Built for Hurt

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I was driving home through a January storm when I first heard the news. A giant cruise liner clipped a reef off the coast of Tuscany and had come to rest on a rocky shoal, her starboard side submerged in fifteen metres of water, her captain abandoning ship amid the chaos. As I navigated city streets slick with winter rain, a BBC radio announcer described the ensuing confusion on the Costa Concordia. Her passengers were evacuated haphazardly in the dark, most on a flotilla of lifeboats that streamed toward the shore of Isola del Giglio. Some were plucked from the hull of the ship by Italian military helicopters, but more than a hundred people jumped into the ocean in a panic, and swam the short distance to the island's shore. Dozens were missing and presumed drowned in the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Horrified by accounts of the developing catastrophe, I turned my car radio off, but I couldn't get the wreck out of my head. I imagined the outright pandemonium on board the ship as it drifted without engine power or electricity, listing to port as her lower compartments were swamped. I envisioned the terrified passengers sliding on decks spiralled to near vertical, people leaping into the sea in a mad bid for survival, others trapped in their cabins as the Concordia flooded and keeled over. I was overcome by a bleak and melancholy mood that persisted for the rest of my journey home, a swirling mixture of concern and grief.

When I walked through the door of my small apartment, I could hear reportage of the tragedy in Italy streaming from my partner's computer. Timothy was sitting at his desk watching coverage of the developing story. “A*wful, isn't it?”* he asked while I hung my drenched raincoat near the fireplace to dry. “*I can hardly get it out of my mind,”* I told him. “*It's just tragic.”* As the sun set in California and rose over western Europe, we witnessed the first video footage of the capsised ship wallowing on a shallow ridge and we talked of the human toll: the newlyweds honeymooning, the families on once-in-a-lifetime excursions, the service crew escaping poverty in the third world only to perish in the waters of the first. There were unconfirmed accounts of Americans on the ship's manifest, which brought the calamity closer to home. But the mishap was already palpable for us; together we ply the cold and choppy waters of San Francisco Bay in a little thirty-foot sloop. We are familiar with the markings on nautical charts, and understand the latent menace of underwater obstacles. We know a few rescue manoeuvres and maritime best practices. We are modestly skilled mariners, glad for any opportunity to sail.

Although Timothy and I speculated about what went wrong and who was to blame for dragging a thousand foot long vessel across ninety feet of submerged granite, it was the personal stories that overwhelmed us, making my heart literally hurt. The vast majority of the Concordia's passengers and crew survived; however, people did die in the disaster. A Filipino dining room waiter, not fluent in any European language, who calmly evacuated passengers before going down with the ship. The Frenchman, a confident swimmer, who gave his flotation vest to his flailing wife only to get sucked into a whirlpool formed by the floundering hulk and pulled under. The Italian woman who found no room in the lifeboats, and instead of forcing her way onto a launch, slid into the sea with the progressive tilt of the boat.

These initial accounts illustrated compassion in action, showing the innate connection we each have with the whole of humanity regardless of nationality. At the moment of calamity, the people aboard the Costa Concordia were empathising with other passengers, and in many cases sacrificing themselves for the sake of their fellow travellers. And in turn, Timothy and I, six thousand miles away geographically but fully present electronically, were empathising with the victims of the wreck as we learned of their plight. This is how empathy works; it reverberates.

The next morning, I saw the first stills from the disaster, including close-up photographs of the gash under the ship's waterline. When the Concordia scraped against *Le Scole*, a trio of flat, barren islands, her hull was lacerated, leaving a massive slash pocked at one end by a huge slab torn from the shoal. Sharp as an incisor, the crag poked up through the rupture like a dislodged tooth. In the instant I saw that rock erupting from the tortured metal, I felt searing pain course from my hips to my feet, swift as a strike of lightening. This sensation echoed each time I glanced at that image, the prickly bolts diminishing somewhat as I became adjusted to the sight of the stranded boat, rent and punctured, lifeless as a carcass.

In western cultures, we personify our ships. Like infants, they are christened in dignified but jubilant ceremonies. They are engendered as female and referenced with feminine pronouns, and are often given the names of goddesses or strong women. c. But it wasn't the anthropomorphic aspects of the Costa Concordia that had me wracked with flashes of pain; I wasn't stung by the sight of the mutilated boat, feeling the magnitude of her wounds as if she were human. Instead, the boulder jutting up through the hull provoked my synaesthesia-for-pain, a neurological phenomenon that has afflicted me since early childhood. Inanimate objects such as broken bottles, rusty nails and serrated knives send waves of pain down the back of my body from my hips to my ankles. And that rock, with its spire shape and ragged borders, had the perfect configuration to trigger my synaesthetic perception.

Some of my earliest memories include painful sensations akin to shocks of electricity that hit instantly when I witnessed a triggering object. My synaesthesia-for-pain has consistently followed the same pattern over my lifetime, corkscrewing from my sacrum to the soles of my feet; however, the list of offending articles has grown over time, and includes such mundane items as the lids from tin cans, kitchen knives, and wooden skewers. It's been like this for me as far back as I can recollect.

When I was quite small, my dad bought a load of lumber and a table saw, dedicating his entire weekend to building a playhouse for me and my sisters. We were beside ourselves with delight watching our father slice boards into segments to build a skeletal frame for the cottage. The tool had a circular blade that spun like a pinwheel, occasionally throwing off coloured sparks when it cut. It whined as it bit into the wood, leaving our yard smelling deliciously piny, and the pavement under the workbench littered with grit. I ran my fingers through the dust, drawing flowers and writing my name in large block letters as my father nailed plywood sheets to the little house.

He'd left the saw to cool on his work surface while he hammered away, the safety catch activated, the blade firmly secured. I pulled myself up from under the workbench to get a closer look at the gadget that so fascinated me. "*Don't touch it*!" my father barked; I jumped back. But I was still close enough to gaze at the blade's zigzag teeth, which made zingers of fire course from my hips to my feet. They were painful, came in waves, and were quite familiar at that point in my young life. "*The blade makes me hurt,*" I said to my father as he began packing up his tools. "*That's why we don't touch it*", he told me, carefully dismantling the saw with his gloved hands before storing it in a locked case.

It wasn't my fingers that hurt. And I hadn't touched the saw blade, just as I hadn't touched the collection of large needles that poked up through the open basket where my grandmother kept her crochet floss. Nor had I handled the broken glass that littered the parking lot at the corner store where my sisters I and bought soda-pop on hot afternoons. The tiny shards glinted in the sun, threatening to prick bicycle tires and bare feet. But they also sent sharp bursts of scintillating pain down the back of my legs when I looked at their coarse points.

I never told my parents about my odd episodes with pain. My few efforts to describe my sensorial world to them were misconstrued, and like most synaesthetes, I assumed that everyone had experiences that were similar to my own. I certainly didn't know the term *synaesthesia* when I was a child. And, the painful

sensation that came when I looked at triggering objects was so deeply rooted into my understanding of the world that it felt completely normal.

As a young adult, I became suspicious that the electric flashes I felt were atypical in some way. So, I revealed my experience to a brilliant and open-minded physician who happened to also be a friend. As we walked through the park in our hometown, I detailed my weird sensitivity: the intensity of the irritation, its brevity, and the predictable path it followed from my hips to my heels when I saw sharp objects. "I've had this my entire life," I told her. Gita was baffled, her forehead furrowed. "I don't know what to say. Perhaps it's some form of compassion," she said, letting her voice trail off in uncertainty. While I found her concern for my situation touching, her answer felt insufficient. I dropped the subject and resigned myself to the idea that the electric flashes of pain were simply an inexplicable relic of my existence.

My moment of recognition came decades later, when a client at my therapeutic massage practice mentioned during her session that she sees a field of colour float before her eyes when anyone touches her. "It's a form of synaesthesia," she said, describing the rare condition succinctly. "Any of your senses can be conflated with any other. For me, my skin and vision are tied together." Her explanation lead me to the book *Wednesday is Indigo Blue* by Dr Richard Cytowic MD, and Dr David Eagleman PhD, two of the leading researchers in the field of neuroscience. Although pain synaesthesias aren't explored specifically in *Wednesday*, many other synaesthetic experiences are illustrated in great detail. I devoured the book in less than a day. I had my answer.

I also had my community. I didn't know anyone close to me who had a pain-based synaesthesia. But, I found a vibrant, active, and international community of synaesthetes online, along with researchers who study synaesthetic perception. And, while only a few of them are currently exploring synaesthesia-for-pain, research into synaesthesia in general is expanding at this time, as is public interest in alternative forms of perception.

Connecting with the larger synaesthesia community hasn't been without conflict. Synaesthesia-for-pain is still a poorly understood phenomena, with little investigation dedicated to exploring the subject. Some of my fellow synaesthetes feel that synaesthesia-for-pain is nothing more than an exaggerated concept of empathy. But for me, the difference between my synaesthesia-for-pain and my sense of empathy is obvious.

It hurts me to see other people hurting. I was terribly distressed by the wreck of the Costa Concordia, and the subsequent loss of life. My heart felt physically heavy, my mood depressed. This is empathy. I

recognise it in myself, but I also recognise it in the selfless actions of the Concordia's passengers on that fateful evening. But the rock stuck in the hull of the boat is a whole different story. A glimpse of it sends bolts of pain down the backs of my legs. I don't consider this an empathetic response; it is synaesthetic, a strange conflation of my visual sensibilities and the dermatomes that innervate my skin. Perhaps it's an artefact of the less neurologically integrated brain of my infancy. I don't really understand why I'm wired like this. All I know for certain is it feels weird and otherworldly and it hurts; not emotionally, not psychologically, not metaphorically, but physically in a predictable and replicable way. This is simply how I'm put together. I am built for a certain type of hurt.

I recently searched for photographs of the Costa Concordia anchored at the port of Genoa where she is being broken. An unprecedented engineering operation righted her, using huge sponsons to float the ship to a salvage dock where the entire craft will be dismantled, scrapped, and recycled. But, before she was pulled from the underwater ledge at Isola Del Giglio, the craggy rock that had been wedged in her hull was extracted. Plans for its future include incorporating it into a memorial for the thirty-three victims of the disaster.

The gash that sunk the ship was partially repaired in the re-floating process and is no longer visible in the demolition photos; it is fully under the waterline. As I look through the images of her upper decks denuded of furnishings and stripped right down to steel bones, I get no lightening bolt flashes of synaesthesia-for-pain. Nothing remains in the photographs to trigger that sensation: no fractured glass, no broken ceramic tile, no ragged metal. But the photos do provoke strong emotions for me as they likely do for most people. It is haunting and surreal to see the boat slowly dissolving, its destruction evocative of the grand tragedy of it all. Lives were decimated in this disaster, and I feel the sadness of that loss, a heavy ache in my chest that I know comes with my personal experience of empathy. It hurts me to see the Costa Concordia disintegrating. But I am not in pain.