

from
Grief
to
Grace

a memoir

Denise Greenaway

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Foreword

According to ancient, indigenous tradition, the names of those who have crossed over to the Great Spirit are not to be spoken. To speak the name is to interrupt the soul's journey. Traditional Australian Aboriginal culture even changes the loved one's name so he can be mentioned but not disturbed.

This makes perfect sense to me in my beloved's case, because I know he wants his privacy as much as I need mine. Subsequently his name is absent from any published writing.

Those who know him, will be able to expand the thin sketches of his character in this book and hopefully enjoy the memories evoked.

But he is on his journey now, and must be left in peace. A journey he sometimes shares with me.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

FROM GRIEF TO GRACE

Sydney

Australia

Winter

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Sudden death

*H*is voice silenced the seagulls,
The policeman's...

It stopped the surf too.

His words gave away nothing

But finality.

It was sudden, he said.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Andiamo

G^o

Escape

Summer might be easier
Italy knows how to mourn

Go to Assisi

Eat food and drink wine

Pray

Sing

Hear church bells ring

Be with the Madonnas

Take the hot waters

Let them share about death and beyond
Embrace their Communion and Golden Cups
And Crypts and Graves and all that Dead Stuff
We'll rush you past the airport queue
And shovel on what's left of you
And when you're ready to return
We'll be here.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

FROM GRIEF TO GRACE

*I do not know where lead the paths;
The end of the road is out of view.
May it be enough for me to know
That Love will see my footsteps through.*

Mirza Ghalib

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Rome

Italy

Summer

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Roma airport

A tangle of human spaghetti squeezes through the colander that is Italian Airport Control. Hot and steamy the strands separate, finally, and my passport receives the stamp of approval, loudly. A frantic search for luggage ensues, what carousel did they say?

Colourful fashionistas in summer heels swish and swirl, their chatter screeching all the way to the coffee bar. Pushing and shoving, yelling and pounding, pointing and paying.

My coffee appears, short and black. The thick elixir meets my throat. I inhale it. I've made it.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Maria

Turquoise tights cling to her curvaceous calves; suntanned feet and painted toenails emerge from her Romanesque sandals. A plait of white and green silk, loosely tied to one side of her forehead, does little to subdue her wild dark locks. Strands, painted grey, ruffle her long lashes and jet thick eye brows. Tussles fall across her broad, strong shoulders.

Maria! I call her name.

She inhales loudly, filling robes that flow like tides, and greets me with arms outstretched.

Sing to me, oh sea goddess, I grin at her.

Bloody hell. I'm late, I know. But I've just driven across Italy.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Before I met Maria...

Before I met Maria, I had no plans to go to Italy. France was my destination. When I mentioned it to Maria, she lit up.

Why don't you stop off and visit me in Italy? I've got a place near the beach on the Adriatic. I'm there every Summer.

We were in Central Australia, sitting in the evening cool, outside the post office. I was about to get provisions for my desert group and she needed to shop for her family.

We'd met earlier in the day on the pathway around Uluru, the famous rock in the heart of Australia. Before I set eyes on her I could hear her and what turned out to be her family of women, lumbering towards the sacred Mutijulu water hole. For millennia, this deceptively modest pond at the base of Uluru's enormous rock walls, has quenched many a pilgrim. My lot had already drunk its fill when the raucous family approached.

Maria's grin was as wide as the Adriatic.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

My world's been turned upside down...

... I told Maria on the phone.

She said come anyway.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Nonna's village

The car ride to Nonna's village follows the freeway from central Rome, in the direction of Napoli. Maria drives surprisingly fast, but 110kph feels comfortable. Trucks in the right lane seem slow beside us. We pass easily. We're driving to the hills just outside Rome, where Maria's mother was born. In fact we'll be staying in her birthplace, a renovated version, so I've been told. The countryside is a modest green. Easy on the eye but not breathtaking. Not that I have much breath left for the taking.

It's been a while since I've driven here, Maria chuckles when we get lost. But don't worry, I'll get us there, eventually.

The road climbs into the hills and the green gets greener. Cobble stones line the way until we finally arrive at Nonna's village, high up, and overlooking misty chestnut valleys and sun filled olive groves.

My room, white and clean with a stone floor, is perched on the top storey of Nonna's ancestral home, one of several adjoining houses. The view is overwhelming, the bed welcoming. I rest my head. Maria closes the dark green shutters. I have no idea what time it is. Church bells sound very near. I close my eyes and let my body sink as it has not since it happened. I dream it never did.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The very moment...

He must have died the very moment my mother appeared to me, at my sister's in Sydney.

Your Gran was in my dream early this morning, I told my niece after breakfast. But it felt too real to be a dream.

We were drinking coffee on the morning terrace overlooking the sea.

The ocean's strangely calm this morning, my sister remarked as she brought out a fresh pot. And what's that weird light on the water? She pointed to a large elliptical shape in the middle of the ocean. It looked heavier than the water and it had an edge that seemed to be just below the surface. The three of us watched it for some time.

Maybe it's a UFO, my niece broke the silence. Anyway, what did Gran have to say?

She said she was taking care of your big cuz now and I need not worry anymore.

He misses her so much, my niece's eyes filled. We talk about her a lot.

All the grandkids adored our mother. My sister and I agreed she was a better grandmother than mother.

And so shall we be, I laughed.

I already am, my sister boasted.

Well you better get going then Grandma, my niece nudged her, it's your grandson's party today.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

I cling...

Here in this empty place
I cling to the cold, cold, cold
Pressing further
Deeper...
Only to surface
Airless
Into the long dark night.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

A mistake

The news shot through Sydney Harbour, spraying the family picnic.

Are they sure?

Where is he?

What hospital?

How do they know it's him?

What do you want to do?

I'm coming with you.

Surely it's a mistake ... a mistake...a mistake... a mistake...

a mistake... a mistake... a mistake... a mistake... a mistake...

a mistake... a mistake... a mistake... a mistake... a mistake...

a mistake... a mistake... a mistake... a mistake... a mistake...

a mistake... a mistake.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Nonna's Italian family

They like you already, Maria chortles as we tread the cobble stones to her uncle's door. It's thick and carved, with a brass knocker. I told them how you saved Nonna's life in Australia.

Even though she couldn't remember me two days later, I cackle. Your sister had to spell it out for her. Do you think she might have a touch of —

Nup, just stubborn. She pushes the already partly open door. After eighty years, she's as hard to move as a bag of old cement.

Nonna's brother stands inside the narrow doorway. He's quite a looker. Youthful, fit, strong cheek bones, sharp eyes and a mouth that still has a lust for life.

Zio, Maria introduces me. He can speak English, she teases. But he won't. Stubborn as his sister.

Entra, he drops his eyes.

After you, Maria says, and watch your head.

Fresh basil and garlic blasts us as we step inside. Maria's Aunt greets us, brushing her hands against her apron. It's full length and well worn. She is as tiny as Nonna but has not aged as well. A floury film covers her skin and hair. Her lips are thin, her eyes faded. Zia, she says and kisses both my cheeks.

The small table, already set for lunch, takes up most of the

modest room. I am allocated a seat opposite Zio and Maria sits beside me. The spare chair, for Zia, is closest to the kitchen.

It's been like this for forever, Maria says, noticing me looking around the humble abode. He was born here as were all of his nine brothers and sisters, Nonna included. As well as their parents and Dad's parents etc. They're probably all inbred, she laughs.

Zio wants to know what's so funny.

Zia shuffles in with two large loaves of bread, straight from the oven, and tells him to mind his own business. He drops his eyes and pours red wine from a potted jug.

Carb city, Maria crosses her arms over her generous stomach. You watch, there'll be pasta and potatoes as well as all this bread, followed by sugary pastries.

I'd better balance it then with the vino.

Vino good, Zio grins.

Bene, I say smiling at him as I sip.

He makes it, Maria says.

I nod approvingly but it's coarse, with a sharp nose and tannins that strip the tongue.

The first course is simple but tasty.

Pasta con Pomodoro fresco e basilico*, Zio tells me and puts a long neck bottle of Peroni beer on the table.

I drink Peroni in Australia but it looks nothing like this, I comment.

Before I've finished the sentence Zia has removed it.

She thinks you must want it cold, Maria giggles.

She's not wrong.

Zia returns with a cold bottle.

Bene, I smile, repeating the only word for good I know in Italian.

FROM GRIEF TO GRACE

Zio grins widely and gives me a thumbs up.

Here's to being a rock star, Maria raises her glass to me. An
Ayer's Rock star.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Nonna's Australian rescue

Are you trying to kill her?
They all laughed. Maria, her sister, her daughter and the Nonna.

Kill me? Nonna ripped off the fly net covering her face. I kill them first. And proceeded to swat three flies at once.

Believe us, nothing will kill her.

She's got heat stress, I said, pointing to the stripes on her eyelids. How much water has she had?

Show me your water bottle, Maria told her mother in Italian.

It was tiny and full. That's not enough, I said. Even if you had drunk it.

She doesn't drink water. The whole trio chuckled.

Especially not on her birthday, her granddaughter put one arm around her.

It's her birthday? I said. Well if you want her to have another one, you'd better put her in our car. Seriously, the heat on the other side of the rock is merciless at this time of day.

An animated conversation in Italian ensued. Finally a pack of food was transferred from Maria's large knapsack and placed in a small soft bag for the Nonna. It had been decided. But still the Nonna protested in broken English. Strong, she slapped her thighs. Mountains big.

Where are you all from? I asked.

Melbourne.

Peels of laughter.

No mountains there.

She means the home country.

Once in the passenger seat of the air-conditioned car, Nonna gave up her tough charade.

Thanks be the God, she fastened her seat belt and pinched my arm. You save life. Those girls, they kill me with that crazy rock. Everywhere, rock is there. My leg, she no work. Too many times I climb mountain. My mountain, not crazy rock, she wagged her finger at the accused.

Food means love in Italian

The only Italian I'm learning is food related:
...café, paté, latte, pesce, Prosecco, prosciutto, pompelmo,
melone, annanas, birra, vino, secco, rosso, pomodoro, frutta,
focaccia, cornetto, verdura, insalata, polo, vitello, gelato,
pomegranate, fico...

But I'm not in a hurry. Time has lost all meaning. Besides, I'm relishing the disassociation that comes from not understanding the language. People can be all around, talking at high speed, even with excessive volume; and their words just bounce by. Without meaning or context, I simply listen to the symphony: dancing syllables, singing vowels; and consonants, especially doubles, to stamp out the rhythm.

We speak like we cook, Maria's cousin tells me. Slow. Not like your English which rat-a-tat-tats. My name for instance is not pronounced Ermanno. It's *Air* (with a long air); in *man* the *a* is like *ah* and the *n* is doubled giving each consonant complete expression. If you say my name in English, it sounds bland but in the Italian language, with every letter afforded its completeness, my name is as noble as my food.

I'm not as English as you imagine, I decide to tell him. My very first food was Italian.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

My first latte

It was the middle of the night when they brought the baby to my mother. She was wide awake.

Here you are, they placed the parcel in her arms.

But it's not mine.

Now mother—

Turn on the light.

Don't be silly, women often—

I'm telling you this is not mine. Turn on the light Sister.

My mother unfolded the tightly bound packet. The sleeping boy did not stir, his jaundiced face immobile, his mop of jet hair still greasy from delivery.

Meanwhile I was having my first latte in the next ward. Attached to a fulsome Italian woman's breast, I sucked at the creamy colostrum and the generous milk that followed. I'd only just dropped off the second breast, bloated and content, when the mistaken identity was discovered. Days later I hadn't stirred, so my mother loved to tell the story.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Mangia, mangia!

Eat, eat! The syllables roll about in my brain like marbles in a pin ball machine; but no sounds come, except that of my own mastication. When I do open my mouth, I only put food in it. All vocab absorbed is entirely food related: Peroni, vino, aqua, limoncello, café, gelati, pane, si, un altro.

But I do learn some etiquette: for instance, coffee is drunk black most times, except in the morning, when it might be taken with very warm, but not boiled milk; it is always drunk fast and any evening request for a café latte is likely to be met with either amusement, astonishment or absolute derision. Cake offered by relatives must never be refused, no matter the circumstance, and although talking about one's waistline might be popular, it does not provide an excuse for abstinence. Refusal of alcohol is also problematico and will be met with a litany of testimonials as to the digestive fortitudes of those who imbibe; travel to a relative's home to taste his or her specialty is always justified no matter the distance, the weather or one's own health or well being; and nodding in response to any question always ends up with more food. Finally, leaving anything on one's plate leads to great consternation, discussion and ultimate offense.

In addition, I learn that breakfast is short and sweet, lunch simple, tasteful and specially arranged so that single flavours

can be identified and analysed in terms of origins, seasonal complexities and digestibility; combinations and complex foods are to be avoided. Green beans, for example, once anointed by the sacred oils, are presented naked and unaccompanied; thus savoured without distraction.

I also discover that lunch is followed by siesta which is followed by coffee, which could lead to vino, even Aperitivo. That dinner always occurs at a late hour no matter the season and must never be rushed. Several courses, *primo*, and *secondi* are the norm, with compatible wines followed by sweets, coffee, and shots of liqueurs such as limoncello (the double *ll* is played like the instrument).

And I begin to understand that *mattina*, (morning) does not always begin with sunrise nor end at noon; that many Anglo Saxon greetings don't translate and most surprisingly, half the people in the village prefer their own dialect to Italian anyway.

Nonno

*A*s it becomes increasingly difficult to keep up with the who's who in Nonna's ancestral village, I stop trying, with one exception, Maria's Nonno.

You know the old man who came to lunch at my Aunt's daughter's place for my niece's birthday. You were talking to his granddaughter, the one who speaks English and works for the bishop.

I do, I say, recalling his water filled eyes and sun damaged skin.
He's invited us to his farm.

He still farms?

He doesn't work it now, but he did until he was ninety.

Ninety? How old is he now?

Ninety four.

Same age my grandfather died.

None of his kids or his kids' kids are interested in working it.
But he loves to visit and take friends. It'll be for lunch.

Of course it will, I chuckle.

High up in the mountains.

I thought we were in the mountains.

We would be at home, but here mountains are real mountains.

Home, the word drops anchor, but only for a moment.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

My Grandfather...

... was as English as they come, and yet Maria's Nonno reminds me of him; the way he comes to table in his long sleeved shirt with buttoned cuffs, sits at the head, distanced from the family he will soon leave behind.

My grandfather's lineage was Greenwich/Gloucester, the fruit of a forbidden marriage between the houses; punished by expulsion to the colonies. He was my father's father and had a proud fondness for me as the first granddaughter in a tribe of grandsons. But his son barely tolerated him. As a child he had experienced him as cold and unloving. As an adult he blamed him for the early death of his mother, my grandmother, a once wild lass from the Isle of Mann.

But I adored my grandfather, second only to my grandmother. It pained me to see him become a hermit after her death, fleeing the city to serve his life sentence on a remote peninsula, in the house he and my grandmother had built for their retirement.

I would visit whenever I could, and with plenty of notice. He claimed he needed to check the tides and the ferry timetable to ensure a safe arrival, but I suspected he needed time to adjust to the idea of 'visitors'. Lunch was always seasonal; the fish of the day, hooked that morning or last evening, creek prawns if they were running, and rock oysters as big as your fists. Accompaniments were simple; fresh bread from the little bakery nearby, home made mayonnaise (my grandmother's

recipe), home grown lemons, with salad from the garden. I liked to bring beer for him and something special for dessert. He always smiled and said, you shouldn't have.

As his life became more and more lean with every visit, I pondered his very existence. However did he pass the long nights without his beloved, what did he think on waking, how did he plan his day; was it enough to tinker with this, sort through that? What was a life without a beloved?

He was a handsome man, even as the years paled his fish blue eyes. Whenever I was about to travel overseas, we always said 'good bye' as if it were our last. On return my first phone call was to him. When he did take his final breath in the hospital for the dying, I was there, with my mother standing close, the curtains drawn. He would not die with strangers.

Wow, what a departure, I whispered as his soul popped its cork.

Right through the roof, Mum giggled, her mirth still as contagious as when I was a kid. My sisters and I could never resist it. We would find ourselves weeping with laughter over nothing.

What's so funny?

Nothing. That's what's so funny.

Even when the nursing Sister tore open the curtains we could not be contained. Like school girls drenched by rain, we tried to explain.

We're just happy, I began.

– for him, Mum added.

Well you'll have to go, said the Sister. I have to check the machine.

Not much use now the horse has bolted, Mum spluttered as we tumbled out of the cubicle and into the ghostly ward. I'm going to wet myself, she cackled as we fell into the lift.

And she just about did.

Death is nothing at all

(as read at my grandfather's funeral)

Death is nothing at all.

It does not count.

I have only slipped away into the next room.

Nothing has happened.

Everything remains exactly as it was.

I am I, and you are you,

*And the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched,
unchanged.*

Whatever we were to each other, that we are still.

Call me by my old familiar name.

Speak of me in the easy way you always used.

Put no difference into your tone.

Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.

*Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed
together.*

Play, smile, think of me, pray for me.

Let my name be ever the household word that it always was.

*Let it be spoken without effort, without the ghost of a shadow
upon it.*

DENISE GREENAWAY

Life means all that it ever meant.

It is the same as it ever was.

There is absolute unbroken continuity.

What is this death but a negligible accident?

Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?

I am but waiting for you, for an interval,

Somewhere very near,

Just around the corner.

All is well. Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost.

One brief moment and all will be as it was before.

How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting

When we meet again!

Canon Henry Scott-Holland,

1847-1918

Cold feet

Family members and friends crowd the waiting room. My skinless body feels their breath, hears their thoughts and heart beats, sees the hairs on their forearms, the flushes in their cheeks, the fear in their eyes.

Would you like to see him? the hospital administrator asks, finally.

That's why I'm here, my voice says, but only in my head.

We've got permission for what you asked. But the Coroner won't let us touch the rest of him.

I watch myself walk down the corridor.

It's not like TV, the administrator tells me.

Her eyes have softened since leaving the cage of her position. Behind her desk any request was an irritation, an indulgence, but beside me now, she unlocks her heart and gently opens the door.

Take your time.

The room is warmly lit by a lamp on a low table. There are two armchairs. For a minute I think we're in the wrong room. I look at the administrator as if to say so.

Her eyes point me to the window and then I get it. He's in there, behind the glass, under that big white dome. Only his

feet are exposed. They are his feet. There's no mistake. I know those feet. They've followed me everywhere. I touch the glass. It's deathly cold. He hated cold.

You better put his ugg boots back on. I sob and run from the room.

The chestnut

Nonno's property starts where the sealed road ends. The descent into it is steep and dusty.

Some of these olive trees are hundreds of years old, Maria says, as we wind our way through grove after grove.

They remind me of the desert oaks at Uluru, I reply. They take 50 years just to get their tap roots down.

I'll stop in a minute, so you can open the windows without the dust and get a feel of them.

Gnarled and sculpted by the weather, I can tell these trees have withstood eons.

If you listen you can hear them talking to each other, Maria says and stops the car right next to one.

It's got a shrine inside the trunk, I say, behind the glass.

Of course, Our Lady watches over everything.

But what's with the plastic flowers on the altar?

That's who she is, Maria laughs, the Virgin of the plastic flowers.

I stare at her. She's certainly young and she's partly smiling.

She's got a Mona Lisa smile, I say.

There's a lot she knows but can never tell.

How mysterious.

Look down there, Maria points below to a number of very large, loosely connected sheds. That's where we're headed and that's where we'll find Nonno under his favourite chestnut tree.

We park in the tree's shade. Nonno is seated at a small timber table piled with nuts. He doesn't seem to notice us, even as we walk towards him. When Maria touches his shoulder he partly rises. She kisses him on both cheeks.

I've never seen a pile of raw chestnuts and say so. Maria translates. This seems to please him. He thoughtfully selects one and presents it to me on his open, unsteady palm. His skin is thin; his touch soft. I hold the shiny smooth object in my hand, turning it over.

Grazie, I thank him and put it in my pocket.

Looking bemused he takes another from the pile, peels it and insists I eat it.

I nod approvingly as I savour the soft flesh.

Un altro?

No more, Maria tells him. It's nearly time for lunch.

Inside the rustic shed there's a freezer, a drying room for meats and salamis and a cave-like cupboard for cheese, as well as a fully equipped kitchen with a gas propelled stove and a wood fired oven. Two huge pots are steaming away. A long table is spread with sheets of hand made pasta; some rolled out ready for the lasagna trays and others for the spaghetti making gadgets. Aromatic piles of fresh basil and flat-leafed parsley sit on the bench near a large fridge.

Meet my cousin, Maria introduces me. Nunzia's face is lined from life and laughter; her eyes speak of hardship and loss. As she leans forward to peck my cheeks, I inhale her cooking smells; pasta, garlic, onion, oregano, tomato and the very earthy aroma of fungi.

Bella, she greets me.

Something uplifting happens to the heart, when you are

called beautiful in the Italian language. *Bel lah*: *Bel* is solid, like the heart, blood filled, alive and beating; *lah* flicks upwards like hair, wild in the wind. The pronunciation of both syllables together transfers love, not flattery. And several times a day, every day...

On the other side of the kitchen, and under the same roof, a massive space generously accommodates two long tables, numerous chairs and a drink machine. There are no walls to this part of the building so the summer breeze gently ruffles the plastic table cloths, strategically weighted with cutlery, glasses, water jugs, bottles of home made beer and wine; jugs of green olive oil and large earthen-ware platters of prosciutto, boiled ham, salami, cheeses, round loaves of bread and bowls of large, green olives: all covered with long veils of flimsy fabric.

Looks like a scene from an Italian wedding, I joke with Maria. It may as well be. Wait till they all arrive.

We are the first guests. We take our places opposite Nonno while his great-daughter-in-law unravels cling wrap plastic from the meats, telling us who made what, where.

All this food comes from the family?

Of course.

A bus like vehicle parks close by, releasing a flock of chattering children, who race straight into the kitchen and open the drink machine.

This is their lunch time, Maria explains. They'll eat first because they have to go back to school.

With cans in hand, they surround the Nonno, kissing him and dancing about.

Calmo, he tells them.

They plonk themselves next to us and start asking Maria how

long she is visiting and when they can come to Australia. She introduces me and they try out their English. Australia good, Kangaru, etc, their mouths full of bread.

When bowls of steaming Pasta Pomodoro* appear at one end of the table, they are passed down the children's assembly line. Mounds of grated Parmigiano cheese and piles of basil are added and forked into mouths, with little effect on the babble.

A few more vehicles arrive and a long line of adult well wishers greets the Nonno. Some disappear to the kitchen to offload their fare: home made tiramisu, ice cream and a number of other desserts I've never seen before. Soon the other long table is prattling, sharing, tasting, praising, complaining.

What's the occasion? I ask Maria.

There doesn't have to be an occasion. This could be a regular family lunch. But there is some business in the air. Olive business.

Are they olive farmers?

Only a couple, but they all have interests and they are saying that because of the blight that has struck this year, some farmers will be importing from Spain, pressing and bottling in Italy and passing off the liquid gold as Italian.

Nonno doesn't join the conversation. His back is turned to their table. He stares out through the missing wall and sips his beer.

He's miles away, I whisper, unsure who amongst us can understand English.

That's why I wanted to come. I think it will be my last time.

He lifts his gaze and smiles at her.

I reach into my pocket to check the chestnut is still there. I roll its smooth hardness between my fingers. Inside it, is a tender heart. I know. I've tasted it.

The Carmelites

*W*ould you like to go to mass tomorrow ? Anna, Maria's English speaking cousin asks me. With the Carmelites. Real Carmelites? The ones in silence?

But of course. There's a monastery near here, she says, matter of fact. It'll be in Italian. And it'll be early.

That's okay by me. My body's still in the Southern Hemisphere.

The early morning is chilly in the mountain mist but I'm rugged up. Not so the woman briskly walking the cobblestones in front of us. Unflinching, her silvery shoes, strappy with thin heels, negotiate the rocky pathway. Abruptly they make a left turn into a side alley and begin to climb a mountain of steps. We follow.

Stockinged heels rise and fall; and calf muscles, like a bike rider's, press against the split in her tight, straight skirt. She stops at the summit. Completely out of breath, I stop too. In church light now, her cardigan shimmers. She reaches into her hand bag, removes a large gold thread scarf and carefully arranges it over her painstakingly coiffured hair. Then she disappears into the side door of the church.

Anna proceeds to the main entrance and I dutifully follow.

Do we have to cover our heads?

Only if you want.

The heavy door closes behind us. It's dark and warm inside and thick with Frankincense and Myrrh. I shadow Anna, miming her every move; fingers in the holy water font, the sign of the cross, a half genuflection, a near stumble over the kneeling platform, a slippery slide along the polished pew.

Multi-coloured rays break through the leadlight glass, high above the smoky gloom. When my eyes adjust, I manage to distinguish an altar, dressed in white cloth, fringed in gold. A pair of tall white candles, in brass candelabras, guards each side. Stands of white lilies exude an exotic and familiar perfume, my mother's favourite.

To the left of me, behind a latticed screen, the beatific forms of Carmelite nuns, thirty or maybe forty of them in their brown woollen habits and white wimples. It's like a scene out of *The Nun's Story*. I steal a glance at their exquisite candlelit faces. They look straight ahead, intoxicated by their devotion. When their Angelic singing wafts, ever so softly, in our direction, my heart hears the words:

Ave Maria, gratia plena,

Dominus tecum.

Benedicta tu in mulieribus,

et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesu.

Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus,

nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.

Benedictus fructus ventris tui...

I mouth them. Blessed is the fruit of thy womb. I'm sure that's Latin.

The priest, a black man, enters from stage left, followed by the woman with the strappy shoes and spangled cardigan. She genuflects in front of the altar and takes a seat in the front row, right before the watchful Madonna, ever modest in her blue

FROM GRIEF TO GRACE

robe, with its neat pleats denying any hint of a womb. Mine meanwhile, is so swollen it's straining the zipper of my jeans.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Italy

On the Adriatico

Still Summer

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

From Rome to the Adriatic Sea

I'm really sorry to leave your ancestral home Maria. Little did I know when I rescued your Nonna in the desert, I'd be staying in the house where she was born.

Si. Life... what can we say.

And now I'm going to your place.

On the other side of Italy.

How many more tunnels?

A lot. We are crossing Italy.

I can't stand them. It's the pressure on the head.

Just keep breathing. It's all we can do.

If I were to remember how it was to be stuck in the birth canal for thirty five hours, it might feel like this, after an earthquake with 1400 metres of rock on top of me. My mother probably couldn't push hard enough. I was her first delivery and she knew little about the workings of her own body. Down the corridor, an Italian woman screamed and yelled, blasphemed even, as she shot her baby boy half across the room.

The nurses didn't like the foreigners, they disturbed the whole ward.

Behave yourself, you're scaring the other women, they chided.

My mother did behave herself, and consequently couldn't shoot at all. Exhausted from fear and silenced pain, she

disappeared into prayer, leaving my rescuers to clamp my fragile head and dig out my skull with their shovels.

We could count the kilometre marks: 1, 2, 3...This is the longest freeway tunnel in Italy 4, 5, the Traforo del Gran Sasso 6,7, of the Gran Sasso Massif 8,9...

If this is your way of distracting me, it's not working.

Unbeknown to me, somewhere beside us is the Gran Sasso National Laboratory. It employs over 700 scientists to experiment with particle and nuclear physics, including the study of high energy cosmic rays, dark matter and nuclear decay. And it's in an earthquake zone.

10! And we're out!

We both shriek with relief.

I can't believe you came all this way to meet me. I had no idea it was this far.

No worries, her accent pure Aussie. I wanted to catch up with family anyway.

Thank you so much. I lean towards her. I can almost hear myself purring against the warmth of her. I want to tell her how safe I feel with her, but then I remember I barely know her.

Exile

I wake in Maria's top floor apartment, a breathing corpse. The sun peeps through the window glass, the town bells are announcing the day. I peer out. The view is perfect pastoral. Not a breeze stirs it. I am in exile. My home on the other side of the world has had Death blow right through it; pillaging, ransacking, plundering and razing it to the ground.

Maria enters quietly with coffee. The small cup rattles on the saucer. I try to thank her but I can't form words. My dry lips part but no sound comes.

Sshh, she whispers and closes the door behind her.

I stare at the cup. I want to smash it against the window to stop the day: another stomach churning day. I close my eyes but the photographic rollercoaster is already on the move; Emergency doors, hospital smells, gutters and wet leaves, hubcaps, the setting sun, family coming and going, his washing on the line, entering his room, standing at the end of his bed, his wardrobe full of clothes, his brother, his father, all our friends and family, the wash of tears, the flowers, the fire pit, sorting through his stuff, distributing the useful, discarding the painful. Closing the door. Slowly.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Fierce grief

*M*y grief is fierce
It does not suffer fools
It cannot be traded
It is not currency.

Stay away from my tower
all soothsayers and imposters too
Unless you want my head
On your plate.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Dirty Laundry

Only the bottom half of Maria's body can be seen; her thigh long hair sweeps across her bright blue knickers and the tops of her bare legs. She is on tippy toe, her heels way off the floor, her arches strained. The rest of her is hanging out the window.

Is that how it's done? I come closer.

Beneath the window are three washing lines. Each is connected to two perpendicular arms fixed to the outside wall of the apartment building. A pulley system facilitates their operation.

I'm no expert, she says, leaning over the lines closest to the wall, clipping the corners of a double sized sheet to them. Check the peg collection down there. Then she straightens up and reels in a spare line. Give us a hand.

It takes the two of us to manage the wet weight of a doona cover.

Maria laughs when I drop a peg. Better than dropping the whole doona.

I love how people hang their washing out here, I say.

Yep. I think it's Anglo Saxon to not air your dirty laundry.

But it's actually clean, it occurs to me.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Maria della Rosa

The church with the roses is open today if you want to go in.

What about the dog?

I'll stay out here with her.

Maria unfastens Chocolate's lead. She shakes her whole body and runs in circles, barking.

Inside the church it's dank and chilly compared to the brilliant day outside. It takes sometime for my eyes to adjust. I grope the marble walls and follow the delicate fragrance of rose, all the way to the candlelit altar.

Plump blooms, yellow, white and blood red; straight from the earth. I inhale greedily and sit before the Maria della Rosa.

She is indeed beautiful, this Madonna, and she seems to be smiling at me. This is what I've come for, I hear myself. I've come to Italy for the Madonna. The mother who knows.

I close my eyes and let her draw me into her. Her petals, each as soft and silken as the other, embrace me. Her rose perfume drags me right into the very heart of her. A familiar bite of salt stings my cheeks and trickles to my lips. I lick it with my tongue. Minutes later or maybe less, a cold breath brushes my cheek. With my eyes still closed, I sniff the air. The exquisite perfume has soured.

Is that garlic? Onion? I jump from my seat and twist mid air. An old man's face is almost touching mine, his mouth hard, his hooded eyes slashed with rage, his wild eyebrows raised, his loud whisperings echoing against the marble. The beautiful Madonna's sanctuary is suddenly a trap.

Shouting now through saliva frothing lips, he starts flailing his arms about. I try to step past him, but he steps in front of me, blocking my way. He grabs my shoulder with one hand and points to a sign with the other. USCITA it reads. I gather it means exit, and I move towards it. He follows closely. With my foot still in the doorway he slams the heavy door against it.

I just got thrown out, I tell Maria.

Lunchtime, she says.

They close the church for lunch?

They close everything for lunch in Italy.

*A rock in the middle of
a waterlogged sea*

Maria's days are defined by food: planning, selecting, purchasing, bartering, carting, grinding, peeling, straining and concocting. Her pantry brims with exotic fermentations; pungent perfumes rise from eerie netted bowls and large sealed jars hubble-bubble, as if about to burst. Bent on improving the Italian diet she brings Melbourne health food with her; seeds, nuts, cloudy vinegars. She loves to make raw food, even cakes: an anathema to the villagers who call her the crazy Australian.

Hours are spent at the big wooden table in her kitchen. I weep quietly while she sorts green leaves, shreds fresh herbs, marinates meats, sniffs cheeses and salamis, tosses salads with her bare hands, wiping the excess oils on her forearms, sometimes even on her cheeks. The rhythm of the chopping, the gentle ordering of the unruly offerings; the layering, the pounding, the forming and shaping, the lining of dishes, the endless pouring of bright green oils; all compress my haemorrhaging soul. But still, there is no tourniquet for suffering.

Maria keeps her eyes lowered, even when her throat swells. Occasionally air is expelled loudly from her lungs, and once, only once, do tears splash from her cheeks into the salad bowl. Mostly she is an immovable rock in the middle of my waterlogged sea.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Andiamo Venice

You can weep as much as you like there. The whole place is built on an ocean of tears. We'll take a picnic for the train.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Tears in Heaven

Time can bring you down

Time can bend your knees

Time can break your heart

Have you begging please

Begging please

© Eric Clapton

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Venice at first sight

Swept off the platform by the tourist swarm, we arrive at the Grand Canal without ceremony. I want to stop a minute to take it all in, but Maria insists we keep moving. Stay close, she yells, her head bobbing in the human riptide carrying us down lanes, over bridges and along canals. Turning, she yells again, using her head to direct me into a quiet laneway.

This is it, she opens one of two glass doors and dumps her luggage inside.

Maria, a voice calls from behind the reception desk. Ciao bella.

Hey, ciao, Maria replies. We're early.

No problem.

Mario, this is my friend from Australia.

Sydney?

Yes, I reply. Good guess.

Mario used to live in Melbourne near us, Maria says helping him stack our luggage behind his desk.

Shopping?

Just a bit, she laughs.

Artisan boots?

Yep. You know me. No Chinese knock offs!

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Venice by day

I float beside Maria, for days. Questions rise with the tide. How can this be, and that? Who built this? What's holding it all up?

Hours disappear, windswept on water taxis and crowded ferries; stroking, holding, bargaining: molten glass, hand carvings, crafted lace, thigh high boots, velvet caps, leather masks, silver and gold.

Surrounded by water I have my first dry days. Until the tie displays drag me back down to the bottom.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Ties

He had a thing about ties. I didn't know how big a thing until I had to sort out his clothes. So many, all new. Not the ties; they were from second hand stores, collectors' items, at least fifty of them, waiting for an occasion to get out of the closet.

When the occasion came, his brother, father and all his friends chose from his wide selection. They hung them from their waists, their shoulders, their heads, their cars; flags of honour: a procession of brave warriors charging through the suburbs in their chariots.

When they arrived, he was already there, dressed in his signature attire; black evening jacket, white shirt and beloved black bow tie, half smiling, as if it were all just a prank.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Venice by night

*I*t's full moon.
We walk the midnight canals, meandering from one dreamlike scene to another. We must be on a film set, masterminded by some arcane magician. What scene will we stumble into next; more tiny bars with serenading waiters and rowdy art students in outrageous costumes? Enter from the left, another lane, another square, exit to the right, the lapping of gondolas.

*Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily
Life is but a dream*

Eliphalet Oram Lyte

Morning comes, lit with moon shadows. When will the director shout CUT?

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Full moon Super tide

I still want to go to Torcello Island, I tell Maria.
But the boats can't get out of the canals on the super tide. The water's too high for them to pass under the bridges.

Well when will it go down?

Not for hours yet. Certainly not in time for us to make the train.

What if I give it a try. Now.

Good luck, she grimaces. I'll be joining friends somewhere for lunch. I'll leave a note with Mario.

Torcello had caught my eye when we passed it the day before. It looked wild; a marshy wetland in the middle of the lagoon. I heard a guide telling a group that it was first populated by people fleeing the "Barbarian Hordes" which overran the Italian peninsula during the "Dark Ages." It was in fact the first Venice. "Not much remains apart from the basilica because the Venetians we know today stripped it."

Even before I begin wading through the overlapping waters, the Grand Canal is in nautical chaos. Several ticket boxes are closed and the information officers cannot tell me anything, or they don't want to; their attitude typical of the Venetian ambivalence towards tourists; their long regal noses oozing disdain like camels when something is asked of them.

And so I join the masses huddled on the slippery jetty watching jam-packed boats and ferries go past without

stopping. At first, the multi-lingual crowd is good humoured; remarks are made as to where the boats might be going and why, jokes escalate, and soon it's an open slather commentary. But as the horde swells I begin to panic. Pushing my way back through the crush I am eventually ejected from the wharf. With feet back on the saturated cobblestones, I stand for a moment to catch my breath.

Suddenly an old woman is tapping my arm. She is carrying a small shopping bag bulging with groceries, a bunch of leafy greens peeking from it. She starts talking to me in Italian, but I know what she's saying because Maria has already used the same words: *Alta marea* (high tide), *Acqua alta* (high water) and *Andiamo*, one of my first known Italian expressions. Let's go.

I walk beside her carrying her groceries as she leads me breathlessly down flooded lanes and alleyways, over sodden bridges and along water logged pathways, all the time talking to me in Italian while I reply in English.

Such a lovely walk with absolutely no idea where I am heading or how to return. On the way, I learn she has no 'arthritico', she usually takes a boat, yes it's a long way for her to walk. But I'm in good luck, she chuckles, she lives on the edge of the lagoon, where boats to the islands can avoid the deluged canal system.

When we arrive at her door she embraces me. I return her shopping and she points to the small wharf where a ferry awaits.

A wild wind whips the turgid lagoon. Alone I stand at the bow, my sails filled by the kindness of strangers.

I am Sailing ... to be near you

I am sailing
I am sailing
Home again
'Cross the sea
I am sailing,
Stormy waters
To be near you,
To be free

I am flying,
I am flying
Like a bird
'Cross the sky
I am flying,
Passing high clouds
To be with you,
To be free

Can you hear me, can you hear me
Through the dark night, far away
I am dying, forever crying
To be with you, who can say

DENISE GREENAWAY

Oh Lord, to be near you, to be free
Oh Lord, to be near you, to be free

© Gavin Sutherland

Expelled by the gods...

To leave Venice is to be expelled by the gods, I tell Maria.
She replies only in sighs.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

More Tears in Heaven

I must be strong to carry on.....

© Eric Clapton

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Alessandro

*A*lessandro, Maria's friend, has become my friend too. I enjoy meeting with him at the beach bar, sipping Bellinis in the afternoons; the coast being an easy left hand drive from Maria's apartment.

Grief has no manners, he likes to tell me. I was married to an English woman once and lived in England. They thought I was rude. But I couldn't hide my feelings like they do, under their fine china.

Italian feelings are untidy, they sprawl like our houses, he says. They scream from apartment buildings and on the street. They yell from cars and on buses too.

At first I thought everyone was fighting, at least arguing, I tell him.

Not arguing, just passionate. Not like English. They don't know passion, they don't know love.

Alessandro knows about my loss but does not directly speak of it. His eyes tell me he understands the savage way I protect myself from the grief stealers. He never tries to board my life raft, but every now and then, he tows it to his jetty.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

No escape from sorrow

*W*hen there is sorrow it is a great shock to the nervous system, like a blow to the whole physiological as well as psychological being. We generally try to escape from it by taking drugs or drinks or through every form of religion. Or we become cynical or accept things as inevitable.

Is it possible not to escape from sorrow at all? Perhaps my son dies, and there is immense sorrow, shock. I cannot face it, I cannot tolerate it. So I escape from it. And there are many escapes, religious, or philosophical.

Not to escape in any form from the ache, the pain of loneliness, the grief, the shock, but to remain completely with the event, ... if we could hold our sorrow completely, without a movement of thought or escape...

© J. Krishnamurti

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Italians know how to mourn

That's why you have come to Italy, Alessandro insists.
Because you English don't know how to mourn.

But I'm not English.

So you should know better.

I'm Australian, half English, half Irish.

So which half is stopping you?

From grieving?

Si.

The half that thinks grief will drive me over the edge.

Over the edge of what? Of being human? Of dying of love? Every time we love, we go over the edge. The edge of ourselves, the edge of our definitions of ourselves, the edge of how others define us.

He stares into his coffee cup as if reading it.

I think it was the Buddha who said: Pain is certain. Suffering is optional.

But the Buddha was not a mother, not even a woman. So much easier to be a monk or a priest. What do they have to lose? I'd like to hear what they have to say when they've carried a child inside their body, fed it with their blood, endured the agony of delivering it, the anxiety, the responsibility, the guilt... I don't want the bloody Buddha. I've come here for the Madonnas.

So please choose a black one, not some pale Virgin in a flower filled grotto.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The Black Madonna

Loreto is a sacred place of pilgrimage, Maria tells me as we drive around the fortress walls looking for a park in the leafy street. I've never been here, she says, but I looked it up last night. It's because of the Santa Casa, the Holy family's Palestinian house.

Why is it here in Italy?

Rescued. Constantine built a basilica over it. The basilica was destroyed twice, but the Casa survived.

How did it get here?

They say angels brought it.

Inside the elaborate, marble and stone basilica, a lowly door leads to the Holy family's humble mud brick and mortar house. The contrast is striking; the colossal cathedral with its lofty light filled ceilings and grand expanses; the petite house with its squat roof and walls so very close. Incense and suffocating hope make it hard to breathe. I lock my arm into Maria's, as she bows before a candlelit altar, against the back wall. It takes a while for my eyes to adjust and then wham! I am thrown backwards by what I see. A black Madonna, wrapped in sparkling silver and golden thread, like a Hindu goddess, life size.

I tighten my grip on Maria's arm, as the room begins to spin. Blood is gushing through my ears and there's a rumbling, like thunder, coming from somewhere above me. Words sound:

I have your son.
I slump against Maria.
And he is not dead.
He's more alive,
Than he's ever been.
Crossed over now,
From the in-between.
I slide down her body.
He is in the Light now.
So weep no more.

When I come to, I can't believe I'm in Mother Mary's little
Palestinian house, somewhere in Italy.

The Dark of Night...

...Is but a palette for crazy imaginings. The canvas, fear soaked sheets.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Tango Cane

Alessandro bites into a string bean and passes one to me. It smells as fresh as the garden from which it was picked. It's morning and he is preparing lunch; his hefty feet happy in Summer sandals. The kitchen is filled with the woody smells of mushroom and the sexy sounds of Tango, live from the radio.

Cane the dog is focussed on his master's feet shuffling to the music. He prances about them, occasionally glancing upwards at what must look like a mountain of a man.

Cane loves to dance, Alessandro says, leaning across the stove to taste from a timber spoon.

C A N E he spells it out and turns to face me, his lips tomato red. In Italian you must say every (he sounds it out ev-er-ry) sound. Otherwise in a restaurant when the waiter offers you CARNE (meat) you might think he has killed a dog. He then laughs loudly at his joke, a piece of tomato skin on his teeth.

By the way, Italians do not eat dog, he says quite seriously. And laughs again. Now I leave it for reduction. Do you like figs? Of course.

Then come into the garden and I shall feed you some.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Swimming without sharks

Alessandro loves to swim. He knows secret places along the Adriatico where the water is inky blue with brilliant emerald patches when the sun breaks through. He is not much of a swimmer by Australian standards. Like most Italians he seems content with just bobbing about or standing, even. I'm not used to standing in the shallows, besides, there are small fish nibbling at my feet and legs.

They can't hurt you, Alessandro assures me as I leap about.

But they are hurting me. I swim away.

He laughs his Leonine laugh.

I'm going to swim right out, I shout.

You can, he shouts back. All the way to Greece.

What about sharks?

There are none.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Italian men who love women

Alessandro has a live-in partner of several years, he also has two ex wives and several children, but none of this is relevant to the affection he has for me. He is Italian and gifted in the art of loving women.

A big bear of a man, his presence fills a room. His wild locks, rugged looks and mellifluous voice shout out Masculine, while his soft and loving embrace, exudes the tender Feminine. I enjoy being with him, driving in the silence of the countryside, walking on the beach, along the canals, eating gelati, drinking coffee, sipping wine.

You must know, first I am an atheist and second a communist, he tells me, making me laugh.

Why funny?

I didn't know there were any communists left in the world.

Of course! I am not a capitalist. Are you?

Not really.

Really? What do you mean? You support war?

Of course not.

Therefore you are not a capitalist. Capitalism needs war.

I know. But what about Communist China and the Soviet. Not exactly peace makers.

Ah, he caresses his beard. You mean dogma.

I suppose. I try to keep a straight face.

Like the Catholic Church and the Vatican mafia.

But what about Pope Francis? He seems to be interested in the poor. He certainly has been investigating the corruption in the Vatican.

He's not Italian.

But he has taken the name of one of your famous patron saints, Saint Francis of Assisi.

Now there is a true communist.

Assisi

Italy

Autumn

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Sister Sue, how do you do?

The full sun hangs low as we make our way into the valley. Cradled below, Assisi town, with its basilicas, stone houses, tiled roof tops, cobbled roads and dusty groves, is in full blush.

You'll love it here.

I hope so, it looks very peaceful.

Maria's little Fiat winds its way down into the town, through arches and onto leafy narrow streets, past cafés and side walk restaurants setting up for the evening. We come to a gentle stop beside a huge, high stone wall. There's a brass plate beside a set of cast iron gates; PILGRIM'S REST.

I like the idea of being a pilgrim, I say. Not sure to whom or what I'm making the pilgrimage though.

Pilgrim's rest, Maria emphasises the word REST.

Suddenly I feel anxious.

We leave the car outside the gates and traipse through the garden with our luggage. Maria is only staying one night and has a light back pack. I'm staying for at least a week and so have my suitcase-on-wheels, not designed for cobblestones and gravel. Clack, clack, it bumps along the uneven stones, stalling in the ruts.

The orchard is impressive, so is the vegetable patch. But it is

the glorious flower garden with its strategically placed stone seats and flat topped boulders that stops us. Tiny plaques of Francis, surrounded by birds or walking with wolves, peek from arbours and tree trunks. In the centre, the young Virgin holds her familiar pose amidst brilliant orange chrysanthemums; purple, pink and white violas; tiny violets and multi-faced pansies.

It's certainly peaceful, I say.

Check that. Maria points beyond the lower stone wall, where a large belltower is overseeing a massive roof top, its tiles reflecting the twilight. Chiara's basilica. The best rooms overlook that.

Inside the foyer, there's a coffee machine and a refrigerator laden with soft drinks, aqua and chilled white wines. Beside it sits a wine rack stacked with reds from the region.

That should help, Maria nudges me.

I nudge her back.

Clack, clack, down the stairs to the vacant reception area. There's a bell on the lamplit desk. We ring it but no one comes. We try again. It echoes loudly in the empty space.

Maybe you could have a drink while we wait, Maria chuckles.

The place feels eerie, I whisper.

Do you think you'll be okay here?

I shrug. It's strange for me to think of being in a nuns' house. I can't say they were my favourite people when I went to a Catholic school.

But they're different now.

Well they'd want to be. I couldn't wait to escape them.

It's the place that's sacred. Assisi is a powerful healing place.

I get it, I say. I've been to sacred places, but not Catholic ones.

You don't have to be Catholic to take a retreat here.

You've stayed here, right?

A number of times. No complaints, except for the coffee.

I grab her arm.

Sure you'll be OK?

I nod. I can't bleed anymore than I have, I don't say. The amputation is already done.

Buona sera, a frail female voice calls from the stairs above us. A beautiful old woman, in a religious habit, is leaning over the rail above the staircase.

Buona sera, Maria replies.

Englesse, no, she says, her lineless face and laughing eyes enclosed in a white head piece and greyish veil. Sister Sue, she giggles.

Sister Sue, I repeat.

No, no, she throws her head back and points to her chest, Anastasie.

Maria talks to her in Italian.

Si, si, she says and begins to descend the long marble staircase. Her back is hunched and her shiny brown shoes make a shuffling sound against the marble floor. One hand grips the handrail, the other a walking stick. Each step looks perilous. First the cane goes onto the step below, one shoe follows and then the other. Once the two shoes are lined up beside the cane, the cane reaches down for the next step and one shoe follows. Repeat. There are twelve stairs and the laces are loose on one shoe.

Before she has made it half way down, a sprightly, fresh faced middle aged woman appears from a corridor behind us. She is wearing a blue-grey uniform without head cover; a brown cardigan, classic Franciscan style sandals and bare legs.

Sister Sue, she says cheerily in a broad North American accent. How do you do?

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The Assisi Madonnas

I love the Assisi Madonnas, Maria tells Sister Sue in the morning as we head out. Sue smiles politely. Andiamo.

I guess the nuns can't relate to the Madonnas like we mothers do, I reflect later, on our drive through the town gates and into the valley below.

That's probably why they only have the Virgin version in their convents. But even for mothers, the Madonnas we are going to visit today are pretty confronting. You might want to give the life size pieta a wide berth.

It's chilly outside the warmth of the car. Maria grabs her coat from a pile on the back seat. I'm warmly dressed. While I wait for her, the sun hits my face and I let it sink into my skin. Back home I always wear a hat for skin protection from the savage Australian sun. Slip, slop, slap, the health promotion slogan etched into every Aussie mind. My boys always smothered themselves in sunscreen, before heading out on their surfboards, for untold hours of relentless sun... my boys...

Inside the empty church, Maria crosses herself with holy water. I'm always surprised when she follows the Church conventions. She seems such a rebel out in the world. But here she is genuflecting and proceeding down the main aisle towards the central altar, like a devoted child about to receive

Holy Communion. I stand still, watching her, as she takes her place before a side altar. Flickering candles, burning in little red glass pots, throw a curious blood-like light onto a life size Madonna. It's a Gothic sight; the midnight velvet robe, the stars peeping from its folds, twinkling in the bloody candlelight. I stay where I am, afraid to go any closer. I can feel my pulse pumping. I catch a quick glimpse of the Madonna's mournful face, but it's the daggers protruding from her shoulders, that make me gasp. I know those daggers, they're in me too.

I retreat to an enclave further to the right, but there's another Madonna, even more disturbing. This one's robe is ripped open, exposing her heart. Full length silver swords are piercing it, seven of them. This is no virgin. This is the Madonna of Sorrows and she's stealing my oxygen.

I rush towards the exit and fumble for the holy water. My face is on fire. I splash water on it and stumble through the door.

Outside, the air is fresh and tranquil; the courtyard ordered with a fountain and sculpted roses. I let my fingers play in the water and wait till my breath recovers. I deliberately exhale the suffocating presence of those Madonnas inside, the likes of which I have never seen.

The perfume from the roses is soothing. It's a beautiful place to wait for Maria. I stroll towards a bench under a shady archway. But no! It's a viewing bench... of another alcove and the life sized pieta: the mother of all mothers, holding her son's full length body. He's about the size of my son and the same age too.

Do not let guilt rob you

*M*aria leaves in the afternoon as planned. I wave goodbye to the little red Fiat, and drag myself up the stairs to the library. Karen Carpenter is singing in my head:

Why does my heart go on beating?

Her music is so loud, I don't hear Sister Sue behind me.

I've heard about your son, she is suddenly in front of me.

Her words lasso my throat.

He's no longer yours to worry about. He's safe now, in God's love. Her hand skims mine. And Love understands he wasn't himself. Nor was he by himself in his darkest hour. Finally he has found his peace. Don't let guilt rob you of yours.

© Karen Carpenter

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The Pieta

That night I dream my boy is stretched across my lap; all thirty four years of him.

I say, let me hold you.

He doesn't resist, even though we both know he is so much larger and heavier than me.

Rest here, I say. Would you like a dummy* in your mouth?

When I awake I am drenched in the blood of the lamb. In the shower I can't get it off.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Death stalker

Death walked beside him,
Promising nothing.
What have you got to offer?
What have you got to lose?
All those who love me.
They'll love you anyway.
And so it came to pass.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

A Mother's answer

*W*hen people ask how did he die, I say,
Death took him.

And before they can reply I say,
That's already too much for me.

I'm not too interested
in how it is for you.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

HIDING

...is a way of staying alive. Hiding is a way of holding ourselves until we are ready to come into the light. Even hiding the truth from ourselves can be a way to come to what we need in our own necessary time. Hiding is one of the brilliant and virtuoso practices of almost every part of the natural world: the protective quiet of an icy northern landscape, the held bud of a future summer rose, the snow bound internal pulse of the hibernating bear...

Hiding done properly is the internal faithful promise for a proper future emergence, as embryos, as children or even as emerging adults in retreat from the names that have caught us and imprisoned us, often in ways where we have been too easily seen and too easily named...

Hiding is an act of freedom from the misunderstanding of others ...

Hiding is a bid for independence, from others, from mistaken ideas we have about our selves, from an oppressive and mistaken wish to keep us completely safe, completely ministered to, and therefore completely managed...

Hiding is creative, necessary and beautifully subversive of outside interference and control. Hiding leaves life to itself, to become more of itself...

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Saint Chiara (Clare)

I like that these nuns haven't had children, let alone lost one. It makes for distance from my suffering. Of course they have suffering too. I can see it in their morning eyes, as they swish about the breakfast room.

How is it to be a woman who has never parted her loins to let a man in or a baby out; to remain untouched by the heartbreak of carnal love?

More coffee? Sister Sue asks in her broad accent. There's a mass at Saint Clare's Basilica this morning. Should you go, be sure to visit her crypt.

Saint Chiara's Basilica is not far from my room. The irresistible sounds of harp float from it and flood the courtyard below my window. I can't help but follow the hypnotic threads through the cathedral's arches, until I come to the source: heavenly strings plucked by angelic-looking, young women. Meanwhile, inside the cathedral, the mass proceeds without me.

When the church empties, I enter and follow the signs to the downstairs crypt. Relieved to find a cosy chapel and not some creepy tomb, I slowly circumnavigate the altar.

My attention is drawn to the right, where a life-like waxen figure reclines, face-up, behind glass. It's Chiara, fully dressed

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in nun's habit, dark brown cloth and veil, with a modest crown
of fake flowers.

I don't know how, but suddenly I'm on my knees in front of her.



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

When you're this broken...

...a space is made for Grace to shift your consciousness. Things that mattered no longer do, matter itself shifts. Tiny molecules make themselves known, the micro, the macro. The present becomes tangible, the silence amplified: you can hear trees sigh, birds winging against the wind, dogs panting, flowers opening, bees making love.

You can see:

*...A World in a Grain of Sand
... Heaven in a Wild Flower.
... Infinity in the palm of (one's) hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

William Blake. *Songs of Innocence.*

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The gossips brought no soup

Sister Anastasie struggles with her walking frame; her sclerotic back is hunched over it, her brown shoes shuffle behind it. Crossing the floor requires all of her attention. From a distance it looks pathetic, but when she lifts her head and smiles, her light fills the room.

Whenever she beckons me to sit with her in the office, behind the reception desk, I don't refuse. It's always warm beside her, wrapped in the silent language of her eyes. Today I find myself telling her why I left Australia and why I am here and how difficult I find many people and how betrayed I feel by some. When I say the word gossip, she laughs as if she understands. The gossips, I say, did not bring soup.

Zuppa, she says patting her tummy.

Si, I say they brought no soup.

Doesn't matter, she waves her fingers. Look at me, she pokes her chest. Then she points to my heart, closing one hand then opening it like a flower. Whatever has happened don't close yours.

But you haven't had children I tell her, you haven't lost a child, you were never a mother, mothers are meant to save their children, you will never know what it is to fail at that.

I can hear my voice echoing against the office walls.

Sister Anastasie takes her blanket from her knees and places it across my shoulders. I let her. But I will not be consoled.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Unending Love

*I seem to have loved you in numberless forms,
Numberless times,
In life after life,
In age after age,
Forever.*

© Rabindranath Tagore

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Songs from the heart of the broken

The breakfast bells are ringing out; Get up! get up! It's All Saints Day! Once they stop, there's only fifteen minutes to get to the dining hall. Straight after, there's a special mass in the chapel. It's being celebrated by some visiting Australian priests, apparently.

But I cannot rise.

Morning but a crack between the shutters,
a slit between death and day.

I cannot rise.

The night,
still coagulated in my veins,
thick with songs from the broken heart
of Amy, Amy Winehouse.

I died a hundred times

I love you much

It's not enough

How can I rise...

© Amy Winehouse

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Amy

*A*my Winehouse is the last person I'd expect to discover in a nuns' house in Assisi. Of course I know of her music and I'd seen some clips, but thanks to the wifi in the library, I'm hooked.

While nuns and pilgrims sleep, my junkie heart slinks through the shadows and fits up the headphones for my midnight hit.

*We only said good bye in words
I died a hundred times*

*I love you much
It's not enough*

© Amy Winehouse

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Jesus was a Jew for God's sake

Anyone who was brought up by nuns, or by mothers brought up by nuns, knows that being idle is to be frowned upon, especially in the morning. My mother could not relax until all her chickens were up and about, their pens tidied, windows opened, no matter the season. So I call upon that training to force me out of bed, along with the promise of the Italian miracle of espresso.

My swollen eyes hide behind dark glasses, while the rest of me sucks what it can from the sun and the coffee. After which, trance like, I follow the cobblestones through the south gate and out of town.

Senora, a young man approaches.

Si, I reply automatically.

Per favore, he places a petition before me.

Ingressi, I say.

Oh you look Italian. His English is good, his smile engaging. Excuse me. I used to have a drug addiction. Now I work for a Rehab centre. It saved my life. Can you sign this and maybe make a small donation?

My son is about your age, I touch his arm. He loved drugs too.

So you understand, he says.

Si. My eyes fill.

Where is he?

I show him a picture on my phone. He died (a hundred times).
He embraces me. I have a mother, he whispers and asks to
look at my phone again. That is why he is surrounded by stars
in the picture. That's where he is.

Si.

He is very beautiful, like you.

I sign and give money. My hand trembles. I have just disclosed
my loss to a complete stranger struggling with addiction. Why
couldn't my son's life be saved?

Are you going to San Damiano now?

I suddenly notice the sign.

I must be, it's in this direction.

Thank you, thank you, beautiful senora, he calls to me.

Slowly I negotiate the steep descent, stopping at an ancient
olive tree. Its grey-green leaves shimmer in the clear morning
light, its trunk twisted by decades of life and weather, its roots
spread across paths unable to contain it. I find a place inside it.
I'm still trembling.

Below is San Damiano where Francis was asked by Jesus to
restore his crumbling church. Like most of his followers,
Francis took the man literally.

Inside the olive tree, the skin is smooth and shiny. I rub myself
against it. No church on earth could bring comfort such as this.

Jesus was a sailor

*J*esus was a sailor
And he spent a long time watching
from his lonely wooden tower
And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said 'all men will be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them.'
But he himself was broken
Long before the sky would open
Forsaken, almost human
He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone.
And you want to travel with him
And you want to travel blind
And you think maybe you'll trust him
For he's touched your perfect body with his mind.

© Leonard Cohen

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The Three Amigos

Back at my Pilgrim's Rest, I can barely climb the stairs. Has someone put concrete in my boots? As for my chest, could that elephant please remove its foot?

There you are, Sister Sue enters stage left. We missed you at breakfast and—

I'm sorry, I woke late, but I managed to go to San Damiano.

Very special on this day, she smiles. You would have been blessed by all the saints at the mass there.

But I didn't go to Mass, I don't say.

You are just in time for tea. With your fellow country men. This way. She bids me follow her to the library annex.

She swings the door open, where three ruddy cheeked men are laughing as if having just shared a joke. One is pouring tea, another cutting cake.

I hope we're not being too noisy for you, one of them says.

We're not here to complain, says Sister Sue. You have a fellow Australian to join you.

Hello, I'm Father Jack, from Melbourne and this is Bryan, he's from Melbourne too, and Phil, originally from Ireland. And where are you from?

And so it goes.

It's been years since I've even seen a priest, so I'm not sure what priests do these days but their conversation gets across

politics, economics, and their pilgrimage to the Vatican, Turin and now Assisi.

And what about you?

The dreaded question.

On holiday?

Yes, of a kind.

Very good too, says another.

The perfect place for that.

I missed your mass this morning.

Oh not to worry, there'll be another tomorrow.

For All Souls.

And one more after that.

Three masses, three nights and three amigos. They all laugh.

Tea?

Absolutely, leaves, out of a pot! What a treat!

Can't beat it, says one.

And would you like a wee drop with it? asks the Irishman, pouring from a bottle of his country's best.

Seasick

If you don't become the ocean, you'll be seasick every day.

© Leonard Cohen

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Heartbreak

is unpreventable; the natural outcome of caring for people and things over which we have no control, of holding in our affections those who inevitably move beyond our line of sight.

© David Whyte

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The Day of the Dead

I wake with familiar dread. Yesterday was a hideous day and it was supposed to be blessed by all the saints. Today it's about the common dead. Let's hope they're a bit more helpful.

Death and dead people are not things I've liked to think too much about. The only time I ever got comfortable with such things was in India. Death was everywhere; on city pavements, under the shade of village trees, on the burning Ghats. All part of the great life cycle.

But in the West, it is something swept under the mat. Yes, there are ceremonies and viewings even, but I've always felt they were separate from, apart. Mechanical exercises followed by business as usual, as soon as possible.

I've not been good at death, I must admit. Hate funerals. Find the grief too overwhelming. Hate wakes where people act as if nothing's happened. Hate speeches by people who grandstand and exaggerate their relationships with the dead who can no longer speak for themselves. So it is with apprehension, I approach the breakfast room on All Souls' Day.

As soon as I open the door, I see Sister Sue drinking coffee with two of the three amigos. She calls me over. We make small talk and I take a table by myself, as is my habit. She comes and pours coffee for me. She seems exceptionally cheerful, the room particularly cosy.

I hope you come to the Mass in our chapel today, she says.
I plan to.

We will be praying for your son, she whispers touching my
shoulder.

I reel at the suggestion. I don't want him included in the
prayers for the dead, thank you very much. I don't want him to
be dead.

Death

...the chorus of a thousand lifetimes

© Bayo Akomolafe

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Communion

The breakfast display is staring at me : fruit, cereal, breads, pastries, the usual. I stare back.

Scuzi. A boy about eight years of age is smiling up at me. He wants help with the juice dispenser.

Prego, I say and easily adjust the valve.

Grazie, he says and skips over to his family's table. His brother is a couple of years older, the same age difference between my two. Their mother is fussing over them like I used to. I turn away, grab a baguette and return to my table.

Just as I break it, a strange feeling overcomes me. I think of Jesus and the story of the last supper. A sudden urge to take communion rushes through me; not modern, new-born Christian style communion, but the traditional Catholic thing with wafers made by the silent hands of Carmelite nuns. And real wine in a golden goblet.

I rush over to Sister Sue. I need to go to confession, I tell her.

Of course, she says. That is one of the initiations of our Faith. And it is your privilege.

I want to take communion, I hear myself say.

Communion is not just about bread and wine. It is to be in communion with all of us, those on earth and those departed. Your son is with us today. Ask him to walk beside you. Pray to him to help you heal.

Pray to him?

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

*That's the beauty
of unconditional love*

When a child dies, a parent is still tied to that child. Souls tied together across universes. It doesn't matter the age when they passed. It doesn't matter how long ago it happened. It doesn't matter. None of it. Their souls are forever tied. That's the love of a parent. That's the love that is more powerful than death. That's the heart that breaks and keeps breaking until their arms are filled again. It knows no discrimination based on age, health or time, it just is, and it will always be. Their souls are forever tied, and there's nothing that can break them. That's the beauty of unconditional love.

© Scribbles and Crumbs

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

*Mea Culpa, mea culpa,
mea maxima culpa*

In the anteroom beside the chapel, Sister Sue tells Father Bryan that I want to take confession. The other two amigos discretely slip out while Bryan extends his hands to mine; they are warm and soft, like toasted marshmallow.

I'm sorry for your loss, he begins. So sudden and so recent.
The space between us shrinks.

Would you like to take advantage of Confession? His tone is oddly professional.

I nod, my voice buried in its watery grave.

So my dear what would you like to confess?

Everything, I mouth soundlessly.

Of course, he nods and waits patiently for my bubble words to make it to the surface.

Every omission, every judgment, every harsh word or thought, every unkindness. And mostly that I couldn't save him. I am so sorry for that, above all.

Of course, he repeats.

But I couldn't, I know, I insist. And what about the omissions, the failure to notice, the denial, the looking away, I croak.

Failures are a big part of being human.

But how many mistakes?

Grief is plagued by questions. He smiles.

With no answers.

Pray for some relief.

And penance?

Enjoy your time in Assisi. The door is always open to peace and forgiveness. It's just that sometimes we choose not to walk through.

I feel something turning in my belly.

Do your best to be in the present, he says.

It's a giant water eel writhing inside me. It's squirming its way up from where the drowned words lay. Up into my chest and throat, choking me. I cough and splutter.

Father Bryan pours a glass of water for me. The glass is crystal and there's light bouncing from it. I want to ask if it's holy water, strong enough to thwart the monster from the deep. I sip just enough to subdue it.

Now come join us and we'll pray for your son and all the other departed souls. And those they have left behind, including me. Ask your son to help you grieve.

*Matter can neither be created
nor destroyed*

Einstein

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

... only resurrected

The pulpit is the carved trunk of an oak tree, brought down from the forests where Saint Francis prayed and played. The carver has removed the bark, releasing the sinews and flesh before sealing them with the tree's own blood. I position myself close to it, admiring the intricacy.

My knees rest easily on the soft velvet padding of the kneeling rail. Sister Sue is fussing with flowers and candles and Sister Anastasia is seated not far from me, hunched over her walking frame. An old blind nun sits behind her, snoring gently.

Struck by the oak's presence, I sense how alive it is. Since being cut down and removed from its birth place, it has been transformed, suffering death only to be resurrected.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The tree of Life

How kind the earth to catch him
How strong that noble tree
How tender the leaves that kissed him
And the zephyrs at his knees.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The three amigos, continued

Enter from stage right, Bryan, robed in gold fringed, purple satin; with black shoes shining. I rise to my feet. The other two amigos follow and take a place on either side of him; their costumes less theatrical and their manner too.

Sister Sue, having left some piece of the production unattended, takes a chance and dashes from one side of the tiny chapel to the other. Sister Anastasie raises her head like a tortoise from her hunched shell and the blind sister rallies. A couple of newly arrived pilgrims settle in the back pews.

Bryan, like a priest on holiday, checks the foreign altar for this and that. With the freshness that teachers have on a school camp or colleagues in *mufti** clothes, he opens the book before him and tells us what a great honour it is for him to celebrate mass in Assisi.

I am still musing over the word *celebrate* when I hear my son's name in the context of death and the departed. I had not attended his funeral back home so that I could avoid the finality of that word, departed. But here, now, in this tiny chapel in Assisi, it is inescapable. I listen as my son is tenderly named, proudly proclaimed and generously honoured, as the worthy departed.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Psalm 23

*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures :
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness,
For His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
For Thou art with me_ thy rod And thy staff comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine
enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely Goodness and Mercy shall follow me all the days of
my life
And I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.*

Text attributed to King David,
translated from the Hebrew

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The White Feather

Three priests, some nuns and a few pilgrims looking for peace, that's what that mass was, I reflect as I head down to the town square. Maybe that's what masses always were; simple gatherings seeking forgiveness of the fragility of man.

The wind is cold at my back until I reach the cosy square, packed with musicians, dancers, children, dogs, police, processions, drums, families, lovers, food, balloons, wine, gelati; all in celebration of the loved ones behind the veil.

There's not a seat, table or place even in the queues, so I continue downhill to the Basilica of Saint Francis, jostled by the expectant throng. Halfway, I feel my son beside me, but I quickly lose him in the crush. I try not to panic as I'm pushed and shoved. Crowds of old women in colourful head scarves, men in Sunday bests, fighting siblings, sexy women in crotch tight pants and high heels, macho boys displaying their gym muscles and bopping teenagers wearing headphones, swarm the grounds surrounding the basilica. I manage to escape into an alleyway where I'm carried upstream. That's when it happens. Right above my head, a tiny, white feather hovers out of my reach, as if caught in an invisible web. I am compelled to stop and watch it, despite the human torrent gushing past me and backing up behind me.

I have no doubt the feather is for me. I jump up to reach it

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as it swims around me. This must look like the act of madness, considering this crowd, but no such thought crosses my mind. My attention is totally focussed on this tiny slither of pure white.

I hold my right arm up high and open my fingers. It comes straight towards them and rests easily between my first and middle. I laugh out loud and grasp my treasure until I can get back to my room.

Thank you, I say, examining it closely, my feet overhanging my single bed.

I'm in Heaven now Mum, your idea of heaven. And I love it here.

I did not die

*Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there, I do not sleep
I am a thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond glints on snow
I am the sunlight on ripened grain
I am the gentle autumn rain
When you awaken in the morning hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight
I am the soft stars that shine at night
Do not stand at my grave and cry
I am not there, I did not die.*

©Mary Elizabeth Frye

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

He always said...

... If I go ahead of you, I'll wait for you.

If there's any way to send a message,

I'll find it.

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Death Denial

We live in a culture where it has been rubbed into us in every conceivable way that to die is a terrible thing. And that is a tremendous disease from which our (Western) culture in particular suffers.

©Alan Watts

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Poor Francis, they ignored your will

Father Bryan has invited me to attend a mass he will be celebrating with the other amigos in the base of the giant Basilica of Saint Francis.

Another mass? I've been to more masses in Assisi than in my whole adult life, I tell him.

It's a chilly dawn and lamplit Assisi is still sleeping. We four walk briskly down the empty lanes, past the shuttered shops until we come to the deserted square outside Francis's Basilica.

It's hard to believe it's the same place as yesterday, I say.

Yep, they sure know how to party, one of them says, as we proceed to the lower entrances and wait for the gatekeeper to appear.

It's all very mysterious, I say.

Yes, there's even a secret code, Bryan laughs.

Should have had that coffee, the second amigo complains. Nothing moves swiftly in Italy.

Bryan rings the bell again.

We'll actually be going down to where Francis was buried, he says. Although it is curious they built all this on top of him, when he had insisted he wanted to be buried with the paupers.

Finally the amigos are granted entrance to the hallowed

grounds. I follow them down the dimly lit stairs. It's like a scene out of the *Da Vinci Code* and I keep expecting a hooded albino monk to stop our passage. But we arrive, without incident, at the dank and airless chapel.

Unexpectedly they invite me to read a part of the ceremony. My voice quivers from nervousness, but my heart's not in it. I can't wait to get out into the fresh air: such an anticlimax after my experience with Clare.

Later, over coffee and cake, I tell Bryan I doubt Francis is even there. After all, they did not respect his will.

If he's anywhere at all, says the Irishman, he's up in the forests. Get yourself up there, to be sure.

To be sure, I say mimicking his accent.

Eremo delle Carceri

Four kilometres above Assisi, on the slopes of Monte Subasio, in a proud and glorious forest, sits the small hermitage of Eremo delle Carceri. An established site for hermits long before Francis and his followers retired to it, the hermitage is a favourite for pilgrims from all over.

The traditional pilgrimage from Assisi to this sacred place involves walking the whole way from the village up the steep slopes, no matter the weather. My feeble attempt to do that in time for the 7a.m. mass is thwarted by the dark, morning cold. It's almost 6:30a.m. by the time I rush into town, grab a taxi and a take-away latte and arrive at the beautiful Santa Maria delle Carceri just in time to be late for the mass.

My eyes drift around the womb-like chapel, until they settle on the charming altarpiece fresco of the Virgin and Child and the strong smelling lilies that adorn her. But I am totally unmoved by the mass. Francis is not here. I wander out before it is finished, determined to find him.

Immediately I am drawn to a narrow stairway that leads to the Grotto where it is said he prayed and slept. It is warm compared to the forest chill and completely silent. It's easy to imagine him here. I wait to hear from him. But nothing. Instead I rest and enjoy the silence.

It's a tight squeeze through another rock opening leading onto a large, water-worn stone crater, sign posted, the Devil's hole. I peer into the demonic lair. It seems friendly. There are even coins shimmering in there. Have some cheap skates tried to sell their souls? Are you here Francis?

Outside there's a walkway. The leaf litter crunches underfoot. On one side there's a huge buttressing wall, on the other, a very steep drop. The path narrows and the cold air is still. I stop. Tiny birds are dancing in the very top of a giant oak tree, a few feet away. Is this the oak tree, famous for having housed his feathered friends? Is this where you are?

Finally he speaketh

I freed myself of my parents' possession of me, so I could do the work of God. Your son has returned to God, where he has been called to continue God's work. You must surrender all possession of him.

And I say unto him: Does the umbilicus ever dissolve?

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SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Brother Sun and Sister Moon

*M*ost high, all powerful, all good Lord! All praise is Yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing.

To You, alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all Your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and You give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour! Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars; in the heavens You have made them bright, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which You give Your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom You brighten the night. He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of You;

DENISE GREENAWAY

through those who endure sickness and trial.

*Happy those who endure in peace, for by You, Most High, they
will be crowned.*

*Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Bodily Death, from
whose embrace no living person can escape...*

Saint Francis

Sister Death

This time when Death came, She was serious.
No more pain, She said. No more worry.
This time, She said. Just come.
I'm in a hurry.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The singing nuns

There is a taxi rank outside the Hermitage gates and a tiny espresso bar, with the usual saintly souvenirs. I drink a short black and buy a bottle of water for my walk down the mountain.

After a near collision with a car on the first blind bend, I decide to venture off the sealed road and follow the winding paths through the vineyards. The morning is dry and crisp. Brother sun is blessing the tips of the grape vines, turning their green leaves to gold.

All is peaceful and bountiful except for a dog's bark. Down the alley between the vines, a big German shepherd is bounding towards me. It does not look pleased. Brother and Sister of all Creatures, I pray.

Calmo Cane, I tell the salivating beast as he comes into my reach. Calmo.

Immediately he crouches in front me and looks up as if waiting for further instruction. Andiamo, I say. Immediately he obeys. With his tongue hanging out, he trots ahead, turning to check I'm following him.

The passages between the grape vines are wide enough to accommodate both Cane and me, but as much as I enjoy his company, I am concerned he might follow me into Assisi town. I tell him so. He barks and runs off the track. I peer over the top of the grape trellis to see what he's barking about.

Below there's a taverna. I can see some long tables under grape trellises and a wisp of smoke. My stomach rumbles. I smell breakfast.

Cane dances in front of me, all the way to a gigantic pizza oven. The warmth is welcoming. Cane smiles again as if he knows he's pleased me. A tiny, old woman emerges from the other side of the oven. Music follows.

Benvenuti, she says, and invites me into the taverna.

Two long tables are laid out with wine jugs and pizza platters. The bench seats either side are occupied by nuns. One beckons me join them. One pours me a small mug of red wine. Another slides a full pizza my way. The rest pluck guitar strings and warble.

Mangia, Mangia.

Hunger overpowers modesty and I lift a warm slice to my mouth. The crisp underside supports the rich tomato and olive topping, the softly melted mozzarella, the fresh basil.

Un altro.

I don't need much encouragement to take another piece. The white cheese stretches from my teeth. I smile at the pleasure of it. A couple of the nuns do too.

More warbling, throat warming and guitar strumming. And then the angelic choir begins. I almost choke on my pizza. Each voice is an instrument. Singular and yet in perfect choral harmony.

The wine goes straight to my legs, warming them. I look down and there's Cane right between my feet.

*St Francis Prayer
as sung by the Taverna nuns*

Lord make me an instrument of your peace
Where there is hatred... let me sow love
Where there is injury...pardon
Where there is discord...harmony
Where there is doubt...faith
Where there is error...truth
Where there is despair...hope
Where there is sadness...joy
Where there is darkness...light
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled... but to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved ...as to love
For
It is in giving...that we receive.
It is in pardoning, that we are pardoned
It is in dying... that we are born
To eternal life

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

*The Road to acceptance
is paved with landmines*

Sister Anastasie has left a holy card in my pigeon hole. It's a classic, like the ones we had at school; it even has gold fluted edges. It's a picture of Saint Clare with the word

ACCEPTANCE

written across her feet.

On the back there's a Biblical quote.

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a
future with hope.* Jeremiah 29:11

Hope? I mutter. Seriously?

I see Anastasie smiling at me from her desk.

But have you lost someone? (I ask her knowing she doesn't speak English.)

Si, si, she says.

And you have accepted it? Is that it? Is that what you're saying? Accept that I will never see my boy again, feel him, hear his laughter, worry about him, discuss philosophy, physics, politics, enjoy his company, read his poetry?

Si, si, she says.

Grazie, I say, holding up the card before crushing it in my fist as soon as I'm out of her sight.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

A Mother's Day poem from my son

This is a poem
Designed just to say
I wish you all the best
On this mothers' day

There were times when I thought
You weren't mother material
Like the time you refused
To make my cereal

But I know
You did the best you could
And if you could do better
I know you would

So today is the day
For me to say
I love you Mum
Thanks for wiping my bum

Not to mention
Everything else you did
It's been 27 years
I do not kid

DENISE GREENAWAY

So let us rejoice
All the time we have spent
And look forward
To all the years that are meant

Thank you Mum for everything you have done
Let's hope the next 27 will be as much fun

Robert Kennedy no less

*I*n the nun's library there's an illustrated children's book telling the story of Saint Francis. It's written by Robert Kennedy. There's a quote from the Saint on the book mark.

If we had any possessions we should need weapons and laws to defend them.

Saint Francis

I have to tell Alessandro.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

A postcard to Alessandro

A painting of Clare's cloister: a beautiful colonnade, leading from the building's open quadrangle to a shaded walk way.

Ciao Alessandro,

I just had to tell you. I have seen an angel. A real one. I know you don't believe in such things but you could not have denied this one. She was outside Basilica di Chiara, drinking an espresso and smoking a cigarette; her wings singed by setting Brother sun, her gaze fixed on rising Sister moon. When I tried to get her photo she chased me. I had to take refuge in the church.

Assisi, like Italy, is a total contradiction so far. Outside the Basilica an absolute circus but inside, well at least inside Clare's, I am deeply moved. I can feel her spirit and can imagine her taking a stand against the popes who tried to impose their rule on her Order.

Yesterday I saw a Saint Francis impersonator in the piazza. His feet were soft and white, with not a blemish, let alone cracks in the heels. He was talking to a stunning looking police woman with a long, blond plait falling from her helmet to the middle of her back. When I asked if I could take their photo on my phone, they happily posed.

I'm managing my retreat here, aided by the nuns' pastoral care and the town's comforting saints, wine and food. But

the thought of my approaching birthday fills me with dread. The cold doesn't help. I'm used to being celebrated in semi-tropical conditions.

By the way, please don't contact me on the day. I've told Maria too. My phone will be turned off. I don't want to hear from anyone. I feel safe in the knowledge that my exact location is unknown, except to Maria, and I'm pretty sure the nuns won't figure it's my birthday unless they have noted it from my passport.

As for his birthday. I've decided to go to Rome. I'll take the train. Maybe Maria will join me. Maybe you will too. After that I might go back. Who knows which way the wind blows.

Bacci.

PS Did you know Robert Kennedy, as in, the brother of the American President, wrote an illustrated children's book about Saint Francis? I've actually held it in my own hands!

Mama said there'd be days like this

© Amy Winehouse

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

My Birthday comes...

... and with it all the memories ...

My mother had just passed and I dreaded the thought of my birthday dawning without her. It was our tradition to be the first to call each other. If I beat her to it, she would laugh and slap her hand on her lap in defeat. If she got to me first she would start singing happy birthday before I had a chance to even say hello. So when the phone rang first thing, I half thought it was her.

Are you going for a birthday swim in the morning?

It was my son.

I hope to.

I'm going to get down there sometime too. Can you wait for me?

Sure.

We could have some brekkie* together.

That would be lovely.

After a long swim at the river's mouth, I spread my towel on the sand and stretched out on it. The incoming tide was rushing into the river on the other side of the breakwall and travelling against it, in his motor boat, was my son; his head peeking above the breakwall with one hand waving.

Jump in.

With phone and car keys in one hand, I used the other to grab his shoulder, as he steadied me onto the bench seat.

Look under the tarp, he grinned.

An esky with fresh seafood and champagne. Beside it a tottering bread basket full of bread rolls, still warm from the bakery. With a grin as wide as the wake behind us, he spun the tinny* around and headed us up river to his childhood lair.

Amputation

The death of a beloved is an amputation. (If you're lucky) you find a new centre of gravity. But the limb does not grow back.

© Mirabai Starr

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Knock knock

Who's there?

Sister.

Sister who?

Sister Sue. How do you do?

I'm in a sink hole, I answer in my head.

Do you want me to save some breakfast for you?

No it's okay really. I'll have something in the piazza.

Before he was even a teenager he would take our tinny* up river, with friends or without. He had a small one-man-tent and a pack of food raided from our pantry and fridge. He'd light a fire and sleep the night and throw out a line in the morning. Whether he caught fish or not, wasn't the point. What he was casting for was FREEDOM.

It is the thought of freedom, that calls him in. I feel his warm presence beside me before his words flood in:

I loved my freedom, but it was nothing like this. The freedom here is unconditional, as is the love. I'd closed my heart, with all the blows I'd had in life and love. I could never get the conditional bit. Now I understand everything is conditioned on earth: the weather, the circumstances, how much fear we hold and how much trust. For a long time I was lucky, I had the mighty wind underneath my wings, holding me, keeping me

safe. But it was temporary, this is eternal. This is who we really are, outside the earth plane.

Love here is profound and even though we are born with it, it's stolen from us by fear, possessiveness, pain, anger, cruelty. I searched for truth my whole life and only found lies. Those lies hurt me, but now I understand they do not exist, they're an illusion, man's limited version of reality.

It's so immense here, the freedom, it could be overwhelming, but it's not, because there's no one to be overwhelmed. Only the mind creates fear. When you get that Mum, you will be free too.

As for birthdays, make a wish to become unborn.

*Children are the anchors
of a mother's life*

Phaedra, Sophocles

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Love loves you

I drag myself into a sitting position, donning socks, shoes, pants, thermals, windcheater, scarf and dark glasses and leave the building un-noticed. Raw, unwashed, unmade, with sunglasses as my only prop, I stagger down the windswept alleyways towards the piazza. But the weather has closed the outdoor areas. Looking like this I can't possibly go indoors. Instead I beat a path to Clare's door. No sooner am I inside than I hear my son's voice:

My devotion to you is eternal, my love unending;
you are my sun, my moon
and you deserve all the love that comes your way.
Open your heart to it, let it in.
Love loves you.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

*To live with the fear of loss
is damaging to all*

Clare welcomes me as always, no matter the state of my appearance, thinking, or emotions. But today she manages to break through my sorrow.

If you live with the fear of loss, she says, you not only damage yourself but all those you fear to lose.

But I've already lost him, I argue.

That's when he replies, I'm not lost, not now.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

It's getting too intense...

...I tell Maria. I know I didn't want to talk to anyone on my birthday but this is getting too much. Too many saints, downloads and deep and meaningful.

Go out to dinner, she suggests. Are you hungry?
Starving, it's turned really cold here.

There's a great fish place just around the corner. They open early in the off season.

Ok and Maria...

Si.

I've decided where I want to be for his birthday.

Where?

Rome.

Bene. I'll go with you, by train.

Grazie Maria.

And... I am glad that you were born, my friend.

Grazie, my friend, but right now I'm not so sure.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Pesky Pesce

Having been misled several times by the word pesce (translated as fish but covering all seafood) I am determined to order correctly this time. So after several birthday wines and antipasto, I am ready to negotiate the fish. The waiter speaks a little English and so it begins.

Me: What fish do you have today? (Exaggerated enunciation through smiling teeth.)

Him: Swimming fish. (Pronounced sweeming) Hand gestures mime the movement of a fish sweeming, with tail extending up to his elbow.

Me: How do you make it?

Him: Cooked (pronounced cook - ed.)

Me: Grazzzzzie. I giggle.

Him: You like?

Me: Si, si. I grin.

Him: Bene.

Me: Si, bene.

I contain my mirth until he turns his back, then I laugh uncontrollably.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Roma

Revisited

Early Winter

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Roma Termini

*M*y ears are about to burst. I spring from my seat and try to push past the passengers blocking the way to the exit door. They are immovable. I look back at Maria, whose eyes are questioning me. The train lurches forward. I return to my seat.

It's the final tunnel into Rome, she says.

I can't stand it.

We're nearly there.

Roma termini hustles and bustles. Wary of pick pockets and touts we head straight to the exit, where Maria's friend Daina, is waiting for us. She's American and has a car. I can tell she knows. She kisses both of us and says, this way. Her car is an SUV filled with yoga equipment and kids' stuff.

My grandees, she says, as we force our bags in. It's only a walk from here but I thought—

Thank you, says Maria.

Before she reverses from her parking spot, a tout approaches her window. She hands him five Euros.

Parking tax? smiles Maria.

More like parking racket. But I dare not pay.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Sylvia's

Sylvia's on the fifth floor, Daina says. With no lift. It takes the three of us to carry my luggage up the narrow stone staircase. By the fourth floor, we're puffing. Enter Massimo, Sylvia's neighbour. He gallantly carries our load the rest of the way and theatrically produces the keys to Sylvia's apartment.

Sylvia gone. Weekend, he says in English but with a very thick accent. I do care, he smiles.

Not bad, Daina says, peering through the glass windows. Especially for this neighbourhood.

Daina knows the district well. Her husband is a Roman and they have a big house not far from here. When I get settled I must come for tea.

The four of us squeeze into the tight vestibule and Massimo wheels my suitcase to the other end of the apartment and into a large stylish bedroom with a king size bed. He turns on the bedside lamps and adjusts the shutters. I check the street below. Daina's SUV takes up half the road.

Maria and Daina check out the sparsely furnished living room, where Maria will sleep on the pull-out couch-bed until Sylvia returns. Then Sylvia will occupy it for the entirety of my bnb stay. It's her bedroom that I'm renting.

Eduardo, Massimo says, leading me to a bedroom with two single beds. Boy.

There's a photo: edible cheeks, cherry lips and strawberry cream skin. I get it, a single mother, having to make do in Rome, renting out her bedroom whenever she can.

Maria checks the cucina, turns on the stove's gas jets. I check the bathroom. Bene, we chime.

After we bid ciao to Daina and Masisimo, I ask Maria: Can I get smashed now?

His birthing day

Proceed down narrow stairs, arrive at courtyard, pass through enormous entrance doors, turn left, enter BAR. Two wines in and words are flowing.

Inspired as I am by Assisi, where a wretched man once opposed the corruption of the establishment, only to have a basilica imposed over his pauper's grave, where priests and dancers laugh together in the piazza, where saints and sinners rub elbows and men sing openly in the streets, where neon candles light the night and the moon waits patiently for the sun, I cannot accept that my son, born on this very day has been kidnapped by forces out of my control: the gods, the fates, it matters not.

Maria does not drink her wine. She simply holds my hand.

No seriously. Let this fucked up cup pass. Why did he drink from it? Why didn't he just pour it down the sink?

Let's have something to eat.

Food. Food. It's always the solution here. Mangia! Mangia! I just want to get out of it today.

You can. We don't have to walk far.

Such a sweet response, I say, clasping for her warm, spongy hand. You are such a good friend and today of all days I'm—

She pats my hand.

Today, 34 years ago, I gave birth to a soul gestated in my

womb for over 9 months: an intense, clever, existentially defiant, funny, loving, poetic, risk-taking magician. Had I known—

Would you still—

During the first weeks when I looked at mothers with young children, I would burst into tears. Please don't let anything happen to them I would pray to the God I didn't even believe in.

It's early days.

Still a fog.

The food arrives: Insalata caprese, Antipasto misto and Cecina, a wood fired chickpea tart.

I push it aside. Un altro vino per favore

Distractions Roman style

Maria and I traipse the city, until we can take no more. Now to find a bus, any bus with TERMINI written as its destination. From the Termini (the big Rail Terminus) it's only a twenty minute walk back to Sylvia's.

At last! A bus clearly marked TERMINI. It's over crowded but we force our way on. With the doors only partly closed behind us, it takes off. We hang on to each other as it swerves through the traffic and turns sharply into a crowded street. The doors open, the engine shuts off and the lights too.

Maria questions the driver in Italian. He replies in English:

Get out!

We tumble down the stairs laughing.

Maria imitates the driver. Get out! Get out!

Stop making me laugh. I already need a toilet.

Dragged along by the crush we are barely in shouting distance of each other.

What's going on?

Looks like a demo. See the placards.

What do they say? What are they protesting about?

Lack of public toilets, Maria cackles.

Stop it!

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Beauty, the ultimate distraction

Piazza di popoli

Medici

The pantheon

The colosseum

Piazza Novona

Roman Forum

St Peter's Basilica

Sistine Chapel

Vatican museums

Spanish steps

Trevi Fountain, (under renovation)

Borghese

Appian way

Everything Al fresco

Pasta

Pizza

Afternoon Bellinis

Bellissimo

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

When in Rome...

Today we have a plan. It involves bus number 84 which leaves from Rome's huge bus terminus. All we have to do is find the stand for Bus 84 and determine whether it's coming or going. No one can tell us which stand, so we begin checking all of them, without success. We then decide to wait at the main entrance so that we can see every bus that arrives. When number 84 finally appears, we chase it to its parking bay, but the driver has exited before we get there. A well dressed woman notices us and enquires about our plight. The woman is a Roman and Maria speaks village Italian, so there's a lot of hand language involved. Finally the woman advises us to take the same bus as her. We can change at another interchange. What to do? We follow and board with her.

An energetic young man, tanned and handsome, hops into the driver's seat and starts the engine. Empty but for the three of us, the bus rattles its way out of the terminus and onto the main road.

At last, I groan.

But too soon the bus stops and opens its doors. The driver mumbles something and turns off the lights.

Whaaat?

We turn to our rescuer.

He must go home to have his lunch, she says in broken English.

DENISE GREENAWAY

So he's stopping outside his house or what?
Possible. She laughs.

My rock rolls on...

Sylvia returns with the young Eduardo, and Maria, my rock, rolls on. I wave her off from platform 10 and wade my way back through the fetid underworld of Rome's Central Rail.

Outside, it's a human jungle. Hundreds are settling down for the night. Touts, pushers and prostitutes are on the hustle. It's an intimidating walk back across the rail lines and through a dimly lit tunnel. Every minute requires vigilance.

By the time I get to Sylvia's, my heart is racing.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Sylvia...

... understands more English than she can speak and she wants to learn. So does her little son. Sylvia's best friend is almost fluent in English and gives foreigners lessons in Italian. Perhaps I would like some?

But the main language Sylvia and I come to speak is that of loss. Her sister has recently died and her name cannot be mentioned without tears flooding. I share my grief and immediately I am family; enjoying breakfast with her sleepy son, evening drinks and dinners with her and her friends.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

And Alessandro?

*H*e does not come.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

I cancel Christmas in Australia

*T*o my family and friends:

As strange as it is to be away from you all, there are many distractions here and moments where my grief is not triggered. I hope to continue to devote myself to this journey (whatever that looks like) and to continue to eat 24 times a day, enjoy the music of the language and the bliss of not understanding a word, the craziness of the Italian temperament (should I call the police?) and the madness on the roads.

I'll be here for as long as it takes for me to be able to return. Meanwhile I do my best to be in the present.

Love to you all.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

And in my darkest hours...

...he comes.

People cannot understand our relationship. Don't let it bother you. You are on your soul's path, delicate as you are. Do not let opinions touch you, for they are merely the projections of others. Become free of them and you will be free forever. Maybe even in your life time. I love you Mama.

Thank you, thank you, but what am I to do?

Know that I am here and will be with you—

Forever?

Forever.

Is this a dream?

No, this is real. What was theory is becoming real.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Back in Australia

Winter

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

...The first anniversary

*M*y head droops on its wilting stem.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Holy smoke

Come up to the mountains for the weekend, my dear friend suggests. We're far enough away.

So on the very morning, at the very time, the sun rises through the large glass doors at my feet. Outside is untamed Australian bushland. My smiling friend places a cup of warming tea beside my bed, next to the wildflowers her children picked in honour of my arrival. This morning they are at their father's, and I am glad of that.

What would you like to do today? My friend asks. I am at your service.

I don't think we should make plans. The ceremony's not till 4. So stay in bed. For as long as you like. I'll make a fire outside.

Despite her enormous desire to please or because of it, the fire will not start. I can hear many matches being struck, wood being re-arranged, loud bellows and her sudden departure from the scene. I decide to get up and give a hand, just when she staggers back with a bundle of sticks and leaves.

I've been given instructions, she says. I think from your boy. Whatever this wood is, it's the one that's needed.

She snaps off one dry branch and places it on the failed fire. It ignites immediately.

I don't know what this wood is. I've never seen it before,

she says, piling on another branch.

The fire flares and a great tunnel of smoke rises from it and comes directly at me swirling about my middle, from back to front. Then another funnel connected to it circles my feet and travels up the front of my body and over the top of my head, while another twirls around my ankles and races up my back.

My friend crouches beside me and the dancing smoke wraps around her too.

We look at each other and then it retracts. Suddenly the fire is completely extinguished.

What was that?

We roar with laughter.

I've seen fire and I've seen rain...

*I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end
I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend
But I always thought I'd be seeing you
One more time again
...I always thought I'd see you baby, One more time again*

© James Taylor

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

The next day

*M*y skin feels a little stronger when I wake, sealed somehow. I know the smoke has done it. At first light I walk out onto a huge rock face at the end of my friend's garden. Underfoot, tiny wildflowers burst from between the cracks.

Life goes on, I hear him say. I'm not abandoning you. I will always come when you need me but I've finished with the DNA. It was the cause of my suffering. You feel different now because you are no longer processing my pain. I'm so sorry you had to do that but it must have been necessary.

You know how I was always interested in healing, well now I have everything necessary to do that, but I am not going to be working with individuals. I've been called to do something else. I can't tell you what it is because I don't understand it myself yet, but it is to do with what I was fascinated by on earth, quantum physics, the planets etc.

A sense of joyful pride rushes through me.

It's hard to see you suffer Ma. But suffering is part of the human condition, so much misunderstanding about life, about death. So much taboo. Over here everything is clear. The human mind cannot understand the Master plan. It clings to old concepts, it wants things to remain the same, it wants Jesus to stay hanging from the cross. But once the Bodhisattva has fulfilled his destiny, his essence is no longer in the form

DENISE GREENAWAY

he took on Earth. The human mind wants to keep us in the physical, separate, but in Truth we are all part of the same.

May you find peace Ma. It's not in the past. It's here, now.
Can you feel it?

Still...

... my guitar gently weeps

© George Harrison

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Sydney

Summer

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Just makes it harder to believe...

(you) won't be around

© Cold Chisel

*H*is ashes are in a box, beside several other boxes containing other bits of him; photos, medals, ribbons, drawings, poems and letters he wrote to me as a teen and pre-teen. Addressed to Dear Authority figure, such letters would quietly appear under my bedroom door whenever he wanted to do something he knew I would disapprove of. To keep a straight face I would often reply in writing. Dealing with him, even at a tender age was like arguing the law in court, his court.

Dear Authority figure, Mum,
I can't say I know what it's like to raise a child or even to give birth to one, but I do know what it is like to be a child. I understand that being a parent must be hard and sometimes painful. Looking after your children wouldn't always be a piece of cake. I know we fight but I'm sure we don't mean what we say because whatever we're fighting about is always something stupid. When a parent raises a child, he/she would like the child to

grow up with respect and to have manners and all the other stuff. What I'm trying to say is, I'm trying not to swear and lie as much and I would like you to understand something.

I know that you would like safety for me (that doesn't sound good English) but I am saying I would like to learn a bit about life. As I said "I'm better at life than school."

I'm not saying drugs and all that stuff. I'm saying people. You said you passed your years down to me and, well I'm not afraid and I feel you shouldn't be either.

You said "no" I can't go to that party and I respect that but what I'm saying is that I think I will learn something if I go and I feel that the only reason you are saying "no" for me not going to that party is because you are afraid. Well don't be. To you I might still be a baby, but to me even though I'm only 13, I feel older.

There are many things you can do, punish me, send me to my room, call my father but the best thing you should do is agree, because tomorrow I will be going to that party (as long as I do my homework.) And I would rather leave with your permission and on a good note than have to disobey you and stomp out.

*I love you always,
your son.*

Ps I think you should consider everything I have said from a child's point of view and maybe try to understand as well as swallow your pride and fear. Your son.

Christmas

I face Christmas in Sydney's Summer haze. It's unbearable.

I hide in coves and haunt the harbour's beaches.

A mere shadow of myself.

Everything hurts, it's all too bright.

The sun's too strong, the sea too rough, the people too loud.

I dream of the Adriatic and Alessandro.

I call him.

You must come back our next Summer, he says. To swim without sharks.

His laughter rattles my misery.

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

FROM GRIEF TO GRACE

I have come to drag you out of yourself, and take you into my heart.

I have come to bring out the beauty you never knew you had and lift you like a prayer to the sky.

Rumi

DENISE GREENAWAY



SYDNEY ROME UBUD

Italy

A second Summer

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*It takes a long time
to say good bye in Italy...*

Two men are saying goodbye after a long dinner. Filled with food and wine, they kiss and hug each other. As one moves in the direction of his home, the other moves with him. They pause and repeat their good byes. Then they step back in the direction they began. Two steps forward and one step back; the good-bye dance in Italy.

Soon they arrive at the first man's house. They embrace again. Now let me walk you home, says the first.

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Dance? Are you serious?

This time you have come to dance, Alessandro insists. You must move the emotions. Otherwise they, he searches for the word, stagnate.

I don't want to move, I raise my voice. I am frozen for every reason.

But if you don't melt you will freeze to death, he raises his voice too.

And if I move, I will shatter.

But the embrace of the music will put you back together again.

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Dance, when you're broken open

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Mother Tree

All I want to do with this body is throw it onto the earth and moan like the Aboriginal women did when their children were stolen from them. I email my ex, and tell him I have no legs. I feel like a tree that has been split, I write; one half forcibly removed.

Trees are strong, he replies.

But this is an amputation...

Next day he sends me a collage he has made; the image of an immense tree superimposed over a photo of me standing with arms joyously outstretched. He has transformed my arms into strong leafy branches and my legs into sturdy tree trunks. In the leaves are the faces of our sons.

That night I feel my legs grow back.

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*I'm never gonna dance again the
way I did with you...*

© George Michael

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The Milonga

I regret having told Alessandro I had danced some Tango in Australia. He and his partner are Tango obsessives, travelling from one side of Italy to the other in search of it.

Won't you come, just once? It's a friendly home town Milonga. You will be most welcome.

The small car manages five of us, two Tango pairs and me. Tango chat spills from the open windows into the moonless night. It's a long way to travel through the misty mountains, but no one minds, except me, squeezed in the back seat, weighed down by my reluctance.

Before we see the lights from the venue we can hear the music. When we arrive and open the car door, it blasts us. Alessandro takes my arm and leads me to the entrance.

A technicolour scene bursts through the door; sexy women in slippery satin, splits up to their buttocks, fishnet stockings and custom made dance shoes; men in tight black pants and silken shirts, woven waistcoats, some with neck ties and cheeky hats.

Doesn't matter. Alessandro sees me looking down at my simple shoes. I told you. Don't worry.

The bar is crowded but Alessandro manages to procure a

bottle of Prosecco and some glasses. I can't see an empty table anywhere, but Alessandro's partner has already joined a group at the far end of the hall. Alessandro points me in her direction. By now the couple in whose car we traveled is on the dance floor.

I feel out of place in my black linen pants and plain cotton shirt.

I'm not going to dance, I say out loud, but no one can hear me.

Alessandro takes his partner to the floor. He moves slowly into the starting position. He is strong and grounded, tall and proud. She rests her left arm lightly on his shoulder, while placing her right hand into his. They stay still for quite some time, her body poised, waiting for his move. Her chest lifts, her core tightens and her feet take their position. One beat, two, and three; he takes his step. Her arches stretch, her calves too, her heels far from the floor; her whole body leans into his strong frame.

I wish I hadn't come. Dance is not a spectator sport for me. I refill my glass and step outside but people are smoking and screeching like cicadas. For the first time in Italy, I feel I don't belong.

I finish my glass and return inside, but the seats at our table are now filled.

What about the Prosecco, I wonder and as I contemplate my empty glass, a man's hand takes it from me. I smile, grazie, thinking he is a waiter, and he replies with a flourish, per favore, and takes my arm. Oh no. Does he think I said grazie for a dance. I pull back. Danza, I say, no!

Bella, he says gently nudging me towards the dance floor.

Which is worse? to make a scene refusing him, or disappear into the flooded floor. The second is the obvious option for my prospective dance partner; an older man, bald, with a pot belly

and a very bright gold band on his wedding finger. He grips my hand and leads me to the middle of the floor. The music has stopped and the dancers are chatting and preparing their next moves. He takes his position. I notice I am holding my breath and my knees are slightly trembling. He looks into my eyes and his face says relax. I take a breath and pray through clenched teeth, have mercy on me. He grins. I breathe again and try to find my core. Frame, frame, I hear my old teacher say. I drop my shoulders and loosen my neck.

Then his face asks permission as he removes my glasses from my nose and puts them in his coat pocket, patting them to let me know they will be safe. I drape one arm over his shoulder just before the music begins.

Half blind now, I feel less visible. He certainly is. As other senses start to take over, the tree in me begins to move; my branch arms stretch, my trunk expands and my tree legs become strong and grounded, sucking up the music through their roots.

Piazzolla is gushing through my veins. My partner pulls my trunk into his and steps forward, his knee parting my tree legs. They in turn bend across his, and kick up their roots. My branches rise.

Soon the room is whirling in the hurricane of dance. My trunk bends back and forth, my leaves quiver, my branches sway, twirl and swirl. As the tornado of Tango gathers force, I withstand it as best I can.

When the eye comes, so does stillness, until the next onslaught. Just when I can bear no more, the music stops and he hands me my glasses. My nose is wet with sweat. His face is as dry as his hands. He takes my hand and kisses the underside of my wrist and steps away smiling.

Grazie, I say.

Prego, he replies and disappears into the crowded bar.

I thought you weren't going to dance, Alessandro is beside me. And for so long. We are waiting to eat. He roars and lifts me off my feet.

Dance me to the end of time

© Leonard Cohen

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The woman in the mirror

It's dawn before I fall into a half sleep, half dream state. I am in a large moonlit temple in a lush tropical jungle. It feels like Bali.

Two young, brown skinned girls with dramatically painted eyes are dancing in unison to the piercing, metallic sounds of a gamelan* orchestra. Their bodies are firmly wrapped in silver and white sarongs, with strong yet graceful, bare arms, fingers long and outstretched, and nails like talons. Their hair is groomed tightly and crowned in gold leaf.

Now that you have danced you can take the next step, one says.
Only small steps are necessary, says the other.

Come, they chant. We'll show you.

I join them and try to follow their moves, but the gamelan is playing too fast and too loud. I look to the girls for instruction, but their eyes keep darting from side to side. They look frantic as if something is about to happen. What are they trying to tell me? I stop to steady myself. Then right before me, a male dancer with a golden crest on his head, appears. He is definitely Balinese. His upper body is naked. Tied at his waist is a golden sarong; it parts into ankle length pantaloons. Feathers decorate his bare feet and each of his arms has a carved wooden bird's wing attached. He is dancing all around me.

Who are you? I cover my eyes.

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Don't cry, he says. Don't cry for the body.

Look, he says and throws golden feathers all around my feet.

See, nothing is as it seems.

I wake with heart pounding and rush to the bathroom to cold wash my face. In the mirror there is a woman. I'm not sure she is me, but when I look into her eyes, I know exactly where I must go.

Ciao Alessandro

*I*t's taken me all this time to realise Ciao is the same for hello and goodbye, I tell Alessandro, as I begin to board my international flight.

Exactly! He laughs and embraces me. Coming and going, a circle. No Good bye. Just, until I see you again.

Ciao, ciao and grazia.

Ciao bella.

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*Let come what comes,
let go what goes...*

Ramana Maharshi

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Ubud

Bali

Second anniversary

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The offering

The tropical night air is thick with solemn expectation and the heady fragrance of Frangipani, Tuber Rose and Lily. Dawn is soon to come.

Kadek has already been to the market to purchase the offerings: packages of sweet rice, sticky rice and fried banana wrapped in banana leaves, as well as fresh bananas, pineapple, mangoes, oranges, limes, flower arrangements unique to Bali, incense and a fresh coconut.

I see her arrive, lit only by the setting moon and a few low slung foot-lights. I watch her approach the wooden enclosure at the far end of the garden. I keep my distance as she silently arranges the offerings at the feet of a reclining Ganesha. I'm excited and fearful at the same time. She has already told me not to cry and I dread she'll tell me to let him go.

Outside the compound, on a staircase overlooking the scene, the shadowy outline of two dogs catches my attention. The pair seems to be watching Kadek light incense and arrange the flowers.

James, my American soul friend appears out of the darkness, dressed and ready.

I've been told I'm not allowed to cry, I whisper.

That's fine, he says. I'll do enough for both of us.

We hug and take our places for the ceremony.

Kadek skilfully cuts the young, green coconut and inserts a drinking straw.

He loves fresh coconut water, I say, my voice dry and husky ...
And beer, as she loosens the top of a beer bottle.

Kadek is a daughter of Ubud, twenty two years wise. When I make offerings to my grandfather, she says, I always light his cigarettes for him. They burn down very fast. She giggles. When you offer the beer to your son, he may want to drink it. Are you ready?

My heart has stopped but I manage to nod.

Dip the flower in the sweet water and splash it three times over the offerings, turning your hand in a clockwise direction.

I follow her instructions with trembling hands.

Now this time when you do it, tell him you are happy he is happy.
The knot in my stomach begins to wring itself.

Tell him.

Tears come.

Tell him how happy you are that he is happy, she repeats. That any tears are tears of happiness. Call his name again and tell him how much you love him but that his happiness comes first.

I follow her instructions mechanically until a warm sweetness wells up in me and I begin to talk to him easily, as if we were alone at home. I want him to know how proud I am of him and how much I enjoy his company; his quirky sense of humour, random acts of kindness and determination to be free. I talk about things we share, declare my eternal love, weep and laugh and read the poem I have chosen for him by Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

FROM GRIEF TO GRACE

How do I love thee

... Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of every day's

Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;

I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

I love with a passion put to use

In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

With my lost Saints,- I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears of all my life! -and (NOW God has chosen)

I shall love thee better after death.

His presence is palpable. He is happy with the ceremony, I know it.

I can feel you, I say. At last I am celebrating you. And it's not good-bye.

At that moment, the lid on the beer bottle pops like a champagne cork. We all laugh. The incense smoke envelops me, just like his embraces always did, so warm and loving. My drooping head lifts, and my heart does too.

Finally I can breathe, I whisper.

The dogs yelp.

I think they know what's going on, James says.

Stay with him here, as long as you like, Kadek smiles. Have breakfast with him.

What a fabulous idea, I say, as Kadek goes off to arrange it. It's like Italy where families eat with their loved ones on the

other side. I could never have imagined doing that, but here, because I feel him, it seems so natural.

He must be a bit of a magician, your son, James laughs. Could you believe that bottle top? I've looked for it everywhere and it's just not here!

Oh the stories, I could tell...

Even after breakfast, it's hard to leave, but morning has come.

We should go, James says.

I know, but I don't want to leave him.

I take one of the blue flowers, his favourite colour.

Mogi, mogi kecunduk malih, I tell him, repeating the words Kadek has taught me. Until I see you again.

Look, says James. The dogs have disappeared.

Love is stronger than death

*W*here does a loved one 'go' when they die?
Where does a wave 'go' when it crashes to the shore?
Nowhere. No place.

The wave was never separate from the vastness of the ocean in the first place, so it cannot return there. Water cannot leave water, nor return.

Nothing happens at all, from the perspective of our true nature. Death is simply the deepest relaxation into unborn, undying presence.

Your loved one did not go anywhere, friend. They simply rested even more into their true nature, which is your nature, which is presence.

Not two, never two.

They are now, where they always were – in your heart of hearts. And they can never leave.

You will carry them.

Love is stronger than death.

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Full moon

The ancient Pusering Jagat Temple sits proudly amongst the startling, green paddy fields. Known also as the Centre of the Universe, this majestic home of the Hindu Lord Shiva, is said to emanate Light throughout the Cosmos. Classical in its design, the elaborately carved stone structure has hosted sacred ceremonies and auspicious, astrological occasions for eons. Tonight it's full moon.

As in many of the temples in Bali, the entrances demand a steep climb up countless, irregular steps. Tonight they are brimming with women, men and children, clad in white and gold, carrying colourful, painted, woven offering boxes. I join them and squeeze through the entrance into the inner sanctum where priests are waiting with salubrious greetings.

The grounds beneath my bare feet are soft and green; above floats the fattest golden moon. I stand quietly and watch the orderly crowd disburse into numerous areas, placing offerings before various gods in particular enclosures. Gilded stands, piled with perfect specimens of tropical fruits; sweet cakes, rice packages, even balloons, are placed before huge barong gods; their black hair life-like, their staring eyes and shiny, satin outfits, imposing.

Guttural chants sound through loud speakers, as numerous male and female priests attend to the purification of all

offerings. I am directed to join a congregation in a specific paved area, where men are already sitting easily on the ground, legs crossed; women on their haunches, their sarongs clinging to their butts, their corseted torsos shapely in their kabayas and tightly sashed waists; children are in between. I sit side-saddle and arrange my sarong and sash accordingly. The chanting floats above us on the incense smoke.

When all the purifications have been done, the holy water comes our way; at first sprinkled on outstretched palms and bowed heads. A single flower, placed between the fingers of the right hand is then raised above the head in the prayer position as each makes his own supplication. Mine is peace for all beings.

I raise my blessed flower and place it above my ear. Then with my right hand cupped above my left, I receive the holy water; three times for drinking and three times for wetting the face and the top of the head. When the dry rice is passed, the fingers of my right hand pinch some grains. I consume three and press the rest against my dampened forehead and throat. I hear myself clear my throat and open my eyes. Everything looks washed and clean. I start to smile and catch a baby's eye. She puts out her hand to me. Her mother turns and helps the baby reach out to me. She strokes my skin.

Tingling, I join the early leavers and file down the stairs. As I put my sandals back on, I can feel the moon at my back. I turn toward it. That's when my son appears wearing a temple priest's hat of white and gold.

I am in everything, he says, with a smile as wide as the moon.

When I walk back to my lodgings the moon walks with me. All is still in the paddy fields. Only the palm leaves rustle.

*I was you and never knew it
You appear in me and I in you
We hide in each other*

Rumi

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4 years later

Winter in Victoria

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Setting the fire is my new evening ritual. A ritual that confirms I am here, in a house, my new house. My hands carefully craft a network of kindling and as I weave strips of bark, twigs and leaves I remember all those who have woven themselves around me during these sorrow filled years.

For a long time have I wandered. Through countries, towns and other people's houses: a ghost barely seen. I have drunk wine and eaten food and laughed whenever merriment arose. But I couldn't be, any... where.

I strike a match inside my painstakingly prepared pyramid and let the flame catch. It flares inside the frame, warming its flesh as mine was warmed by friends who barely knew how. I blow ever so gently, for a flame just lit, like a dying heart, is easily extinguished.

Crackling now, then bursting, the wild flames incinerate everything in reach. Just like the inferno that raged inside me, singeing those who came too close. So furious was I that my son had been taken out by a world that could not see him, hold him, love him.

Logs topple. As I did, whenever grief subsumed me: my nights filled with longing, regret, remorse and my days a bleak, bare canvas. No one and no thing could help me, except him.

When I opened the door to my new home, it was on the anniversary of his departure. Clichés abound. New beginnings, a new chapter, blah, blah, blah, but even with the keys in hand, my heart was empty. Winter in Victoria, so far from the lushness of the home where he took his life. But to where did he take it? And where would I take mine?

He'd certainly hate Victoria, he never could bear the cold, died with his ugg boots on. And yet here he was at the front door. No such thing as coincidence, I could hear him say. And as I stepped inside. Ma, don't make this a house of sorrow. Let it be your place of grace.

The fire is settling now, finding its rhythm. I've learned how to feed it enough to stay warm without burning down the house. I curl up beside it and listen to it purr. Soon it licks my eyes closed.

In the morning, I'll offer its ashes to the garden I'm building for him. For it is in the ashes of my loss of him, I find his greatest presence.

Epilogue

Grace isn't in the remembering or the forgetting; it's in the space in between.

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Dedication

*W*hilst this book is devoted to my beloved,
it is also dedicated to all those who have loved
and lost; those who grieve for whom they can no longer hold,
those who long for what they think they had and those who
know there is more to Life's mysteries than what we've been
led to believe.

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La mia famiglia

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Zio	Uncle
Zia	Aunt
Nonno	Grandfather
Cucina	Kitchen
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