me? I hurt with the yearning and yet the impossibility of it.

‘But how do you manage it?’ I cry, perturbed, exasperated, and mildly overwhelmed. ‘How do you manage to sit with someone else’s pain and not be overwhelmed by it? How do you manage to not run away?’

She smiles and wraps her fingers together. ‘I don’t *always*. Sometimes it is hard to bear. But this is the issue of empathic distress. Compassion is a skill. We modulate it, so that we don’t feel so much empathy for another person that we become overwhelmed by their suffering. We have to be able to connect with it deeply, whilst also remaining deeply centered within ourselves. So we never forget that this is the other person’s pain, not ours. If I feel myself getting overwhelmed, I remind myself to breathe, and I’ll turn my focus away, just for a few moments, onto my diaphragm, and I’ll notice my chest expanding with the in-breath, and sinking with the out-breath. Just for a few moments. I modulate the pain, by shifting my focus. Then I can turn back to the client again and be fully present to them and to their pain again.’

I’m struck by what she’s saying like it’s a thunderclap of new insight into how other people manage their feelings. It has never occurred to me before, that a simple technique, or skill like this, could help to manage emotion. And it has never occurred to me either that she is feeling my pain while I’m talking, and that sometimes it overwhelms her. Or that she has a strategy for managing it. I thought she was just born this way. *She’s too clever*, I think, and of course then rebound into, *I’m so useless*, by comparison.

But I don’t want to lose this insight, so I press my brain into applying it.

‘When I feel the distress from my traumatised parts,’ I say, tentatively building my thoughts, ‘my default reaction is to look away. It’s to block them out. I dissociate from them.’

She nods. This much is obvious.

‘Because I don’t feel that I can handle their pain. I can’t take on board their suffering.’

‘And so they suffer even more, because they feel abandoned.’

I look at her, surprised again by this new idea.

She presses on. ‘What worse abandonment is there than from yourself? You are with yourself, twenty-four hours a day. And yet you are also absent from yourself most of that time. You suffer, but without self-compassion. That then feeds the vicious cycle of dissociative identity disorder, which requires you to separate from yourself in order to cope with unbearable

suffering. Without a compassionate response, it grows and grows, and feels too much to engage with. And so you dissociate from yourself more and more.'

Aaaah. This is it. This is my life. This is me.

'But you're saying that I can learn skills to manage this empathic distress, so that I can offer myself—my selves—some compassion for their suffering, rather than just blocking it out?'

'Yes.'

Yes. This is about-turn for me, but *yes.*

'It's not easy,' she adds. 'But the first step is for you to experience it in our relationship, here. When you experience compassion from me, that creates new neural networks in your brain. You have the basis then to build on those networks, and to start applying that compassion to yourself. You need co-regulation before you can develop self-regulation.'

This helps. This reduces the shame of why I've not managed it before. I haven't had the right circuitry, because I've never had the experience of compassion until now. My experience of compassion in the room, here, in therapy, with this therapist, is providing the building blocks for me to develop self-compassion towards myself. Slowly but slowly.

'Your parts need you,' she adds, glancing at the clock. 'Compassion is a necessary response to suffering. Without it, our suffering persists. Compassion begins to close it off. You need compassion from me, and you need compassion from yourself.'

'But what if the suffering is ongoing?' I say. I need to pinpoint all possibilities.

'Then the compassion needs to be ongoing,' she says. 'Suffering and pain and distress are part of this world, part of our lives. At one level they will never end. We have very little choice over that. But what we do have a choice over is how we respond to our suffering. Compassion is the only right response to suffering.'

'I'm in therapy to ease my suffering, aren't I?' I say, seeing it for the first time. 'I'm here to try to relieve my symptoms, which are suffering. I'm here to try to become a better version of me, because who I am right now is full of suffering. I can avoid some suffering with better choices...'—I'm thinking of the thousand crazy things I do each week which exacerbate my distress, back-brain driven reactions and impulsions—'… but for suffering

that I can't avoid, I can only manage it with compassion. With *self*-compassion.'

But from inside comes the dread feeling again, like a turning away.

'Not *false* self-compassion,' I add, directing the reassurance inwardly. 'Not 'there, there, now shut up' compassion. But 'I hear you, I'm with you, I'm for you, I'll sit with you' compassion. It doesn't take the suffering away, but it does ease it a little. It's like gas-and-air. You still feel it, but it's further away and less distressing.'

'Exactly.'

All my life, unconsciously, I have been seeking compassion. In all the myriad ways I have sought help, or support, or sympathy, or empathy, what I've been looking for is for someone to hear my pain, and validate it, and sit with me in it. At times I've wanted to shout it from the rooftops. I've wanted the whole world to know how much pain I'm in. And mostly I've heard only silence in return. Because the world is not good at compassion. *I'm* not good at compassion. And I'm needing this experience, now and here and week by week, in therapy, of receiving compassion from an attuned, empathic, grounded human being, so that I can know what it is, so that I can grow the neurobiological substrates to be able to express it towards myself. This is the start. I have the capacity for compassion, because I am a human being, and to be human is to be compassionate. We are built to bear suffering—both our own, and other people's.

I couldn't manage my suffering when I was a child, because it was too much, and because I was only a child. My brain hadn't developed fully. I didn't have the space inside me to bear that kind of pain. But I'm an adult now. My parts often present as child-like, but the way through this suffering is not to continue in my childhoodedness. It's to grow upwards and forwards into the fullness of the adulthood of me, where I am resilient enough and capacious enough to sit with myself in my suffering, and be compassionate. This is my challenge. This is my goal.

'I guess I need to choose compassion,' I say, as I stand up, and begin to get ready to leave. 'I need to adopt it as a mindset, as an attitude. So that I can learn how to do it. I need to see my suffering, and respond to it well.'

I feel unexpectedly resolute, even hopeful.

But I'm aware—acutely, almost painfully—that one discussion about compassion has not suddenly given me the skills to do it. And yet, as with so many things that happen in this room, the first step is insight, the second

step is intention, and the third step is implementation. Steps, steps, steps. As long as I keep taking steps, I’ll move towards my destination.

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

‘How can I help you?’ the therapist asks me. ‘What do you need from me?’

I look at her closely, examining her features, whilst also looking through her, to make sure I don’t connect too closely.

First the fear: *Is this a trick? What does she mean? What does she want? Why is she saying this?*

Then the shame: *What right have I to be helped?*

And afterwards, the sadness: *No-one has ever offered to help me.*

Three emotions in three seconds.

I don’t know where to look, where to put myself, what to do. Part of me wants to get out of here, as quickly as possible, to put infinite distance between me and this huckster, mocking me with her duplicity. She’s ensnaring me. She’s offering me hope, so that she can dash it, and then trample over my upset. She’s a Trojan horse, trying to get behind my defences, so that she can attack me from within.

But maybe it’s for real. Maybe she means it. Maybe she wants to help me.

How can I help you?

But she won’t, because I don’t know how she can. I don’t know how to answer her question. I am unhelpable and hopeless: a limitless emptiness of irreparability. There is no help for someone like me. That’s what I’ve known all my life. Because I am *bad*.

All of these thoughts whirl around like spring gusts in a courtyard. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to *be*.

‘What do you *need* from me?’ she says again, because I haven’t responded. There’s such tenderness in her voice, like crêpe paper folding itself over my heart. I am tempted to believe her good intentions. I’m tempted to hope.

‘I’m not allowed to *need*,’ I say, guiltily. I feel stuffed full to the lid with neediness, a vast vat of it, all sticky and putrid. My neediness is *wrong*. More than that, *I* am wrong. I shiver with the shame of it and bury my eyes into the biscuity carpet to avoid the reproach of her gaze.

I can hear her sigh, but with such a weight of sadness that even across the room from her I feel it might crush me.

‘You’re not wrong to *need*,’ she says. Her voice is dripping with compassion, like molten nectar. I want to lick it up, devour it, take it into myself, to make her words true, to make it possible to be acceptable within my desperate, aching wantonness of need. But I smother the feeling back down again. *Bad, bad, I am bad.* I feel twisted up inside, nauseous at this conflict within me, wanting her approval, wanting her acceptance, hating myself, hating my need.

Her head tips forward and down slightly, like she’s trying to swoop down into my line of sight. ‘You’re *not* wrong to have needs,’ she says again.

It’s like a piercing in my heart. And suddenly I feel whisked up away into a scene from my childhood, and I lose the nowness of now and I’m stood apart from myself, out of my body, out of the here. I’ve become little, littler than little, a sobbing frantic mess, all desperate with the terror of abandonment, and this child-me collapses into a ball and out erupts the pain, the anguish, the life-draining agony of neediness unneeded.

‘Please don’t, please don’t, plee-a-ase,’ she sobs.

The mother is holding the telephone, the ugly cream bulge of it heavy and threatening, the coiling, curled cable dangling like an appendage from its torso on the wall. ‘I’m phoning the children’s home,’ the mother says, stern and callous and cold and unremitting. ‘They can come and take you away until you learn not to cry.’ But still the tears come, killing her, severing away all possibility in this conflict of impossibility. ‘Please don’t, please don’t, plee-a-ase’, with hiccuping gulps of salty wetness.

Stop it. Stop it. Shut up. Be quiet. Just stop it.

But she can’t. She needs good mummy to save her from bad mummy. She needs her to come back and make bad mummy stop, to let her be, to

quietly, sombrely put her in her room, but without this gibbering malice and rage of the snake-mother, all evil and fetid and frothing. Other mummy disappeared, in a flick of a switch, in a skip of a heartbeat, and she doesn't know where she went, but she needs her to come back so she doesn't have to go to the children's home, where the monsters come in the night-time, the big oafs of men who murder the little children. She *needs* mummy to come back, to stop *this one*. But how? She doesn't know. She can't know.

'|t's okay, you're just remembering,' says the therapist, with enough volume to rise above the sobbing of the child-woman client. 'It's not happening now. I won't send you away.'

I struggle to comprehend her words. My body is jolting still with emotion, and snot is peeking out from the end of my nose. I reach for a tissue to wipe it away, shaky, forlorn, and deeply mortified. Surely this is the point at which the therapist will tell me that she can't work with me any more. Because I am too much. Because I dissociated. Because I really, really, don't deserve to be here.

'How can I help you?' again she asks.

I gulp in a ratchety breath and try to force myself calm. The scene of what just played out here is like afterburn on my mind. I can see enough of it to know that it just happened, but I can't remember it directly. I don't *want* to remember it.

'I don't know,' I say, my voice shaking with the effort of calmness. 'It doesn't feel right to be helped.'

'No,' says the therapist ruefully and sagging her face into an empathic frown. 'You were punished when you had needs.'

Punished? I'm surprised at her choice of words. *Was I 'punished'? What is she referring to?* I look up at her, quizzical.

'Do you remember what just happened?' she asks.

I shrug. 'A little,' because that's true. But I can't look at her.

'You seemed to be reliving a time when your mother threatened to send you to the children's home because you were upset about something. She punished you for having needs.'

Something rips through me. It's unbidden and surprising. It slits open a memory like a sack of grain. Out come tumbling pellets of emotion.

'I was upset because I'd fallen off my tricycle,' I explain, and my words are fast and clipped and my breath is shallow. 'I'd cut my hand when I fell.

It was on the path outside the house. I went in to show her. She was cross with me for bleeding. It hurt. I cried. And she flipped.'

'Flipped in what way?'

'Screaming at me, hitting me. Just crazy. An eruption, like a bomb had gone off. I needed her. I needed comfort from her. And she flipped.'

'She flipped?'

I've said it twice now, so she must have heard me. What's her question?

'Yes, flipped,' I say, and I can see it, for that moment, in my mind's eye: the terror of child-me, a preschooler, with blood trickling down my hand onto my wrist, the stinging pain of it, the fear that I'll drip onto the carpet, the shakenness of the tumble, grit on my knees, in my palms, on my forearms. And I need a cuddle. Just so desperately, desperately need a cuddle. So I run to mummy and she *flips*.

What I saw, of course, was her switching. The therapist is right to question the word. She didn't *flip*. She *switched*. I triggered her no doubt with my attachment need. She couldn't handle it. She didn't know how to respond to it. And she switched into the rageful screamy one and threatened to send me away if I didn't stop crying.

But it was okay for her to cry, I think to myself, wistful but angry.

'What sense did you make of it?'

The upset has subsided within me. I have, for this moment, dual awareness: I can hold in my mind's eye the traumatised child, bereft of comfort and support, and I can see—for now at least—that she was me. And at the same time I know that I am here, and that I am me, and that I am sat with the therapist—the therapist, not my mother—and that I am remembering. This is a feat of therapeutic progress which has taken years to achieve. I can both be here, and remember, and I can know that I am me, and she is me, and that I am remembering being me. And yet only a few moments ago I *became* her. My progress is neither linear nor neat.

But this time I've come quickly back into my adult self, and the therapist has mediated that shift. I am learning. I am beginning to be able to be me and remember being me, without switching away, out of shame, from the unacceptability of me. The therapist is making it acceptable.

I have a sudden insight.

'The sense I made of it,' I say, slowly, spreading out my words, like uncreasing a sheet, 'is that I was wrong to need. The sense I made of it is that I was wrong to be upset. The sense I made of it is that I shouldn't have

fallen off my trike—I should have been more careful—that it shouldn't have hurt when I did, that I shouldn't have been upset by it, and that I shouldn't have sought comfort and care from my mother.'

'That's a lot of 'shouldn'ts'.'

'Yes.' But better than that is the fact that right in this moment, with the therapist as my auxiliary cortex, I can stand back from that incident and *see* it. Really see it. And see it from the outside, not just be immersed by it, on the inside of it, reliving it, swamped and drowning.

'And what sense do you make of it now?' she asks, pushing me forwards. I feel like there are two pieces of paper, each with a heading: 'Then' and 'Now'. I am lining them up in my head, side by side. The comparison will be stark.

I force air out through my mouth to release some tension and I frown myself into a focused state, leaning forwards. Concentrating is hard when you're used to dissociating. Especially this kind of thinking, when emotions are swirling hard and threat levels are high, due to the proximity of the therapist. I'm nearly shaking with the effort.

But the therapist is here, willing me on, and she is safe, and I am safe, and it's not happening now. I grasp onto the deep-in-my-guts sense of the safety of *now* and I dare myself to say it.

'The sense I make of it now...' The thoughts keep bobbing below the horizon of consciousness, as if my mind doesn't want me to see them. I squeeze my brow tighter. 'The sense I make of it now is that my mother had her own struggles. That for whatever reason she had attachment difficulties and that she was dissociative too. And so when a small child—*her* small child—wanted comfort and affection, it triggered her. Maybe it reminded her of all her own lack of comfort and affection, what she failed to receive as a child. Whatever the reason, she couldn't give it. She was broken. And so she lost her emotional balance and she flew off the handle. And what she did, and how she reacted, was damaging to me at the time as a child. But her reaction was because of *her*, not because of me.'

The therapist is looking at me, focused too, her head bobbing slightly in encouragement.

'And so the sense I make of it now is that it wasn't wrong for me to be upset or to have needs or to go to her with them. That was the most natural thing in the world. What was wrong was her reaction to me.'

A big rush of air comes out of me as I collapse with the strain of thinking this. At one level, it is so simple and so straightforward. At another, it reeks of terror. This is treason to think such thoughts. To blame my mother at all, however graciously. To call her ‘wrong’. Not to take the blame myself. Not to be the bad one.

And there is conflict inside me.

Part of me wants to retract it all, throw myself on the floor, beg for forgiveness, sob and scream and cry and plead for the pain to stop. Because the pain will come now. The pain always comes if we talk back.

Another part surges with anger. With the unrighteousness of it all. The injustice. The unfairness. The cruelty. The hurt.

Another part wants to run away, to drift into oblivion, to not know, to not feel, to not be. Anything other than think about this, feel these feelings, be here.

And yet another part wants to vomit with dread. Helpless, frozen, legs all collapsed under us.

I sit in the conflict, twisting around within myself. I lose contact with the therapist, with the now.

‘What do you need from me?’ she says again. *Again. Why can’t she just let it go? Why does she keep foisting herself into me, invading me, coming where she’s not wanted, intruding where she’s not needed? I don’t need anything from her. I don’t need anything from anyone.*

But then I sit across from myself as I feel the sobs begin to rise. *Acceptance*, I think to myself, but don’t say it. *I need you not to reject me. Not to shame me. Not to punish me. Just don’t send me away. Don’t humiliate me. Don’t ignore me. Just sit with me. Hold my hand. Tell me it’s okay. Wipe away the blood and put a plaster on it. Tell me a story of when you fell off your bike. Ask me what happened. Say you know it hurts. Ask me to show you where. Tell me I’m being brave.*

But I sit, as these thoughts swarm within me like a thousand angry wasps, and I say nothing, and I can’t meet her gaze. I’m too ashamed still.

‘I’m overreacting,’ I say instead. ‘It was only a little cut.’

‘You were only a little child,’ the therapist retorts, kindly but firmly, searing into me with compassionate eyes that won’t let me discount it all.

I sigh, frustrated, and turn away further. Really I want to escape now.

She tracks me.

‘Receiving anything from anyone is hard for you, isn’t it?’ she says.

And then it comes. Erupt and away.

‘I don’t need anything from anyone!’ sneers a strident voice, churlish and adolescent. ‘I never have, I never will. I can look after myself. I don’t need anyone.’

‘You’ve looked after yourself extremely well. You’ve coped through very difficult circumstances.’ She’s trying to placate ‘him’, trying to bring him onside, trying to mitigate the conflict that he wants to stir between us so that we can avoid these feelings that are steaming on the surface.

‘It’s an impossible bind,’ I say, forcing myself to speak, feeling distant and withdrawn and yet vibrantly immanent. ‘If I need anything from you, you’ll send me away. You’ll close me down. It’ll be the end of the session, and there won’t be any more. I can’t contain all this need’—arms wafting, as I always do, when words won’t suffice—‘in just the therapy hour. I can’t let it out. Because I’ll never get it back into the box again. And it won’t be here, in the session, that I’ll feel the fall-out. It’ll be when you’re not here. So don’t tempt me with ‘what do you need from me?’ Like I can just switch that on and off.’—Angry, horrified, pleading, morose.—‘Just don’t.’

A long pause now as the words fizzle away and I gulp some air to try to calm myself and I try to come back into me, into *just me*, and to stuff down the vulnerability of this rancorous part, so frightened and disavowed.

The therapist picks her way through the minefield I’ve just set for her. She guards the way with warmth and connection and humanity and realness.

‘I know,’ she says. ‘You’ve had a lifetime of not having your needs met by a human being, and then here I am asking you what you need from me. And it sounds like you feel that if you ask for anything, you will need to ask for everything. And you’re frightened of the hugeness of the need on the inside of you. So instead you get angry with me, to push me away, so that you’re not tempted to reach out to me and receive something, in case it’s not enough. Is that about right?’

Yes, that’s about right. In fact, that’s about perfectly, completely right.

I soften my ribs and sink a little into the chair. There’s a bit more space for air in my lungs. My fists uncurl.

I nod, because I’m not sure what sound I might make if I speak. It’s an olive-branch.

‘You’re right that I can’t meet all your needs,’ she continues. ‘A therapy session never feels long enough. It’s a smidgen of your week. And I’m not

there for you the rest of the time. So you're right to mistrust me. But I'm not offering you everything, and neither am I offering you nothing. I'm offering you something. And I'm hoping that that something can be a transformative experience for you, which shows you that it's okay for you to have needs. Whether your mother couldn't meet them then or I can't meet them now doesn't mean that you're wrong for having them. The something that I can offer is designed to show you that your needs aren't shameful—that *you* aren't shameful. That's all.'

In a tight, closed-up space in my mind is a little bubbling of resentment, that she didn't agree to meet all my needs, all the time, and forever. But her limitations at least feel safe. The boundary of what she can and cannot do feels safe. She is offering a transformative experience, within the confines of 'something', rather than 'everything' or 'nothing'. That is largely alien to me. But its compactness feels safe.

'Doesn't it make it worse, though?' I ask, apprehensive, but genuinely curious. 'Doesn't it make it worse to have *some* needs met, but not all? Doesn't it just make you crave more?'

She puckers her lips into a thoughtful gaze and chews on the idea for a moment.

'I guess,' she says—and I can see that she's trying to be loose and flexible in her response, so as not to be caught out by my legalistic rigidity—'I guess it's like a seed. If you're hungry, a seed won't do much to abate your hunger. And as you say, it might just make things worse, by whetting your appetite. But it depends what you do with it. Because if you plant it, and nurture it, then maybe in time it will be enough to feed you for a lifetime.'

I look at her, suspicious. I don't want to be fooled by the seeming profundity of what she's just said. And I don't want her to see that something is resonating, deep in my guts. I want to think about this, and mull it over, and consider it. I don't just want to take her word for it. I want to *know* that it's right.

She smiles at me, perhaps sensing my struggle.

'The important thing from today,' she says, 'is that you know that your needs are not shameful. They're not wrong. They won't get you in trouble. You won't be rejected, or humiliated, or hurt. Your needs are what make you human. Your needs are essential for proper human connection. Your needs are the essence of you. And your needs are acceptable here.'

But it’s the end of the session, and I have a sense, as if she’s about to pick up the phone.

‘Our time is up,’ she says, ‘for *today*. But I’m not sending you away. A limit on our time, a limitation on your needs, is not a rejection. Therapy is something. It’s not nothing, and it’s not everything. It’s a seed.’

And so off I go to sow.

UNSHAME

‘*Un*shame?’ says the therapist, checking that she’s heard me correctly.

I nod. ‘I don’t know what else to call it. Because, what’s the opposite of shame? There isn’t one really, is there? It’s not pride, because that’s all puffed up—the other end of the spectrum. What’s the position in the middle, where you’re not full of shame, and you’re not full of pride? *Unshame* is the only word I can think of. It’s where you’re just *you* and it’s okay to be you.’

She smiles encouragingly. Maybe it’s going to be one of those sessions where I just need her empathic supportiveness to contain me while I unfurl my thoughts from their tight little nest deep within my head. I need permission to challenge things. To feel things. To know things.

I need a safe space in which I can stand back from my life and rearrange its edges, like breaking up a jigsaw and starting again. I need to find the frame. I need to find some certainties. I need to be able to imagine what it will look like once complete. Because I realise that, so much of my life, I’ve been putting the pieces together upside down: a dull, pale blue cardboard life. But now, here in therapy, I’m going to jiggle the pieces around, turn them over, consider them. And start to construct a new picture. One full of life.

At least, that’s the plan. I’m not sure where my positivity has suddenly come from. I’m not sure if it will remain.

‘Shame stinks,’ I say at last, reinvolving the therapist in my thoughts. ‘It’s like a sulphurous fume that has followed me around all my life. I’m so

used to it that I've become nose-blind to it. But other people notice it about me. And it makes them draw back.'

The therapist's eyes narrow and I wonder whether she'll agree with me or disconfirm my perceptions. Either way, I will feel both worse and better. So I decide not to find out, and plough on.

'But I want to live in clear air. I want the freshness of ozone, like by a waterfall. I want *a different life*.'

'How are you going to create that different life?' she asks.

'Through *unshame*.'

She makes a light puffing noise through her nose, and her eyes are twinkly. 'How do you mean?' she asks.

I laugh.

'I have no idea.'

I used to imagine that, at least part way through therapy I would suddenly grasp what it was all about, and I would have all the answers. I would know how to get 'fixed'. I would know why I was messed up, and how to get unmessed up, and then a few weeks later (having only anticipated six sessions in total) all would be well.

Best laid plans, eh?

Although I'm yet to know it, at this point, six years in, I'm over halfway through my therapy process. I've made significant progress. I'm no longer regularly trying to kill myself. I'm no longer assaulted by flashbacks or nightmares. Although parts are still a reality, my switching is largely measured and controlled. Much of the trauma has been made conscious, and vocalised; it sits, albeit at times precariously, like a puffin on a cliff-edge, within some sort of narrative framework. I have developed numerous skills: grounding, mentalising, 'noticing', soothing. I know about my window of tolerance and how to manoeuvre back into it. I am developing 'earned secure attachment'. I have, in fact, made huge strides forwards, despite on a weekly basis feeling that I am making none at all.

But still.

Still there is shame.

Still there is the enduring, eternal, stuckness of shame. The hatred of being me. The raw, putrefying revulsion of who and what I am. The feeling, on the inside, that I am immutably defective. That I am on the edge of society. That I don't fit in, don't belong, don't deserve human companionship.

Shame.

Will it ever move?

I burrow my eyes into my therapist's to try to draw out of her the glimmer of insight I need to understand what 'unshame' is. Because I see it in her. She's not perfect. She's not 'sorted'. But there's something about her, something about the way she inhabits her skin, and converses easily with her feelings, that I know is alien to me. She exudes a confidence about her right to exist. Her body says, 'I'm okay here. I'm okay being me. I have needs, and I deserve to have them met. When they're not met, that's not okay. But *I* am still okay, even when my needs go unanswered. Because when that happens, it's not because of me. It is because life is imperfect. But I am okay, just as I am.'

Unshame.

It smells nice.

But how do I get there?

I have a queasy anxiety that part of me—or a part of me, at the very least—is holding onto shame because it's familiar and comfortable. Because the alternative—any alternative, even a better alternative—is scary.

And maybe this part of me doesn't want the responsibility of living in *unshame*—a place where I cannot shrink into the shadows. Because in daring to be me I will have to stand in the glare and declare, *unashamedly*, that I am okay as I am, that I have the right to exist, to be—and so risk rebuke from others who would pull me down. Do I lack the courage to stand tall and fight for myself, defend myself, assert the right to be who I am, what I am, even though—like every human being—I will never be perfect?

Living with shame is like being stuck in neutral, unable to engage the clutch to shift into gear. We idle, not moving forwards. Because then at least there's no risk. At least we won't crash. Just imagine what could go wrong if we stepped on the accelerator in life. Think of all the accidents waiting to happen. Shame says, 'Let's stay exactly where we are, so that we don't risk dying.' *Unshame* says, 'But think of where we could go, the things we could do, the scenery we could see.' Shame folds its arms in response. 'No, it's too dangerous,' it says. And maybe it's right. But maybe it's not.

Shame is a powerful place to be: we are master of our destiny. It is a negative destiny, full of suffering and pain, but at least we are in control of it. Nothing can go wrong that we have not already anticipated and deserved.

Unshame by contrast is slender and fragile. We don't know what we are. We might succeed. But also we might fail.

Is it better to know that we are bad, to know that we are at fault, to always be in the wrong, in order to erase the anxiety of uncertainty? That is the temptation of shame. It is rigid with certainties and in a dangerous world I yearn for certainties. Shame can control where we come in the race if we pull out before the start; unshame has a thousand possibilities, and not all of them are rosy.

I remember that the therapist is there, and that she cannot read my thoughts. 'I'm thinking about unshame,' I explain. 'I'm not sure I know what it's like. I'm not sure I want it.'

'Why not?'

I shrug. 'Because it's different. Because it's scary. Because it doesn't 'fit'.'

'Like someone else's clothes?' the therapist asks.

I nod. 'Exactly like that. There's that sense that I ought not to be doing this. I'm waiting to get caught out. I'm waiting for someone to say to me, 'Oi! What are you doing? Who do you think you are, to wear the clothes of Unshame?''

'And whose voice is that, who will tell you off?'

'Probably my mother's,' I admit and I smile sheepishly, because my mother spends far too much time in the room here with us.

'What would it be like if in life nobody told you off?' the therapist asks.

My eyebrows rise an inch up my forehead and my eyes ring wide. 'I simply cannot imagine that,' I say at last. *I have always been in the wrong.*

But I stop for a moment to think about it. What would that actually be like—to be okay? Not to be bad, not to be shameful, not to be evil, not to be wrong? Right at this moment I simply cannot conceptualise it. It's like asking what the world would be like without air.

The therapist rocks forwards in her chair, leaning towards me. She waits until she has my full attention. 'You're *not* in the wrong,' she says, solemnly, like a registrar.

And at one level—intellectually, cognitively—I know this to be true. I wouldn't smear someone else with ineffable badness. I won't even do it to my abusers. So why should I do it to myself?

'But *how* do I believe that I'm not bad?' I ask, plaintive and grumbly and slightly annoyed.

‘There’s a disconnect between what you know with your head to be true, and what you feel with your gut to be true, isn’t there?’ the therapist says.

‘Yes,’ I agree. ‘It’s exactly that. I want to believe I’m not bad, or always wrong. I don’t want this shame identity. But I can’t shake it off. I can’t just *change* it. It just *is*.’

She sighs and nods and compassion breaks out over her face. I feel, for that moment, understood.

‘So what are you going to do about it?’

Whoa.

I wasn’t expecting that. Suddenly I feel misunderstood. Has she heard nothing I’ve just said? If I could change it, I would. If I could feel differently, I would. If I could live in unshame, I’d be there in a flash...

I frown somewhat angrily and turn my gaze away from her, and sink away within myself. I feel hot and cold at the same time, and slightly fuzzy around my edges.

‘Just notice that a moment,’ says the therapist quickly, taking me by surprise. *Notice what?*

My eyes shoot back to her to try to make sense of her words.

‘Just notice how you’ve reacted out of shame to what I’ve just said.’

I don’t understand. I retreat further within myself, ashamed at being ashamed.

‘What do you mean?’ I say at last, feeling naked and sulky.

‘Shame arises in your back brain,’ she says. ‘The disconnect is between your thinking front brain, which knows theoretically that you’re not bad and wrong, and your back brain and body, which don’t. So when I ask you what you’re going to do about it, you feel shamed—as if I’m saying that you’re at fault and that you shouldn’t feel like this—and you become defensive and disconnect from me.’

I’m astonished that she can pick up so much from such a micro-moment between us. But she’s right that I’ve pulled back from her. Because I feel stuck in shame, and she’s asking me what I’m going to do about it. But surely, if I’m stuck, I’m *stuck.* What can I possibly do about it? Her question feels like an accusation, as if she’s saying that the shame is my fault. As if *I* am at fault: something else for me to be ashamed about. It’s a little bit too meta.

But, no, that's not what she's meaning, a voice within says, firmly and with a pointed stare. I force my brain through a tight sieve of mentalising. I've vocalised my desire to be free of shame. She's merely encouraging me in that. My reaction is because of me, not because of what she's said. My reaction is because shame is my default.

I can't yet lift my eyes but I do readjust my position closer to her—imperceptibly closer, maybe, but it feels big to me. I try to take control of the urge within me to throw a sulk and coerce her into retracting her challenge. I realise, with sudden acuity, that I sometimes use shame to manipulate: don't tell me that I can change; don't tell me that I can be different. Just feel sorry for me that I'm stuck like this, and believe me when I say there is nothing that can be done.

It's a constant conflict. I want things to be different. I want to live in 'unshame'. But I'm also convinced that my place is in shame, and that I am its prisoner. That there is nothing at all that I can do about it—I am bad because I am bad, and because I am bad I will always be bad. What, then, is the point in trying to change? It is a fixed and immutable part of who I am as a human being—who I was born to be.

She's hunting me with her eyes.

'Just notice it,' she says again. 'Notice the reaction.'

Now I'm irritated. 'Why? What good will that do?'

She smiles at the corners of her mouth and looks down, as if to step away from my emotion. 'Noticing helps to interrupt the automatic reactions of trauma,' she says.

Now I really am lost. I signal so with a disgusted squint.

'Shame is a habit,' she explains, taking time between each word. 'When certain things happen, like when I challenge you, it activates your shame. If I encourage you to think or behave in an 'unshame' way, it presses your shame button. And within the blink of an eye, you're flooded with shame. You disconnect from me, get angry, or freeze, or shrink into yourself. It's a back brain response.'

She pauses to let the words fall like silt into my head. I feel on guard still, as if about to be attacked.

'You can't stop yourself reacting, because it happens too quickly.'

Yes, exactly that. So what am I supposed to do?

'The first step is simply to notice the reaction,' she replies to my unspoken question. I look back at her, dubiously, so she continues. 'There's

some clever brain science—which I don't understand—that suggests that by focusing your attention on the reaction itself, it will begin to interrupt that reaction so that it won't be so habitual or automatic any more. It brings the front brain online and switches the back brain off again.'

This sounds either like the stuff of mystic fairy dust, or psychobabble claptrap. I'm not sure which. Is she conning me?

My doubt etches over my face, causing the therapist to laugh almost explosively.

'I know,' she says, smiling broadly. 'I know you don't think I'm capable of understanding brain science. And I don't. But I've grasped enough to understand this much. Noticing works. When you react, we just notice. That's all. We don't try to change it. We don't judge it. We just notice.'

But noticing in that non-judgmental way is not what I do. Oh no. For me, noticing is about criticising, and pulling myself down. Noticing has a purpose: to blame, to berate, to shame, to hate.

Again, I feel ashamed of my reactions. Why do I always resort to beating myself up? Why can I not even simply notice, without it being a form of self-abuse? I say so.

'Ouch,' says the therapist, frowning. 'You're perpetuating the abuse.'

Hmm. I suppose I am. Abusing myself, beating myself up, playing my mother's role for her, even in her absence. *Damn*.

'Shame seems to engender shame,' she says.

I frown a question at her.

'But what would unshame be like?' she asks, ignoring my query. 'What would it be like if you didn't have any shame, and you were just able to notice the way you react to trauma without judgement or condemnation?'

It's like a thought experiment. *What if?* I realise that I don't have any other model in my head for reacting, other than out of shame. So what would reacting out of *unshame* be like? The thought stirs a little vortex of curiosity on the inside of me.

'You mean, even if I get triggered, I'm just able to step back and notice that I'm getting triggered but without feeling ashamed of it?'

She nods. 'Yes. What would that be like?'

I stare away into the roses beyond the window to try to focus. 'I would have one problem, rather than two,' I say at last. 'I would just have the triggering to deal with. But I wouldn't be beating myself up for having been triggered. It would be a lot easier...'

The rose heads are bobbing in the breeze. I can't quite make out their colour.

'Unshame... it feels almost empty,' I say.

'Empty?'

'Yes, like *clean*. Uncluttered. Uncomplicated. Like a surface that's just been dusted and everything put away. No sticky stains. Just a smooth area that you could cook on.'

I'm not sure I'm making any sense, but I think she's used to that.

'With unshame,' I say, glimpsing something inchoate and labile, but significant, 'it's like there's *just* the reaction. It just is. There's not the reaction to the reaction. With unshame, I can respond calmly. Not react, but respond. I can choose what to do. Shame whooshes down on me and I've reacted before I know it. That's the back brain, isn't it? But with unshame, it's like the surfaces are clear and there's no mess and I've got time to think about what's being said or done.'

My words are inadequate to describe the insight I've just had. It's like peering into a room and opening the curtains and everything suddenly is bright, and in view. Like the roses are suddenly aromatic in my hand.

'But I can't force unshame, can I?' I say, reinvolving the therapist in my train of thought, and looking at her full on in a fantastically-present 'I'm here and I'm me' kind of a way.

She tilts her head quizzically.

'I mean, that's what I've been frustrated about all along. I've wanted to just push a button and move from shame to unshame. But it doesn't work like that, does it?'

'How does it work?' she says.

'I don't know. It feels like it's a gradual process, of just noticing—like you say. Just noticing every time I'm reacting out of shame, and then drawing myself back to a position of unshame. That I'm okay just as I am. Being kind towards myself. A bit like in mindfulness meditation when you notice that your attention has wandered from your breath. You don't force the breath. You don't beat yourself up for it. You just go back to doing it. And over time it becomes easier, more natural, and your focus gets stronger, a bit like a muscle.'

She is nodding slowly, waiting to see if there's more. There is.

'So the move from shame to unshame isn't some big momentous occasion,' I continue. 'Is it instead a process, like of learning to focus on the

breath?—I have to learn to focus on the unshame? Until it breaks the habit of shame?'

'That sounds very feasible,' she agrees.

There's a flicker of disappointment on the inside of me. I've spent six years waiting for the *aha!* moment. I've turned up each week hoping that this is the week that the magic wand will be waved and *tada!* I'll be free of shame. What I'm suggesting—and it helps that I'm proposing it, rather than the therapist—is that the journey towards unshame is a process, and a practice. That it will take time.

'I guess I had to learn to see shame first,' I add. 'It was so normal that I didn't even notice it. Like our breathing. We breathe 24 hours a day but it's only occasionally that we stop and actually notice it. And then when we notice it, we can change it. It might speed up again when we're not looking, but as soon as we notice it, we can slow it. So, like in learning to breathe deeply, from the belly, rather than with short, shallow breaths, learning to live in unshame is a constant practice rather than a one-off. It's a new habit that needs to be set in muscle memory, in habit memory.'

She's smiling at me.

And there it comes again—uprush, thrumming, thud in my tummy: the feeling of shame. That I must have said something wrong, got something wrong. That I've become unacceptable by what I've just uttered. Because I can't prove that I'm right. It's just a theory. And maybe it's wrong. Maybe she knows it. And maybe she's smiling at me in a patronising way. Maybe she's going to ridicule me now...

'Just notice,' she says, the smile fading. I have no idea how she manages to mind-read me like this.

I take a breath. Yes, being smiled at can be a trigger sometimes. Non-traumatised people react unconsciously to a smile with a release of oxytocin, the so-called 'cuddle hormone', which promotes social bonding. Traumatised people often react instead instinctively, automatically with a rush of cortisol, the stress hormone, as I have just done. People are dangerous; a smile is dangerous. I have no control over my reaction. But I do have control over my response.

'Unshame,' I say to myself, as a mantra, and focus on my breathing—because even though I meant it as only a simile, they are linked now in my thinking, so I might as well use it. In with the unshame; out with the shame.

She waits until I'm settled and then she speaks. 'I guess when you start to see your shame reaction, you'll start to see it everywhere,' she says. 'It might be a bit overwhelming to start with. But stick with it. Breathe through it.'

She looks at me, making sure I've heard. I have. I nod.

'Unshame is where you belong,' she says.

Unshame. That's where she lives. And that's where she says I can live too. It is a delicious thought and I want to lick my lips in anticipation of it.

You don't belong in unshame, says a voice inside, almost immediately.

Unshame, I respond, silently, internally. *And breathe*.

It's a start.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carolyn Spring helps people recover from trauma and to reverse adversity. She is author of numerous books and articles and has delivered extensive training throughout the UK for both dissociative survivors and professionals working with them. She set up PODS (Positive Outcomes for Dissociative Survivors) in 2010 to promote recovery from dissociative disorders. She now works more widely in the field of mental health and adversity and combines a wealth of personal experience with research in her writing and training, bringing a rare positivity and the belief that no matter what people have experienced, recovery is possible.

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