

SAMPLE CHAPTER

SAVING GRACE

A MEMOIR
OF
WEIGHT
LOSS

GRACE KITTO



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Dartmoor is wild and beautiful at this time of year. It's early June and the birds and insects are making a ruckus, a gentle musical hum which fills the air, scented with yellow gorse. Picking my way among the vast rocks, up tangled pathways, through bracken and brambles which catch at my dress, I climb the tor till I'm almost at the top. I'm very fat so it's not easy.

I've heard there's a wild woman who lives in a cave under the tor and rarely comes down or speaks to anyone. I want to meet her. I'm breathless and humbled by the time I get there.

'Hello?' I call into an echoing silence. 'Hello? Bridget? Is Bridget here?' No answer. But in the dark recesses of the cave I see a movement, quick, defensive and silent. She doesn't step forward.

I hang around for a bit but then begin to feel intrusive, as though I'm disturbing her. I turn away and begin reluctantly to make my way down the steep rocky path, stumbling and sliding on the dry, gravel-strewn track.

I become aware that someone is peering after me, and glance back. Two bright eyes dart at me, noticing my every movement. No other word or gesture in my direction. I make my way slowly down the hill, dejected but not defeated. I've glimpsed her. She's seen me and almost acknowledged my presence. I'll come again.

*In which the scales fall
from my eyes...*

17st 6lb

Wednesday, 1 June 2011

I GOT ON the scales this morning full of dread. They shuddered and swung, then settled. I gazed at the result, willing it to be less bad than I suspected. Tears splashed onto my feet because no matter how hard I stared at it, or how I shifted my position, the needle had tipped the next stone and was resting inflexibly at seventeen stone six pounds.

I'm embarrassed that this matters as much as it does. There are plenty of other things in the world to be concerned about – climate change, the arrogance of bankers, the war in Afghanistan, and my son claiming crossly that there's nothing wrong with his school shoes just because they have holes in them and his toes are actually poking through. These things are the stuff of life, they're what I read about and think about and are obviously much more important than this. My weight is just a tiny little side issue, an irrelevance, not important at all in the vast scheme of things. But still it made me cry.

This is not a new problem. In fact, it's wearily old. And it's not that I haven't tried to diet. I have, many times. I've lost a bit here, gained a lot there and after years of struggle, have been left with an increasing waistline and a perpetual sense of failure.

It's hard to explain to anyone who hasn't had weight issues where the problem really lies. In my case, there's a disconnect between what I mean to do and what I actually do that stymies me every time. This was forcefully demonstrated by one particular incident a few years ago. I've been mulling on it ever since and trying to make sense of it.

ON THE EDGE of Dartmoor there is a place called Cadover Bridge. It's more than just a bridge. There's a river walk, a picnic spot and a car park all known by this one name. I pass it twice a day on my drive to and from work, a lovely journey across this corner of the moor. Through the seasons I watch the changing landscape of Dartmoor in all weathers, the tors at the horizon on one side and a distant glimpse of Plymouth Sound and the open sea on the other, a twice daily pause for reflection and mental restoration which I love.

It was a sunny day in early summer.

I had a busy production schedule in my job at ITV and during the day had no time to draw breath, let alone worry about my weight. I had finished work and was about to go home. For some reason I can't now remember I started to think unhappily about how fat I felt. I strode across the car park muttering to myself that I was absolutely definitely going to start a diet that very night.

My route home takes me back across the same edge of Dartmoor but with reverse views, obviously. No Plymouth Sound facing this way, but instead I sweep down a long hill towards Cadover Bridge car park, where for eight months of the year an ice cream van is parked. Without stopping to consider I pulled in, bought myself a 99 cone and sat in the car eating it.

Five minutes later I came to, as if from sleepwalking – dammit, I was about to start a diet! I really, really didn't mean to do this. How did I suddenly have an ice cream in my hand? I trembled with frustration and fury at myself. To add to the sense of disbelief, the truth is that I'm not even very keen on

ice cream, or indeed chocolate. I don't actively dislike them but neither are my treats of choice.

I couldn't understand how it had happened. Let's be clear, I'm not saying that I blacked out. I can remember buying the ice cream and getting back into my car to eat it. What I have no idea of is how I came to make the decision to buy it, and to override the previous decision to diet. I suddenly saw the complete madness of my situation. No sooner had I decided to lose weight, than I had done this crazy thing. I realised on that miserable sunny afternoon that there were two parts of my brain just not talking to each other. It was as if I was deaf to my very self. It seemed obvious that my unconscious was at work. It had other plans for me that day, not revealed, but demonstrating quite clearly that it was in charge of my actions.

That moment crystallised a recurring problem at the heart of any diet plan I've ever tried. It can't be a coincidence that every time I've made the decision to lose weight, the next thing I know is – bang, I'm suddenly eating a calorie-laden snack that I didn't want and don't need. On that day, at Cadover Bridge, it seemed a clear message that my unconscious was the boss of me. It felt like there was nothing I could do about it.

Years ago, I read Freud as background to a television series I was working on about the history of mental illness. Ever since he popularised the idea of the unconscious, it has been regarded as a powerful force in decision-making. I remembered that according to him, only a very small percentage of our thinking is conscious. On the other hand, the conscious part of the mind is where the verbal self lives, the 'I' we call ourselves. So where had the decision – to eat the ice cream I neither wanted nor needed – come from? My unconscious, I presumed, which was not merely deaf to me, but was cocking a snook at me, having a laugh at my expense. It was maddening.

This is the background to my many failed attempts at losing weight. This was what I knew I had to contend with. I didn't know where to look for answers. I had read a lot about dieting,

but nothing that even described this kind of experience. And yet I suspected even then that I wasn't alone and that other people must have this strange, almost out of body experience of eating without having meant to, and then bitterly regretting it. There's something so foolish and self-defeating about it that it's hard to describe truthfully. A humiliating trick of the mind.

Inwardly I named this pattern of behaviour the Cadover Bridge Syndrome. I revisited the incident time and again, trying to understand what had happened to me, not just on that day but on countless days filled with similar episodes. And trying to work out a way of grappling with it.

Why did it matter so much? Because what it demonstrated was a fundamental problem at the heart of my failure to control my eating. I did not experience temptation, uncertainty or doubt about whether to buy the ice cream. I just bought it, ate it and then, only then, came to and regretted it, as if attempting to retract permission in retrospect. This left me in despair. From my point of view, there had been no opportunity for self-control in the whole event. By the time I was aware what I was doing, it was too late. And soon after that realisation the 'sod it' reaction would kick in: if I had already messed up, what's another bag of crisps?! How can you exercise willpower when the rug has already been pulled from under you – by your own unconscious decision-making?

Worse, it made me doubt my own sanity. To decide firmly to do one thing and then immediately do the opposite inevitably leads to self-questioning. The original decision hadn't been half-hearted as far as I was aware. And yet it was repeatedly overridden.

THAT WAS SIX years ago. Since then, nothing has changed except that I've thought about it a lot. That doesn't mean it's been possible to do anything differently. In fact, I've done the same thing, made internal promises and then broken them, over and over again, in a Groundhog Day all my own. And this morning, these shiny digital

scales glinting back at me, their electronic numbers trembling and then settling at an ever-increasing weight, is the result.

With a sudden leap of hope, I march to the other bathroom to find my old white Salter scales. I've had them since I was a student forty years ago. They're much more reliable. They have a dial and a needle. I like them. But hope is dashed as they give exactly the same result. Of course they do.

Changing trains at Bristol Temple Meads yesterday, I caught an unexpected sight of myself in a full-length mirror at the corner of an underground walkway. A middle-aged woman, tired, reasonably dressed, but almost square, as wide as I am tall. 'Can that really be right?' I thought. 'Is that really what I look like?' and tried to dismiss it. But couldn't. Hence this morning's weigh-in.

This battle has been going on for most of my life. A memorable statistic for me: aged eleven, I weighed in at eleven stone. I was the height of an adult by then, at five foot four, and a pretty hefty adult weight to match. 'Two Ton Tessie' rang in my ears.

*Two Ton Tessie from Tennessee
 Holds six sweeties upon her knee
 When she does, all the fun begins
 When they play tennis on her double-chins*

As I got older my (increasing) size sat on my shoulder, ready to bite as soon as things got difficult. Twelve stone aged eighteen, and then down to ten and half as a student, weaving up and down between eleven and thirteen through my twenties and thirties. It's been a long and tricky relationship between me and my body.

There are some things I take comfort in. I've never been a binge eater or a secret eater. I eat with everyone, rarely alone, and not massively more than anyone else, except I've noticed that thin women tend not to have bread when it's handed round in a restaurant, they choose chicken rather than belly

pork and refuse pudding. Partly out of irritation with the popular obsession with dieting (or that's what I told myself) I've chosen not to dwell on such trivialities. And now look what's happened.

Looking back with rigorous honesty, I think I've often rooted out the most carb-heavy corner of the menu, kidding myself that I've eaten the same as one of my thinner friends because we've both had a main course, no starter or pudding. But probably I've had twice the calories. She orders lean steak and salad, I have baked potato and cheese. She has fish and steamed veg, I go for quiche and coleslaw.

My husband doesn't know how heavy I am. I can't bear to name a weight of such huge proportions to him. I prefer not to think of it myself, and in fact there is literally no one I will share it with. This is bizarre, because if you ask me what I weighed on any given occasion over the last thirty years I could tell you pretty accurately. That means I've been giving myself an unpleasant running commentary all that time, a critical voice muttering in my head, 'I know what you weigh ...' But there is no one else I can tell.

It's also bizarre, because after all I walk round looking like this every day and people don't spit at me in the street. I'm not a public menace, reviled because of my weight. I have to try to get this thing in proportion, see it in context. There are plenty of other people who have woken up this morning sad to be as fat as they are. Feeling alone with the problem, I try a stretch of the imagination to place myself in someone else's shoes: I could be a student in my twenties who's just tipped ten stone and is devastated, size eight a distant memory. Or a forty-something primary school teacher, her health heading downhill as she hits twenty stone and feels powerless to curb it. Their situations might be widely different but their distress would probably equal mine. The idea of them is comforting in a way – they're fellow travellers – but they don't change my situation.



THE QUESTION IS what to do and where to go now? It's a problem, a puzzle, a conundrum. I resist the temptation to set myself an impossible goal: 'I know, I'll get to nine and a half stone by Christmas!' I won't. It's gone way too far for that. This needs to be a radical solution but it must also be achievable. There's nothing more depressing than a goal that's so far out of sight you are defeated before you begin. It must be realistic.

In my line of work, over time, I have had to research a wide range of subjects, and it occurs to me that I can use this experience. I'm not a scientist and I have no medical training so I expect it'll be tough, but it's worth a concerted effort. I will treat my weight problem like a project and try to take the emotion out of it. And I won't talk about it, I'll just do it.

Next, I abandon a timetable for weight loss. It's so tempting to set a deadline – a dress size in a month, a stone before I go on holiday, ten pounds before my wedding ... These goals are hard to achieve and pointless in the larger scheme of things. Yes, pointless.

I'm looking for a radical fix, not a temporary gear change. At work I've got no problems setting schedules for myself and others for months or even as much as a year ahead, so why is it so difficult to adopt the same approach in my personal life? And then inspiration strikes – that's what I'll do. I'll commit now to a year of concentrated effort and see what that achieves. I've no idea whether that's long enough to get me down to a healthy weight or, if not, how much I could possibly lose in that time. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to worry about that now. This commitment is for one year, to see what I can do.

The first thing I need is a simple diet to follow. I'm not setting great store by this choice. After all, the aim is just to eat less food than the body uses in a day, and so burn body fat. It's not complicated. The value of the regime is to help me do it in

the most efficient way possible. But crucially, I'm not expecting a diet to fix my mind as well.

Over forty-five years on this particular battlefield I've tried many diets, from high fibre to food combining, the grapefruit diet to Atkins, Slimming World to 1000 calories a day. Here's a secret that not everyone seems to know: they all work. All of them. If you follow them properly, they are all geared to reducing calorie intake and every single one of them will do the job and help you lose weight. But there's the rub of course – *if* you follow them properly. That's the tricky bit.

They each have their pros and cons, but the one I've had most success with from a practical point of view is Weight Watchers. I have some reservations about it because it's a huge corporate concern, designed to encourage increased consumption of Weight Watchers products. The abundance of branded foods and related diet aids bears that out, but the diet itself is good, solid and sane. The WW online programme will give me the food and weight tracking tools I need without having to go to a class, which I've never enjoyed. Result.

But for once I'm clear that picking a diet is not even the beginning of the journey but just a tool, a mechanism to help me on my way. No, the real problem is my mind, which I know will trick me and stumble me, hobble and twist me into repeating the negative patterns of the past. It's my head I must grapple with. I'm going to challenge it, find out what makes it tick, and then work on changing it. After all, you can always change your mind – can't you?

MY HUSBAND AND son don't know I'm doing this yet and I don't want them to. They love my cooking and I love cooking for them, so that isn't going to stop. If I get anywhere, they'll find out soon enough.

'That looks very virtuous. What is it?'

'Just bolognaise. I've done you two some pasta. That OK with you?'

‘Sure. Smells great.’

I’ve adopted a mantra which I chant quietly to myself on the way to work. ‘It’s only for a year, only for a year.’ It makes me laugh. I’ve rarely lasted three months on a diet since I was in my twenties. Only for a year? Seems like a lifetime. But still I mutter it to myself, as a comfort and a sign of intent. Only for a year.



Sobering fact #1: *Over 63 per cent of Brits and 70 per cent of Americans are overweight.*

National Statistics, 2016

National Center for Health Statistics, 2016

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