

PROLOGUE

The descent

It was a sunny Sunday afternoon when the phone rang. I was idly wondering if I had the will to vacuum. The siren call of the phone offered a reprieve. It was my big brother calling to tell me that my twin brother, Angus, was dead. That's all he said, 'He's dead.'

I fell spinning into an abyss of pain and darkness. I shook and I wept. Food repelled me. I couldn't sit still let alone drive. Sleep was ragged. My skin felt paper thin and my sensitivity was acute. The pain was unrelenting. CS Lewis said in *A Grief Observed* that the death of a beloved is an amputation. For a twin it's worse. I couldn't move. My dog came and sat next to me.

Alone in his flat, Angus died when an ulcer had burst.

It wasn't my first encounter with the sharp pain of grief and loss, but I forgot it and had been living with the blithe arrogance of everyday life. My concerns up until that moment were parking, work, bills. I didn't think about pain. Brutalities and wars in faraway countries didn't really affect me. I had forgotten how grief walks alongside, sits on your shoulders. At any time your proud little house of cards can tumble down.

Years ago I had confidently asserted that pain was an ally. I didn't remember how it strips you back to your core, naked for all to see, defenceless, wounded and raw. Time tricked me into thinking I had learned the strong, driving nature of this lesson. I realise now this was foolishness.

I did remember how people behaved toward the bereaved, though. Their awkwardness and muffled kindness. The way they changed around me. Some ran a million miles, as if I were carrying a terrifying infection. Others drew close. Too close. Treating me as if I were ill, they patted my arm, looked deeply into my eyes and whispered in voices dripping with concern, 'Are you okay?' No, I'm not, I would think, pulling away. Please don't make

my pain your story. Leave me alone. It was hard to receive kindness and even harder from friends than from strangers.

I was given curious gifts in that ragged time: sure knowledge of what I would and wouldn't do, crystal-clear knowing of what really mattered. The trivialities of life were exposed baldly. People's vanities shone brightly. I was released from worrying about what others thought of me.

The whole business of grief and loss is a mess. It can start badly and end who knows how or when. It doesn't have to be about death. It can be about loss of a friendship, a pet, a dream of you, vitality, country, hair, strength. It's not always as straightforward as death, where the loss is there for all to see. What about those mysterious unresolved losses? Babies adopted out in secrecy, the end of a forbidden relationship?

Whatever way you come to it, the journey through grief is long and unpredictable. The only way through it is through it. There are no shortcuts. The more you step into it, the better. Avoidance only brings it back more strongly later on. Better to lash yourself to the mast and sail into the storm. What choice do you have? And after others have tired of you and gone back to their lives, you

still have to sail that sea. Things happen on that journey. Friendships are formed and gifts arrive from unexpected sources. A friend told me once, 'You get the help you need, not when you think you need it, but when you really need it.' She was right.

Dear God, I miss my twin. It's called being twinless and I am told there are support groups, even conferences. Only a twin understands how awful it is when your kindred spirit is gone. For the first time in my life I was really alone. And yet, I feel him around me; I know he watches over me.

Just as I was getting a wee bit better, my dog died. With sadness, I buried him in my garden.

Then my father died. Now the descent accelerated. It had started when I visited him at the nursing home and found him asleep on the chair. He started at my touch and said, 'Dear, it is good to see you.' It smote my heart.

With encouragement, I managed to get him into a wheelchair and out to the car. After some painful hefting and shoving we were off. I drove to a nearby park with level paths where I could wheel him to look at the ocean inlet, the sea glistening on the mudflats.

He was so frail. Paper skin, bony hands, cold feet in felt slippers; he sat in semi-regal splendour with

his Russian hat and a warm blanket across scrawny knees. Once a powerful man, one that I feared, he was now fragile and diminished. A husk. Nearly deaf, nearly blind, with difficulty moving, he had suffered so much loss—dignity, privacy, vigour and influence. All were gone. He had been banned from taking alcohol, which he loved, so I plied him cheerfully with brandy and soda, and he sipped it, gratefully, as he contemplated the sea and the sky.

I gave him his favourite sweets to suck on. ‘Oh,’ he said with deep gratitude, ‘these are good.’

We remained there in the afternoon sun, watching the tide slowly creep up until I realised he had gone to sleep and it was time to go back.

‘Dear,’ he whispered again, ‘it is good to see you.’

The next day, when I visited, he was asleep on the bed and I didn’t want to disturb him. I left and went to my faraway home. I never saw him alive again. As I travelled home, he died.

I did see him one more time, lying in his coffin. I found it very reassuring to sit next to the body and talk to him. I don’t get to see many dead bodies. They are so cold, so very dead, and you can really tell the light has gone out.

I had reached the point where it was all too overwhelming for me, so I set out on a pilgrimage.

I would leave Australia and go far away, to England, Scotland, India and New Zealand. Places I loved and where I knew I could hide and heal. I was ashamed of my inability to cope and was useless at all the paperwork and administration I faced at work. I couldn't see the point. I couldn't accept the sympathy of friends and the pity of colleagues. I wanted to leave behind pain and to find new understandings to ease my aching heart. I knew that, in order to go forward, I would, I *had*, to go back. I would, inevitably, have to address everything in the past that I had hoped to leave behind. This would happen now that everything had been tossed up.

These endings were my beginning.