

Chapter One: Life on Mars



I am alive. This is one of the hardest and most beautiful things to be.

I spent so long trying to kill myself.

I still want to kill myself on a regular basis.

But right here, right now, I'm alive. And I am glad.

The will to live is like a pesky, persistent house plant. Some kind of creeper, that you bring home and think 'I wonder if you'll survive' and low and behold, a year later it's crept all along the mantelpiece and you're thinking 'Huh. I'm sharing my space with you; how can we manage this?' And you know that neglect is not the answer. And you know that if you keep watering it and feeding it, you'll be living in Little Shop of Horrors. So you prune it, and water it, and love it, and feed it a little. Then you hope that what you do is enough to bring out its beauty and purpose while you're managing all the natural contradictions and tragedies of the world.

My memories are a mess of contradictions. I can remember my parents buying me a pair of glasses and a warm coat. This was evidence that they loved me and took good care of me; it was evidence that they prioritised my needs over their wants. The only price? My eternal loyalty, silence, gratitude, and servitude.

What do we owe the people who love us? What do we owe the people who hurt us?

If I, by my own volition go to an aquarium and buy a fish, and I take it home and take care of it, and love it and feed it, and buy it medicine and change its water, and pay my electricity bill so the filter works on the tank—what does that fish owe me? Does it owe me its life? I buy pets so that I have the joy of observing them being perfectly themselves. Do they owe me anything, besides the true expressions of their natures?

Rachel Naomi Remen, says that all true love is unconditional—conditional love is merely approval. To be seen, accepted and loved, is a heady and intoxicating drug. I have been both a user and dealer of this drug for a long time. I feel the shame in me, and I see the shame and pain in others, and I think 'So that's you. Mmmm. Well, that's me too.'

But I'm alive.

Strange as that may feel.

My body is fresh and quick and changeable.



My mind is slow and solid and confused.

And my soul? Hard to tell.

Because it's not just people that I owe a debt to, and it's not just society. I also owe a debt to life itself. And this pesky, spreading weed that is the will to live keeps reminding me and reminding me: 'Whoa. Beauty. The amazing beauty of the things in the world. Whoa.'

The first time I tried to kill myself I was around 20. My sister had been suicidal at age 15 and had taken a paracetamol overdose. She was told this was lethal. So I took the same amount and waited to die.

Oh lord. The innocence of a 20-year-old who thinks they have no future.

From there, I tried various overdoses in various amounts, and everything from cutting, to burning, to strangulation, to injecting bleach, to god only knows what else.

I tried a lot of things, a lot of times.

And yet here I am.

Alive.

Why? Why am I still alive when I tried so hard to die? And why do I keep saving my own life? What could possibly make those two opposing forces, the will to live and the desire to die grapple so spectacularly? The Dalai Lama says that the meaning of life is to be happy and useful. I know how to be happy. But of what use am I? And to whom?

Every morning I get my husband out of bed. And while he's away, I take care of some of the housework. And I often cook him dinner. And all of those things are useful. And all of those things make me happy. And my husband does good, important work. And he makes the world a better place and often saves, or at least improves people's lives.

But as A.S. Byatt says, that's not very much to hang a life on.

Let's say Leonard and Penny bought adjoining farms. Then let's say Leonard had a flourishing farm and Penny noticed how well Leonard's farm was doing, and thought 'I can help with that'; so she gave Leonard all her seed stock. The result would be Leonard would have a great farm, but Penny's land would be lying fallow.

And that's not true, either.

Because I get a Lot from my relationship with my husband. He gives me plenty of seed stock back again *wink*.

Sometimes I wonder what I'm capable of cultivating, and how I'm going to go about doing that. And how I'm going to prevent myself from destroying mine and my husband's farms like I destroy everything else in my life.



I'm learning; slowly but surely, my brain is learning, and my heart is learning, and my soul has always been learning.

Education for me is like standing in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and wondering which date palm to climb first for the sweetest, most flavoursome fruit. Which one has the dates which explode in your brain, with the juice running out of your mouth? Learning is like laughter—it fizzes.

I'm doing a bad job of cultivating my body. Lord.

The scars. So many scars.

They criss-cross my arms and legs and torso like fuchsia, cream, white, and silver chopsticks.

That's if you're not looking at the burn scars. You see the same patterns on the bottom of saucepans; mottled, by turns pitted and raised. Or in Aluminium trays that haven't been washed properly-- the layers of brown on layers of silver.

Once you've given your life over to cultivating that sort of mischief, what's the point of cultivating health?

It's a bit like growing opium poppies in the backyard, and vegetables in the front. Would you like some spinach with your heroin, Sir?

So there's the first problem. Once I've worked out that my life force is around, how can I get to the point where I can actually live?

The constant back and forth-- going from reasonably competent to barely able to have a conversation or get out of bed. How can I create a life worth living with that going on?

Yesterday I got up in the morning in absolute despair. I spent most of the day despising myself, wishing I were dead, and taking various actions to make that happen.

At some point in the afternoon I had a change of heart, a small bloom in my soul, or a small gift from my voices, and I spent the rest of the day acting in ways that help me to live. And now I'm alive. Despite whatever damage drinking bleach has done to me.

I'm here.

But how do I live? How does the voice in me that wants to stay alive prevent the voice in me that wants to die from taking over?

