

I Saw It But Then It Moved – Rachel Elliott

## **PROLOGUE**

Four parents, a pot-bellied pig, a nymphomaniac grandmother, a dead sculptor: I have lived with them all.

Walk with me, past the seafront and into town. This is a place of strange fervency and heat, where even the smallest of matters are the biggest of matters, fanaticism is ordinary and the most common form of exercise is a wild-goose chase. I want to show you a statue in the market square of a woman who used to live and work here. This is Sophia Berec, a sculptor who uncovered a thousand faces in blocks of stone. Her tenacity and doggedness have infected the town, turning it into a hotbed of grand plans. It is jam-packed, chock-a-block, heaving with big ideas. The religious do more than attend church; they spread the word using miniature state-of-the-art megaphones with supersonic technology, bellowing at disconcerted shoppers. The fishermen do more than catch fish; they talk fish, eat fish, dream of fish and worship fish. The artists lock themselves away and try to capture something that will not be still.

Turn left here and we will come to the house I grew up in. I can still hear the clash and clang of voices inside.

‘Don’t step on my pig!’ shrieked Aunt Judith from the armchair, as she clickety-clacked a sweater into being.

‘Ooooooooh, there’s nothing like the smell of freshly baked cakes,’ sang my mother. ‘There’s no problem that can’t be solved by the right muffin.’

‘I paint the sea to pin it down, to bring it up close to my lips,’ said my father. ‘Notice how it’s always different every time you look? This is the same with all things. Never look at something and believe you’ve seen it. Every single thing you set eyes on is a moving, shifting, living thing. There’s no truth, only gazillions of perspectives, and none of them is truer than any other.’

And there it is with its punch and its clout: that moment when my father invited chaos into the room. He shattered the world with his sentences, breaking it into bold and audacious pieces. A world full of living things, each of them with something to say. How would I hear myself think?

Follow me, past the bakery, the bookshop, and the café in which Chaos sits by the window drinking espresso, bickering with Fate over the nature of things and whose turn it is to pay.

‘Don’t you worry about things like chaos, Alex,’ said my grandmother. ‘Soon you will learn about sex, and then you will think of nothing else.’

‘Really? Nothing else at all?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But how will I know what food to buy?’

‘Sorry?’

‘If I think of nothing but sex, how will I know what to buy when I get to the supermarket?’

‘The supermarket?’

‘Yes. I won’t have made a list. If I’ve been thinking about sex all the time, I won’t have made a shopping list and I won’t know what to eat. How will anything get done? Should I try and think about as much as I can now, so that when the time comes to think about sex I’ll have done all my thinking?’

‘That’s a very interesting question. Now where does your mother keep her sherry?’

If my family were a book we would be *The Combined Dictionary of Mental Disorders and Irritating Habits*. If my family were a company we would be in liquidation.

‘How, pray tell, does one live this way?’ I said to the mirror on my eighteenth birthday (I had just started reading *Sense and Sensibility*). ‘Even my psychotherapist is a mess.’

**Therapist** I’m feeling discombobulated.

**Alex** That’s your most overused word. Did you know that?

**Therapist** I wasn’t aware of that, no.

**Alex** Are you crying?

**Therapist** Of course not.

**Alex** Would you like a tissue?

**Therapist** I’m fine, thank you. This is a big session for us. You’ve been coming to see me on and off for ten years.

**Alex** Mmmn.

**Therapist** So how do you feel about all this?

**Alex** All what?

**Therapist** Going off to university. Saying goodbye.

**Alex** Well, I don't mean to sound insensitive, but I can't wait. I'm going to be taught by James Caine.

**Therapist** A relative of Michael?

**Alex** No. He's an Australian photographer. He teaches the first module. He's done some amazing stuff – all these wonderful photos of old women. I love old women's hands. Don't you? They're beautiful.

**Therapist** I've never really given much thought to them.

**Alex** Haven't you?

**Therapist** No.

**Alex** Mmmn.

**Therapist** It's an emotional time, ending our work together.

*Silence.*

**Therapist** When you first walked in here you were only eight. Feisty little thing, hair everywhere.

**Alex** What do you mean, hair everywhere? You make me sound like a monkey.

**Therapist** Well, you looked like you'd been dragged through a hedge.

**Alex** That's charming. I'm glad you didn't say that back then. Anyway, I probably had been through a hedge.

**Therapist** Sorry?

**Alex** I used to sneak into people's gardens, remember?

**Therapist** Oh yes, I forgot about that. You sold me a photo of your next-door neighbour so you could buy some sweets. It was the only way we could get you to come back.

**Alex** You bought me? Isn't bribing a child illegal?

**Therapist** It's okay, you were cheap.

**Alex** I haven't changed.

**Therapist** How do you feel about us ending today?

**Alex** That was a quick change of subject. I wonder what was going on for you then?

**Therapist** Don't play the therapist with me, my dear.

**Alex** You've taught me too well. Do you get an honorary qualification, if you've been in therapy for over a decade?

*Silence.*

**Alex** I can't keep coming here forever, you know.

**Therapist** I know.

**Alex** It's funny, though.

**Therapist** Is it?

**Alex** A bit.

**Therapist** Why?

**Alex** I was originally sent here because of my photographs. Now I'm going off to art college to train properly. You didn't cure me very well, did you?

**Therapist** Do you think that's why you were brought here? Because of your photographs?

**Alex** Yep.

**Therapist** Yes, you upset your friends and family by taking secret photos of them, but you also told all the other children that nothing really existed, you were so superstitious you couldn't enjoy anything, and you sat and talked to the sea all day instead of going to school.

**Alex** My dad does that all the time. He's never been to a therapist.

**Therapist** (*smiling, but only slightly*) I'll miss you.

**Alex** Will you?

**Therapist** Of course. I've watched you grow up. It's a bit like waving a daughter off, I suppose.

**Alex** Do you think that perhaps you've become over-attached?

**Therapist** No Alex, I don't.

**Alex** Shall I pass you a tissue?

**Therapist** I'm fine. How are you feeling?

**Alex** I'm okay. I will be back, you know. And you always go to the farmer's market on a Saturday, and you walk Rufus on the beach first thing every day – our paths are bound to cross.

**Therapist** Do you feel that you have to take care of me?

**Alex** God, you're such hard work sometimes.

**Therapist** Why do you say that?

**Alex** Because you analyse everything.

**Therapist** Occupational hazard.

**Alex** I thought I'd write to you – let you know how it all goes. I'll send you some photos, for old time's sake.

**Therapist** I think that would be acceptable.

**Alex** You're a cuddly old thing.

*Silence.*

**Alex** Can I say goodbye to Rufus?

**Therapist** He's out in the garden.

**Alex** Oh. Can you call him in?

**Therapist** Does that feel important to you?

**Alex** It really does. That dog has seen me through thick and thin. He's seen me crying, laughing, shouting. He's heard all my secrets over the years. And he's never judged me, bless him.

**Therapist** It must be hard, to say goodbye to something that's done all that.

**Alex** It is. Such a cute little dog.

*They stand up and walk to the door.*

**Alex** I am planning to move back again you know, after college. I can't leave the sea, the galleries, my grandmother. This is home.

**Therapist** Who knows what will happen.

**Alex** Who knows.

**Therapist** Nothing is certain, is it?

**Alex** Nothing at all.

