

Chapter 1: Salt & Control

“The breaking of so great a thing should make a greater crack.”

— William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

On the corner of Sun Valley Road and Main Street sits a bustling bistro. Columns of river-rock support exposed brick walls. A bar runs the length of the room, heralding a commitment to regional beer and wine, bartenders at the ready with a sample or a recommend, and a back story. The best seats in the house are benches built into a wall of windows offering a somewhat occluded view of Mount Baldy, the grande dame of the row of peaks that comprise the Sun Valley ski resort, its size and presence providing perennial comfort to the valley below in the way that only tall mountains can. Covered with a thin cushion, the benches form a “u” of right angles. Bohemian-flavored throw pillows allow one to burrow in for a protracted and cozy dinner, each additional course securing the prized real estate for another fraction of an hour.

Here, I have shared meals with my family, my spouse, my dearest friends. New and lasting friendships have emerged out of conversations with neighboring tables in this three-sided, window-fronted getaway. It is a protected and secluded space, one where, more often than not, I dine alone, a practice that provides an opportunity to savor and settle, moseying my way through the uniquely sensual experience of a well-orchestrated and executed meal.

In these moments, I am nowhere but here, absorbed by the desire to take it all in, to breathe and smell, taste and touch, see and feel the plated art that the chef has deliberately created. I am wide open, all in. It is a lovely exchange of appreciation, which is to say, presence. Sometimes, a flash of inspiration prompts me to write a few words in the notebook that I always carry in my handbag; other times, my bench neighbors will be social, and I will oblige. Most often, I hold these moments for myself, for the

sole purpose of filling my tired, scattered, deadline-driven mind with such an overload of delightful sensory input that all else fades. It is a reliably edifying and balancing ritual.

On one such evening, as spring succumbed to summer, when the once vividly white snow at the very top of the governing peak mixed with dirt from May rains, I returned to this dining ritual to peel myself up from feeling stampeded, to become again three-dimensional, to nourish my fading sense of self. With an abundance of irons in the proverbial fire, I needed to withdraw from a few overextending decisions, to recover some guarded space in which to move about freely, and to protect a few pockets of time not bookended by urgency and others' needs. I had become absorbed by the every day. I had become indistinguishable from my usefulness.

A single goblet of an Italian farmhouse red blend lasted all four courses: house-made burrata with a wedge of homemade bread, wild yeast leavening Italian wheat, all smothered in the grassiest of olive oils; Mama's salad, with globe grapes, kicky arugula and salty earth pecorino; roasted Brussels with grilled Marcona almonds, sweetened lightly with saba; and the coup de gras—affogato, a homemade vanilla bean gelato, drenched table-side with hot, strong, freshly-brewed espresso. A timeless marriage of complementary opposites: at the moment of the first kiss, espresso to gelato, a thermodynamic timer begins. All will soon melt and blend into a lukewarm coffee-cream soup. The divine experience of this dessert lies in the instant of friendliness just beyond the stark distinction, the first melding, the curiosity of one substance for another. The dessert derives its name from the Italian word for *drowned*.

My senses still delighted, my mind unburdened, I stepped outside into the cool, early summer evening. Strolling the three blocks back to my hotel, the vanilla bean and espresso flavors lingered on the sides of my tongue. Gentle conversations with the neighboring table echoed in my eardrums.

Without warning, swooped up from life and dropped unceremoniously onto the battlefield of the mind, I found myself trapped in a psychological flash flood, pressed against invisible walls rising swiftly and jaggedly from the sidewalk, like vertical cliffs, impossible to climb—a random attack. Memories of simple pleasures experienced only a moment ago were ripped away. The emotional rapids rushed me; there would be no escape.

Sobs lashed out of me uncontrollably, submerged by this drowning wave, choking their source with gasps of desperation, until a wail crept out of my laterally stretched face, a melodrama of sorrow, escaping narrowly as a wounded, wild animal from the steel jaws of a hateful trap. The sheer force pummeled shudders through my contracted form and I spun into a free fall towards the depths of misery, of self-hatred and self-destruction. I lumbered down the stairs from the sidewalk to my room, leaning all of myself into the door, its weight suddenly incomprehensible. Inside, I collapsed into a sinewy heap on the hotel bed. The monster was back: my annihilation, his goal.

So alarming were the sounds coming from my shrinking self that soon, a knock came at the door. The hotel manager arrived. He was a thoughtful young man who routinely double-checked my reservation to make certain that my room was conveniently located for my fur ball of a dog, Coco. Traveling this time without my beloved puppy, I still booked the ground floor, sharing a thin, old wall of this ski bum hotel with the room reserved for the overnight staff. He had, no doubt, heard every terrible sound.

I cracked open the weighted door, present enough to feel a tinge of embarrassment, but without the faculty to shift my current, heavy reality. “Someone died,” I croaked.

“I am so sorry,” he said with warm, sad eyes and a sincerely concerned tone that sounded almost relieved. He had no idea what to do next. There was nothing to do.

I closed the door and slid, without pause, down its back until my bones hit the floor. In a way, my lie was terrifyingly accurate. Someone was dying. Me. Again. And I thought I wanted to this time. Goddammit.

In these consuming moments, preferring solitude to rejection, I shove away everyone and everything that I love—or, at least, I try to do so. Some have seen this act of sudden rejection before and have given it the credibility it deserves, which is to say, none.

The monster’s cruel coup of my mind is recognizable in the behaviors that it compels. It can be a thankless, heavy task to love an anorectic. A mighty storm simmers just beneath the glimmering surface. We swim in dangerous waters. The threat of drowning is nearly always imminent. Rescuers beware: Sabotage lives here.

I know that this subject matter holds not only the possibility, but the likelihood of moments that emit a sort of pungent acidity. The imagery is gruesome at worst, disconcerting at least. After all, it is a story of starvation—nearly to death. I would love for this to be an old story that no longer affects me today, but it is not. I still dance with this devil. The moves are intricate and, over time, somewhat predictable. It is this predictability that I hope to illuminate and decode. The present reality of a desperate time is rarely well understood until a person has lived it, passed through it, and is on the other side, looking back, beyond the imminent threat of returning to that place simply by connecting with it through physical and mental memory. The story I share here is now at a safe enough distance for me to turn back to face it, yet still close

enough for my perspective to be accurate to the experience. It is recent history.

Though memory is a tricky thing: It is fraught with danger and the soft sadness of old hurt soothed by behaviors that encourage amnesia. The cause of the hurt may be long forgotten—still, the pain remains. The wonderings of hazy and faded recollections and the absolute uncertainty of truth contrast ironically with the burdensome weight of that sharp ache. What terrible thought does memory keep at bay? What door does it guard? What movement does the heft of it prevent, what connections have been lost to it? Countless. I know this for certain.

Creating and maintaining space is the answer: space and a clear distinction between what is me and what is not, between what I crave and what I must do to name and satisfy the need that has learned to mask itself with propriety and deprivation.