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# **Whispers Through a Megaphone**

Written by Rachel Elliott

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# WHISPERS THROUGH A MEGAPHONE

*Rachel Elliott*

ONE

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## THE SUPERABUNDANT OUTSIDE WORLD

Miriam Delaney sits at her kitchen table and watches the radio. She is mesmerized, transfixed.

Inside a studio somewhere—somewhere in the *outside world*—a woman is speaking in the fullest of voices about her extraordinary life: the adventures, the flings, the lessons she mined from her mistakes. Her stories are punctuated by music, carefully chosen to reveal *even more life*.

Miriam takes a deep breath in, because maybe what's on the air is also in the air, maybe something of this woman's superabundant presence will transmit through the broadcast.

Fancy being able to speak like that.

Fancy being able to speak properly.

It's three years today since Miriam last stepped out of this house.

No, that's not quite true. She has stepped into the back garden to feed the koi carp, stepped into the porch to collect the milk and leave a bin bag for her neighbour to place at the end of the drive. But step out into the street? No chance. Risk

collision and a potentially catastrophic exchange with a stranger? You must be joking. Not after what happened. *Not after what she did.* Inside the cutesy slipper-heads of two West Highland terriers, her feet have paced the rooms of 7 Beckford Gardens, a three-bed semi with a white cuckoo clock, brown and orange carpets, a life-size cut-out of Neil Armstrong.

Miriam's hibernation is three years old today, but numbers can be deceptive, three years can feel like three decades. Hibernation ages like a dog, so three is about twenty-eight, depending on the breed, and this one is kind, protective, it keeps the world at bay.

The *world*—now there's an interesting concept. Miriam rests her chin on her hands. Where is the world exactly? Is it inside or outside? Where is the dividing line? Am I in or am I out?

She tosses a coin. *Heads I could be part of the world, tails I'll always be outside it.*

The ten-pence piece, flat on her palm, says heads. *Best out of three?*

Three hopeful heads, one after the other.

Miriam smiles. It's time. She knows it and the coin knows it. Show me the money. Money talks. It's time to *get a life*.

The main problem? Other people. They have *always* been the problem. Other people seem to know things. They know what a life should contain, all the simple and complicated things like shopping and Zumba and being physically intimate with another body. They know the rules, the way it's supposed to go. Miriam is thirty-five and when she looks out of the window all she sees is a world full of people who know things she will never know.

The *world* again. After years of not looking it's all she can see. She would like to be part of it, to somehow join in.

She writes a plan on a Post-it and sticks it to the radio:

1. Do something I am afraid of. Apparently this builds confidence (have yet to see evidence of this—will be an interesting experiment)
2. Spend next few days clearing out house—get rid of mother's things
3. Leave house next week

The trouble with number one is what to pick from the enormous list? The task of actually *making* the list of things she is afraid of could take another month, and four more weeks inside this house? Four weeks that will feel like ten months? That thought is unbearable, it makes Miriam shiver and run upstairs to fetch one of her many cardigans.

But lists are good, remember? You can add things and take them away. Adding makes you feel like a person with clear intentions, subtracting feels like a small victory. What else? Well, a list is a personal map. It's a ladder that you can move up and down at your leisure. When you cross things off it feels like you're moving, you're getting somewhere, there is some purpose to all this—something is finally happening.

Back in the front room, she begins the list.

*Write fast, Miriam. You can do this. Lists are good. Write until you land on something you could tackle tonight. No, not tomorrow. Tonight.*

#### THINGS I AM AFRAID OF

1. Idea that my mother is still alive somewhere and I am not alone
2. Idea that my mother is definitely dead and I am alone
3. Going back to where it happened
4. Love

5. No love
6. Clothes shopping
7. Thought that I might do it again if I go back outside
8. Being stuck in a lift with a group of talkative people
9. Never being able to write a list or letter due to major accident involving hands
10. Turning into my mother
11. Having no capacity to know that I'm already just like my mother
12. Fingerless gloves
13. Naked cleaning

There it is, number thirteen on the list (unlucky for some). Naked cleaning—all it actually requires is removing this cardigan, this T-shirt, these jeans, pulling Henry the hoover from the cupboard and plugging it in. How scary can it be?

Answer: that depends on your childhood.

It depends on whether, at the age of eight, you found your mother sweeping the floor of the school corridor wearing nothing but a pair of trainer socks. (Had she planned to go for a run and slipped into insanity seconds after putting on her socks? Can madness descend that quickly, like thunder, like a storm?) There she was, Mrs Frances Delaney, quietly sweeping her way through a turbulent sea of hysterical children, the waves of laughter rising up and up and—

Miriam was drenched. She had wet feet, wet hands, wet eyes.

*Mother here at school. Mother naked. Other children cackling, jeering. Poor mother. I love mother and hate mother.*

The headmaster appeared. He walked on water. He took off his suit jacket and smothered Mrs Delaney's nakedness. He was gallant, unfazed. Perhaps he had seen it all before. (Miriam hoped not.) Frances carried on sweeping—she was

thorough, if nothing else. She had always valued cleanliness and order. Perhaps the headmaster understood this, hence his sensitivity. Perhaps he respected it.

What made the situation worse, even harder for Miriam to comprehend, was the fact that her mother didn't even work as a cleaner. Turning up at your own workplace without any clothes on is a rupture of social etiquette, a glitch in mental health, forgetfulness at its most perverse, but at least it contains a thread of continuity: *I have done what I normally do, I have come to the right place, but something is amiss. I wonder what it could be?* Turning up at someone else's workplace—your daughter's school—in the nude, in the buff, apart from tiny socks, is unbearably nonsensical.

Miriam's mother was mad as a spoon.

Was it catching?

(Miriam hoped not.)

Fast-forward twenty-seven years and what do we see? We see a woman, carefully folding her clothes and placing them on the sofa. She walks to the cupboard in the hallway and pulls Henry the Hoover out into the light, plugs it in, switches it on. Now she is vacuuming the brown and orange carpet in her front room wearing nothing but knickers and Westie slippers. A cuckoo springs from its house, making her jump. It's ten o'clock. Only two hours left until Wednesday becomes Thursday, until the first day of August is over, and then it will be three years and a day since she ran all the way home, whispering *oh my God, oh my God*. Anniversaries come and go. Important dates get sucked into the vortex and life rolls on, taking us with it, perpetual tourists who pretend to be at home.

Steady on, Miriam. There's no need to start brooding over the nature of existence. You've got to stay focused, just for once, otherwise you'll *never* leave this house. Self-soothe, remember?



Remember what the book said, the one Fenella lent you, the one about staying sane in a mad world.

Fenella Price. Chief supplier of objects from the outside world: food, pens, knickers, etc. Fenella is no ordinary friend. She is a Beacon of Sanity, forever glowing, her equanimity unshakeable. She is proof that people can be sensible, rational, consistent. But more importantly, she is proof that Miriam isn't contagious. Her mother's madness is in her blood and her bones—it has to be, doesn't it? But Fenella has been there and seen it all, the highs and lows, the dramas and trips, ever since they were at primary school, and *still* she is sane. She wears smart clothes, works as a cashier in the local branch of Barclays, goes to evening classes three times a week: Pilates, Tango, How to Make Your Own Lampshades. As sane as they come, surely?

"Stay sane in this mad world," Fenella said. "When your thoughts race off into historical territories, talk softly to yourself. That's what I do. I don't care where I am. I say *just you settle down, Fenella Price. Everything is fine.*"

Miriam sighs. Thank goodness for Fenella. If only she could tell her the truth about the thing that happened, the thing she did, three years ago today.

It happened like this.

Oblivious footsteps along the woodland path.

Oblivious footsteps across the field and all the way to the pub.

Lunch with Fenella (a cheddar and onion-marmalade sandwich, a few French fries, half a cider).

A hug and a goodbye, nice to see you, give me a ring soon.

Now we travel in reverse.

Oblivious footsteps across the field.

Oblivious footsteps along the woodland path. Disgustingly ignorant, outrageously unaware, until—

The world is a safe place until it isn't.

People are good until they're not.

Miriam wishes she had taken a final look at the buildings, the trees, the dogs playing in the field, but you never know what's coming, you walk small and blind, the world simply an echo of your own concerns.

Ralph has Treacle all over his legs, his arms, his stomach. Treacle the ginger cat, bored with Ralph's inactivity, hungry for breakfast. She pads up and down the sleeping bag, treads over the lumps and bumps of her new owner, searching for signs of life.

Treacle had been lost and alone, a stray cat in the woods, patchy and thin. Then she met Ralph Swoon, who was also lost and alone. Now they had each other, and a rickety old shed in the middle of the woods, full of slatted light.

He bought her a can of pilchards.

It was a fishy kind of love, but it was real.

Still wearing yesterday's clothes, Ralph steps out of his sleeping bag. He runs his fingers through his hair and opens the door, heading for the pile of leaves that has become his outside toilet. Treacle sits in the doorway, waiting. She is already used to this part of their daily routine. She knows that Ralph will stumble back in, tip some food onto that cracked blue plate on the floor, then return to his sleeping bag and invite her inside it. Yesterday they fell asleep like that for three

hours, with Treacle opening her eyes every now and then to make sure Ralph was still breathing.

Feline logic told her that he had dragged himself here to die. Why else would he have turned up in the woods at 11.30 p.m. on 4th August with no bag, no possessions, just a wallet, a phone and a guitar?

But the cat was wrong.

He hadn't come here to die.

Last week, Ralph was sitting at the breakfast bar in his kitchen, listening to his wife and their two teenage sons out in the garden. Sadie and Arthur were hosing the legs of their new puppy while Stanley watched.

"This dog stinks," said Arthur.

"It's just mud. Help me hose it off," said Sadie.

"He's your dog, Mum."

"Don't start this again."

"Who went and got him?"

"I bought him for you and Stan. You always wanted a dog."

"I wanted a dog when I was six. You're ten years late."

"Oh fuck off."

Arthur smirked. The puppy wriggled about, trying to escape the cold water, trying to play.

Ralph had been against the idea of a dog. Didn't they have enough problems, without attending to the needs of what was effectively a furry baby? As usual, Sadie won. She said it would be good for Arthur, who was showing signs of excessive boredom. It would relax him, teach him responsibility, get him outdoors. A teenager needs a reason to climb out of bed in the morning, she said, otherwise he will sleep all day and all night and life will pass him by like an unremarkable dream. Sounds familiar, thought Ralph.

“Don’t get water in his ears,” said Sadie. “Dogs hate water in their ears.”

“So why does he keep jumping in the river?”

“Spaniels like to swim. They don’t swim *underwater*.”

Arthur dropped the hose on the floor. “He’s clean now, I’m going in.”

“He’s not clean. Look at him, he’s filthy.”

While the puppy shivered between them, Arthur and Sadie glared at each other. Stanley was an absent bystander, his thoughts elsewhere. These departures had been happening since last Friday, when Joe Schwartz kissed him hard, led him upstairs, sat beside him on the bed, kicked off his Converse trainers, flicked the hair out of his eyes and said you’re wonderful, Stan, I really think you’re wonderful.

Canadian Joe. An Adonis. He was a magician too—he had turned down the bickering voices of Arthur and his mother so that Stanley could barely hear them. Something about a filthy dog. Something about his brother having a problem.

“I’m not impressed with you right now,” said Sadie.

“Oh really,” said Arthur.

“You talk to me like I’m a piece of shit. What’s your problem?”

“I don’t have a *problem*.”

“Just go and make me a coffee, Stan can help me finish. Stan, are you with us?”

Arthur marched through the kitchen in muddy boots, tapping on his iPhone.

Arthur Swoon @artswoon

Mum drowning new dog in garden call RSPCA

Mark Williams @markwills249

@artswoon Really? Not the LOVELY Sadie? Don’t believe you

Arthur Swoon @artswoon  
@markwills249 Enough SICKO BOY thats my mother!  
My dad wearing hoodie not cool at his age

Mark Williams @markwills249  
@artswoon Maybe he's in midlife crisis? One word for  
you: MILF

When the twins were born, Ralph was still an undergraduate. He was twenty years old, passive and unworldly. He hadn't wanted to call his sons Arthur and Stanley. He preferred Mark, Michael or Christopher, but he would never have risked arguing with Sadie about such crucial matters. They were fine, they were happy, he could lose her at any moment. This was the wordless core of their relationship, known and unknown. Sixteen years later they argued all the time and the sight of her Mini pulling into the driveway, its back seat covered with newspapers and unopened poetry anthologies, had begun to make him queasy.

Should your own wife make you feel queasy? Perhaps at the beginning, with the anticipatory fizzing, the urgent desire. But after sixteen years? What would she say if she knew?

"You make me feel queasy, dear."

"You make me feel queasy too."

"What now? A dry biscuit, a cracker, Alka-Seltzer?"

He took a digestive biscuit from the packet and put the kettle on. He listened to Sadie telling Stanley about an exhibition she wanted him to see—maybe they could go this afternoon, she said. There was a pause before the inevitable rejection: I'm sorry, Mum, but *no can do*.

"Why not?"

"I'm taking someone to the cinema this afternoon."

“Can’t you go to the cinema another time?”

“Maybe you could see the exhibition with Kristin.”

“I don’t want to see it with Kristin, I want to take you.”

“But Kristin’s into art.”

“Will you shut up about Kristin?”

Kristin Hart. The boys’ godmother. She and her partner Carol were the paragons of contentment, which made them mesmerizing and annoying, even more so since Sadie found herself preoccupied with thoughts of Kristin in bed, Kristin in the shower, Kristin doing stretches before her morning run. Discombobulating, that’s what it was—the sexualization of an old friend. Really quite *distracting*.

Ralph closed his eyes.

He saw flickering lights, blocks of colour.

Yellow, black, reddish brown.

The talking had stopped. There was a moment of silence.

Yes, *silence*.

He exhaled into it, feeling his shoulders drop.

He noticed his fingers, the way they had curled into fists.

“I’m in such a foul mood,” said Sadie, marching into the kitchen with a cocker spaniel attached to her leg. “I need a coffee.”

“I’ll make it.”

“This bloody dog’s driving me insane. You can take him out this afternoon.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not? I need to get the food and drink for tomorrow. It’ll take me ages.”

His birthday party—something else he hadn’t wanted. But it wasn’t really for him. Sadie liked to surround herself with as many people as possible on a regular basis, otherwise his continued presence came as a shock.

“What do you know about Stan’s girlfriend?” she said, finishing her coffee while the spaniel licked her face.

“Are you sure he has a girlfriend?”

“I hope she’s not dull, like that girl he brought to the barbecue last month.”

“I thought she was perfectly nice.”

“He can do better than *perfectly nice*. She had no ambition.”

“Sadie, she’s a teenager.”

“When I asked where she wanted to be in five years’ time, do you know what she said?”

Ralph stood up, trying to decide whether to wash the dishes or go upstairs. “What?” he said, running the hot tap.

“In a swimming pool.”

“Maybe she loves swimming.”

“In five years’ time she wants to be in a fucking swimming pool? She could be in one *now*, Ralph. What kind of ambition is that? It’s like saying you want to end up on a toilet.”

“Sadie—”

“And do you know what else? She said her favourite restaurant was Frankie & Benny’s.”

His wife was oblivious to her own snobbery. Ralph blamed this on her parents, a lecturer and a mathematician who discussed current affairs, played the banjo and made home-made pesto, all at the same time. They were brilliant, quick, sarcastic. They lived in France and never visited. No child could ever emerge from their narcissism without hating herself, and Sadie had converted her self-loathing into something more tolerable: snobbery.

Ralph’s mother had been a housewife. His father worked for an upholsterer. It was no worse than Sadie’s background, it was just different, but try telling *her* that.

“Whatever,” he said.



“You sound like Arthur. Is that his hoodie you’re wearing?”

“Of course not. I don’t go around wearing our sons’ clothes. I bought this last year for running, don’t you remember?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you run,” she said, head down, fiddling with her phone.

Ralph went upstairs, leaving a bowl of washing-up water that was supposed to smell of lavender and lemon, but actually smelt like the passageway between Asda and the car park.

Sadie Swoon @SadieLPeterson

Off to MK’s this pm for the works: colour, cut, massage.  
Spirits need lifting!

Kristin Hart @craftyKH

@SadieLPeterson Coffee afterwards at Monkey Business?  
We need to talk

Mark Williams @markwills249

@SadieLPeterson You’re gorgeous as you are  
#IfonlyIwere10yearsolder

Sadie Swoon @SadieLPeterson

@craftyKH Coffee sounds great, meet you at 5pm?

Upstairs, Ralph was confused.

“Well blow me, I’ve forgotten why I came up here,” he said to no one.

*Blow me.* He almost Googled this phrase once, to discover its origins, but decided against it when he imagined the kind of sites that might pop up. He tried not to utter these words, especially when working with female clients, but saying *blow me* was something he had inherited from his father, along

with narrow shoulders and a pert little bottom. Frank Swoon had been famous for his buttocks. Women wolf-whistled as he walked down the street. "Oh you do make me swoon, Mr Swoon. Just look at those little cheeks." It was the kind of comment a man would have been slapped for.

Ralph's confusion ran deeper than trying to recall why he had come upstairs.

In fact, it was chronic.

He was perpetually bewildered. He knew less about his own desires these days than his clients knew about theirs. Compared to him they were models of sanity, able to sit in front of him once a week and articulate their emotions with astounding clarity. Sometimes he wanted to tell them. He wanted to say hey, do you know how *astounding* this is, the way you know what you want? You may have a catalogue of neuroses, you may be anxious and depressed, but *you actually know what you want*.

Sadie had her own theory about his confusion. She was convinced that he hadn't been the same since Easter, when he walked into a giant garden gnome in B&Q. Who puts an enormous gnome right at the end of an aisle? Ralph had complained to the manager, calling it a MAJOR SAFETY ISSUE. When the manager laughed, trying to hide his amusement inside an unconvincing coughing fit, Ralph threatened to call the police. Yes, he was overreacting. Yes, he should have been looking where he was going. But sometimes a gnome is not a gnome: it is a giant symbol of everything that's wrong with your life.

Seconds before he headbutted the gnome, he was pretending to admire a vase of plastic daffodils. Insisting that they buy six bunches, Sadie was tweeting about how authentic they looked, how satisfying it was to have flowers that never died, and why hadn't she thought of this before? Other people, miles away,

were responding to her tweet. She was reading out their comments. Ralph stormed off down the aisle, unable to tolerate the peculiar hoo-ha evoked by the plastic daffodils, and he spotted Julie Parsley. *Julie Parsley?* And *that* was when he collided with the giant garden gnome.

Sadie held up her phone, took a picture of him rubbing his head, sprinted into the customer toilets.

What was Julie doing here in his local B&Q? Hadn't she moved away? He remembered her singing 'Move Over Darling' on stage at the King's Head; remembered her singing Ralph you're so lovely, you really are lovely, to a melody she made up on the spot.

Her hair was short and wavy now, like that French actor—what was her name? Audrey Tautou. Yes, that's the one. Ralph's memory was still intact, despite the bump on his head, but Julie Parsley was nowhere to be seen. Her absence made him furious, even though she had been absent for much longer than the past few minutes. It made him shout. It made him complain about HEALTH and SAFETY and the BLOODY STUPIDITY of making a gnome that was as SOLID as a FUCKING WALL.

Ralph's confusion had nothing to do with that day in B&Q.

It had nothing to do with Julie Parsley, his first love, aged fifteen.

And it had nothing to do with garden gnomes.