

Washing away

Lines blurred, an erratic palette – the days of clean edges dissolve in the rear-view mirror. At first, her reaction to the unexpected pain was like that of any other human being: denial and rejection. It was unendurable – the pain of loss, and the realization that, after all, she was like any other person out there, despite years of painting herself a different story with more vivid colours, cross-hatching or intricate patterns. No longer could she deceive herself so as to boost her self-worth; she was one of many, not one of a kind.

The pain that she initially pushed away and refused to acknowledge would sneak up on her at night, when the world was quiet and empty of distractions, when the house fell asleep and the agony inside of her would awake. She would aim to breathe in full awareness to slow down its force, but eventually she would give up and submit to the pain. It would shake her until tears rose to the surface, it would torment her until she allowed them to flow from her eyes, and she would wash them away in the shower, disguised by the running water, diluting their saltiness, their tangy edge thinned down as they ran down her body now vulnerable, briefly restoring her before she fell asleep. With a jump, she realizes she probably has spent too much time in the shower, she needs to step out soon. The bar of soap is back on the light blue dish. The tap is off, the crying is over; a towel is swiftly draped around her, her body is dry, her face too. No lotions or looks in the mirror, just the perfunctory pep talk – oh yes, things always work themselves out somehow – a pointless nod that allows her to place one foot in front of the other.

She would lie down but could only glimpse at rest; the images of the past, whether joyful or cheerless, would wash over her and soak her, reminders of what she had lost, memories of what was no longer there.

She was not the woman they would have naturally described as adventurous: there were no zip lines or parachutes in sight. Throughout her life, she had spent hours every day talking to strangers; and wasn't that scary? Wasn't that the true adventurous spirit? She had listened to their woes and had learned about their fears, their families, their flaws. It had been her job to listen, her pride to help people explore their thought processes, to let them untangle the mental knots they had spent years contending with. Often the look in their eyes when they contemplated an idea for the first time and saw an opening in their lives would stay with her for days, it would sneak up on her while she was having breakfast and she would find herself smiling down at her cup of coffee. This was what her mother had always referred to as a dignified occupation, serving the community. "You're doing good, darling," she would often tell her with a pat on the back.

Slowly she walked into the kitchen and considered her fridge and pantry. How much food was there? How long could she wait until her next trip to the supermarket? It was warm outside, a sprinkle of midspring, she could survive on little food if the temperatures rose. It was no use talking to herself the way she did to her patients, asking them if they could use art or creative writing to soothe their anxiety, to generate a sense of accomplishment.

"Expressing yourself in different ways can be so powerful," she used to suggest. Now she felt like a fraud. "You can try painting, drawing, knitting. My sister made lovely felt toys for her children last winter." What a crook, she thought, her opinion of herself diminishing with every passing hour. She had spent years trying to help her patients connect to a fresh outlook on life, and here she was, a dimly lit creature, brick walls on the horizon.

"I will paint myself a bowl of rice, steamy, with seasonal vegetables; I'll even splurge on organic today," she told herself, sarcasm not cheering her up. "I will knit myself a husband,

a child. I'll draw myself some money to cover the rent for a couple more months. I'll write myself a story where my—”

The words on the page were coming in and out of focus. Breaking the spell that connected him to the leather-bound notebook, he shifted in his seat and stared into his tea, wrapped his hands around the steaming cup and brought his face closer to it. Taking deep breaths, he took in the smell and the warmth, and wished for something to fill in the gaps. Careful not to burn his tongue – fear a common sight in his kitchen these days – he took short sips, and tried to relax with every drop, while he struggled to shake off the doubts about his work, becoming aware of his body against the chair, his legs decidedly rigid against the comfortable cushions that he spent so much time on.

Now all that was left at the bottom of the cup was a small pool of tea, light, tepid, weak – he considered it dispassionately and wondered whether he should simply drink it, eyes closed, or throw it out and make a new, fresh cup instead. He shook his head and ripped up the pages. No. Her story will have hope in it. Tears of joy. Resilience. Yes, she was not real, a simple product of his hours holding a pen while his legs stubbornly tensed up against the cushioned chair, but the readers, they were only coming to the pages to find answers, not to drink in more bitterness. They craved for optimism. They would not accept her, he worried – they would close their eyes, their books, discarding her struggles, together with his. He had the power to change it – he decided to start over and give her a win.