

Chapter One Making a Pig's Ear

At the end of my first week as a patient at a psychiatric in-patient facility, there were many questions going round in my head, but the most pressing was, “How the f**k am I supposed to make this ball of wool look like the animal in the picture?”

Earlier in the day, the doctors had been continuing to provide me with the cheapest, but surprisingly most effective German language immersion course I could have asked for, as they declared, “*Es ist sehr wichtig, dass Sie die Therapien Machen.*” It’s very important that you do the therapies.

Ah, the therapies. To the uninitiated, the A4 piece of paper hanging on the wall at the end of the ward with the therapy timetable looked like a cruise ship entertainment programme. In fact, whilst I waited to be formally admitted to the hospital, amidst all the horror, I had stood next to my ex-boyfriend, joking about this very thing.

“Look! It’s not a therapeutic programme; it’s an old person’s holiday itinerary!”

He had laughed. Then again, he had *had* to laugh, because his dumping me, over the phone, whilst I was on my lunch break, on the first day of a new job, in a foreign country, was in no small part a major contributing factor to me being here in the first place.

I had always said that after my next breakup I would either run a marathon or do an ironman. When my first relationship ended at 24, I ran my first 10k. After my second breakup (aged 30), I did my first half-marathon. When, aged 32, things ended with my fuck-buddy-come-de-facto-boyfriend, I took part in my first triathlon. The trajectory was clear: with each breakup I get physically stronger, and one more relationship disaster and I can tick off another life goal.

As it turned out, I didn’t run a marathon. Or do an ironman. I had a complete nervous breakdown and spent three months on a psychiatric in-patient ward in Germany. Bugger.

Because throughout my life I have treated my mental health like a poorly maintained car, doing just the bare minimum to keep it on the road. Over the years, qualified brain mechanics have popped their heads under the bonnet and sucked the air through their teeth with a “Zchhhhhh” sound.

“Well, this needs looking at. This could go anytime. And this part here is hanging on by a thread.”

“But can I still drive it?” I would ask.

“Well, we can patch it up enough to get you through your MOT. But if I were you ... well, I mean ... zchhhh, if you keep waiting, you’re going to be looking at a really big repair job in the long term.”

“But can I still drive it?”

“Yes, but ...”

I didn’t heed their professional advice. I stuck electrical tape over the rusty parts. I used cable ties to hold loose bits together. I did just enough therapy and just enough counselling to keep me on the road until the next time the rattles got too loud, and a service was unavoidable.

Unsurprisingly, whilst cruising down the motorway of life at high speed, my poor, neglected car couldn’t cope anymore, and the engine fell out. Which is why I now found myself perusing a menu of activities the professionals had deemed appropriate, when all I really wanted was to fall asleep and never wake up.

There was the frighteningly titled Morning Activation – I can only imagine what horrors *that* involved because I never made it – there was Qigong and walking group, art therapy and music therapy and dog therapy (oh my!), cognitive training, newspaper group, yoga and pilates.

What I needed was somebody to talk to.

What I got was the pronouncement, “*Es ist sehr wichtig*, blah blah blah . . .” causing me to leave the weekly consultation chuntering away like a teenager.

I sent a message to HIM – the Hot Italian Male, and yes, the very same ex-boyfriend:

*I just saw the doctors, as part of them seeing everyone.
They say I need to do the art therapy and the sport therapy.
That it's very important.*

*They think I'm just upset because my relationship is over.
That's what they keep saying. But I think it's more than that.*

He told me I was probably right, but so were the doctors. And maybe the sport and arts therapies were to tackle the very real pain I was in right now. Also, they probably wouldn't do any harm, and I should do them anyway.

I promised I would try, so I will try.

I typed. He congratulated me for my efforts, and I wrote back.

I have an exciting paper and wool session this afternoon. If only they knew the (crap) things I've already fashioned from paper throughout my life 😊

So later that afternoon I sat there in the *Ergotherapy* – art therapy – room, which reminded me of a nursery, but fortunately with adult sized chairs. The walls displayed artwork from past patients, their fates unknown. The paintings, crafts, and beaded jewellery were of varying qualities; with some showing great skill and others adding to the nursery-like feel of the room. I knew which end of the spectrum I would be at.

Ordinarily I would be in heaven in a room like this. A lifelong stationery aficionado and maker of things, one of the best presents I ever got was a simple set of cardboard drawers filled with paper, pens, stickers, highlighters, and stencils. It provided me with hours, nay years of crafty fun. I would sit under the kitchen counter in my Dad's house constructing a log-cabin out of straws.

“What on earth? . . . More mess!” my Dad would half-jokingly fume.

“I'm being creative, Father,” I would reply, as precocious as ever.

“Yes, creating a mess,” he would grumble, but leaving me happily surrounded by glitter and off-cuts of paper.

And here in the ergotherapy room were two giant stockcupboards brimming with card, paints, wool, threads, sparkles and more! And I was free to make whatever I wanted. But it was too much pressure; too much choice. I didn't know what to make. I didn't want to make the wrong thing and make something rubbish. I didn't know what would be the *best* thing for me to make, to make me feel better, to get the most out of the therapy. I was overwhelmed by the art equipment smorgasbord of possibilities.

Everybody else in there had something they were working on and they sat with a quiet intensity that filled the room. I must've sat at the table around which we all sat for at least ten minutes just thinking, *oh god, oh god, oh god*. Then I reached out to my best friends; the one constant in my life; the ones who always provided me comfort and support and a safe place to hide. Books!

On the windowsill was a small collection of craft books, the kind I used to take out of the library every weekend. I started to leaf through, waiting for inspiration to strike. But everything looked too hard, or too easy, or too boring. That is until I picked up a wool craft book. In it were a series of animals and people that could be made entirely out of woollen

pom-poms. They looked both simple to achieve and satisfyingly complex when finished. OK, so I had selected my medium – wool! Strangely overlooked by the greats of the Renaissance but actually a surprisingly versatile vehicle for self-expression. Now I needed to choose my project. I flicked backwards and forwards through the book, between elephants and hippos, fairies and flowers. I couldn't make a decision.

“I thought this was supposed to make me feel better,” I mumbled to myself. “I'm more stressed out than ever!”

But eventually I landed on a project that seemed to have the right difficulty level, had no emotional connections to HIM, and would be pleasing as a finished product: a little pink pig.

Unfortunately the instructions were in German, and my vocabulary did not yet include the topics of wool manipulation and pom-pom manufacture, so I had to spend further time watching a few *Youtube* videos which detailed a beginner's guide to pom-poms. At last I was ready to go, and embarked on my first art therapy, waiting with baited breath for the instant mood elevation that the “*sehr wichtig*” therapy would obviously bring about. And at the end of the two hours I had made ... a single pink ball! Well, to the untrained eye it was a single pink ball of wool, but to the expert in artisan crafts, it was obviously a porcine body. And I felt ... exactly the same.

As I sat there that day wrapping the wool round and round a cardboard circle, I was thinking over and over again, *this is great. I'm still a depressed person. But now I'm depressed person doing art.* The message I sent HIM at the end of the session made my cynicism clear:

I made a pig from wool ... I'm cured 😊

But I had made a promise to HIM and I carried on. I kept going to the ergotherapy room at the designated ergotherapy time, and doing the very important ergotherapy. I made four pom-pom legs, which were as big as the body, forcing me to start them again and do some careful shearing, more suited to a sheep than a pig, to scale them down. And with every session, as my pig took shape, I began to see the benefits of art therapy. Of course it was never going to solve my problems, fix my broken heart or fix my broken brain; but it gave me a little respite. When I was focused on making ears out of pink felt, I wasn't thinking about HIM or what had happened. Focusing on my art project gave me a break from myself. And so I began to incorporate the activities into my free time – so to say – outside of the designated therapy sessions too, doing complex jigsaws for hours on end and colouring in pages in the mindfulness diary my sister had sent me a few years ago. *If only I had coloured in more pages then, maybe I wouldn't be here now*, I thought, both ruefully and sarcastically.

At the end of my first month in hospital, when I was starting to feel a little better and beginning to acknowledge a little bit of progress, I finished my pig. His eyes were wonky, his legs wobbled, but he was gorgeous and I loved him.

“Aww, *so süß*,” said everyone in the ergotherapy room. So sweet!

“He needs a name,” said the art therapist.

I decided to bestow upon him a name which reflected both my own cynicism to the process of art therapy, and his status and inevitable destiny as a pig, despite my being a vegetarian.

“I shall name him Cured,” I said, “like the bacon,” making myself laugh if no one else.