

# Ring Fingers

by Barry Charman

‘Stop!’

That was the first word I heard from the woman across the world. She was chasing someone. I don’t know if they stopped or not, I didn’t care; I was hiding under the table with my head in my hands. There were other noises and shouts, but I bit my lip and drowned them out. They stopped as suddenly as they started, and I put the entire incident down to stress.

That night I heard her again, as if she were in the room with me, talking to a wayward lover. Her voice rose, then wavered, as if she’d heard something upsetting. I tried blocking her out, and eventually she stopped.

I heard her again, intermittently over the following weeks. Her voice would suddenly be beside me in the car, behind me in the street. At first it felt invasive, and I thought I was losing my mind, but she couldn’t hear me when I yelled at her to leave me alone; she didn’t know I could hear her. Fear gave way to worry; people didn’t suddenly go mad at forty-two did they? I didn’t think so, so worry gave way to anger.

I shouted at her, ignored her until I was livid. I’d always lived alone, on my terms. I didn’t intrude on others and kept myself to myself; if I’d wanted someone in my life I’d have gone and met someone. Anger didn’t do anything, so in the end I got bored. I listened as she talked on the phone to a mother who didn’t seem to have time. I listened as she dropped something at work and had to apologise to a boss who sounded like a total shit.

One night I was watching television, and she was sobbing as if she was right next to me. I felt violated, like I had no privacy, but what could I do? If I told someone about her I’d have been committed. For a month I held myself together, my nerves dancing on a wire.

Then one evening she was confiding in someone, her voice was cracked, whispery. ‘I’m only thirty-two,’ she was saying, clearer than ever. ‘I’m too young for this, right?’ She sighed, like something was being emptied from her voice. I couldn’t help but feel curious. Over the next few weeks I heard her from time to time, her voice sometimes wry, sometimes shaky.

She woke me up one night talking about crooked fingers. I frowned, quickly curling my hands into a fist. Could she see me? What the hell?

Slowly, she continued, talking about some diagnosis, how confused she was, how overwhelmed. I realised what she’d been talking about all this time. I’d gone through the same thing a few years ago. It was the first time I’d noticed something that connected us. Was *that* the reason I could hear her? Was I meant to be sympathetic? I shouted at her to leave me alone. There was a pause, then she resumed talking.

About then I started to tune her out, tried to get on with my life and reduce her to some sort of background hum. It wasn’t like there were any others voices, just hers. I could keep a lid on it.

Eventually the voice’s random interjections and outbursts faded into the back of my mind, like some radio station left on in the next room.

It was only when I was half asleep that I noticed her again.

‘...hurts to walk, can’t use my hands, now they’re telling me to do all these tests. Appointments, different departments, it’s just— Where do I start? What if my hands stop working? John? Are you— Did you hang up? Oh God..?’

It was the disbelief in her voice that struck me. I’d used that tone before, but only to myself.

After I’d been diagnosed, I had to jump through too many hoops. X-rays, blood tests, scans. Therapy, specialists. I’d left the doctor with my head spinning and no one to set it straight. Arthritis got you like that.

‘You just get by.’ I found myself speaking to her, not yelling, not pleading, just talking. ‘It’s a lot to take in, especially with a misdiagnosis.’ I laughed, a little. ‘You can’t walk, but you can’t slow down. Just got to go on, step by step. The meds’ll make you sick, but you get used to them. You have to, of course, but the body always adapts. In the end you pull yourself together.’ To my surprise I found I wanted her to hear me. To share something I found reassuring. ‘Your fingers won’t straighten; they don’t tell you that at first, but it’s okay. Lost my ring fingers at thirty-four, how about that? It’s like your body’s rejecting you, but it’s the only thing holding you up. Each day you don’t turn on it, it won’t turn on you. And you make it. Like that. Day at a time. You know what I mean?’

I listened, but she didn’t speak. She didn’t ever speak again. Suddenly it was over. Her voice was gone. Why? Because some connection had been made, some wavelength fixed?

It wasn’t that I missed her; I just wanted to know if she’d heard, if the words had meant anything. Guess I’d never know. Must have affected me, because I found myself volunteering at a drop-in centre a few days later. I didn’t talk much really, just chimed in here and there. A little at a time. I liked it when it seemed I was helping.

Sometimes when I turned the lights out, I asked if she was feeling better.

Maybe somewhere she could hear me and couldn’t shut me up. I didn’t know how it worked.