



Roar!

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A WOMAN
DOESN'T GET TO USE
HER 20,000 WORDS A DAY?

A SHORT STORY BY
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ROAR!

or 20,000 words a day

She knew she had a problem. Not a small, everyday problem of the kind that others would say, I know what you mean, but an enormous, insidious, dangerous problem that was growing larger by the day.

"Did you know," she said to her daughter, "that women on average use 20,000 words a day, whereas men only need 7,000?"

"Not every thought that pops into your head has to come out of your mouth, Mum," her daughter replied through a mouthful of toast, eyes on her magazine.

"If I spoke all my thoughts aloud, I'd never stop talking," she protested, swallowing back her next words as she caught a withering glance.

"Just think before you speak, Mum. We don't all need to share your every observation."

She knew she wasn't using her daily 20,000 word allowance. She knew because she was constantly biting off the ends of her sentences, or, more often, allowing them to trail into incoherent wisps of sound as they met with indifference.

At first, she merely started storing them up in her head, but they caused the kind of migraines that made her head feel as if it would split in two, like a watermelon. Lying alone in the dark with a cold flannel over her eyes, she listened to the faint sounds of family in the rooms below – the murmur of voices, the drone of the TV, the piercing "ping" of the microwave – and feel as if she were encased in a bubble, alone, unreachable and unwanted.

So she attempted to write her words down, buying thick, A4 pads of paper with the supermarket shop and a bag of scratchy bios. But she couldn't write fast enough to catch them as they marauded through her neural pathways and tumbled out of her mouth, scorching her lips with their urgency. The pens and pads went in the bin.

What did other women do? How did they disgorge their 20,000 words a day?

Meeting with her friends gave her a modicum of relief, albeit temporary. For a few hours on a Monday she could spew the backlog of words that had built up over the preceding weekend, whilst at the same time absorbing the words coming at her from around the table in the coffee shop on the High Street.

Lately, though, she had noticed the girls shooting peculiar glances at her every now and then, and once she had caught a look passing between two of them that convinced her she was going to have control the speed and sheer number of words she was throwing at them. She stopped going for coffee.

That was when she decided she would have to find somewhere to store the words she didn't use. Somewhere safe, and secret. Somewhere where they could lie dormant, or at least swill around harmlessly out of hearing of the rest of the world. So she began to look for a place.

She knew it had to be nearby so she wouldn't have far to run when they needed to spill out of her mouth. It had to be secure, so that her husband or her daughter, or the occasional guest wouldn't come across them accidentally in the middle of the night, or when searching for the downstairs loo.

So she hauled the old trunk down from the attic. It had carried her father's cricket kit and books and adolescent hopes to boarding school, returning with his disappointments and not-quite-good-enough certificates to be left to gather dust in the far recesses of her grandparent's house. It seemed appropriate, somehow, that having lived here all her life she could, at this late stage, make her own mark and create something new.

The trunk was in the way. Her husband complained about it, but she ignored him, stubbornly. All he saw was a musty old trunk. He didn't know it was a receptacle for everything she wanted him to hear. But the trunk, though capacious, was old and the words had a habit of leaking through the moth holes, like light finding a path. She could see them in the night, shifting murmuringly in the darkness, making her hold her breath every time he fidgeted in his sleep, afraid that they would wake him.

During the winter, they flew to Grenada to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary.

"It's a trip of a lifetime," he told her. "Be happy."

That was code for be quiet, she knew. Sometime over the past 30 years, he had stopped responding to the sound of her voice. It was as if it was indistinguishable from the traffic, or the faint hum of the fridge, and just as interesting to him. She had become white noise.

Watching the banana groves slip past as he drove their hired car from airport to hotel, she remembered the boy she met so long ago and felt a little ache reach out and squeeze her heart, oh so gently. He had wanted to listen to her then. Night after night, they had stayed up drinking the undrinkable wine from the local corner shop, setting the world to rights, talking about everything and anything into the pink-toned morning.

When had he stopped wanting to hear what she had to say? Was it when the pregnancy hormones muddled her thoughts and made her so tired? Or when she had nothing to talk about except toddler adventures and day time soaps? She couldn't remember. He was a good husband, a good provider for the family, a gentle man. He had tolerated her for 30 years.

"But I want to be celebrated, not tolerated!" a small, treacherous voice whispered in her ear.

Parched, they stopped in a village so he could buy them some cola. Music, loud and bass-heavy, spilled into the dusty street from the ramshackle store. She sat in the car and gazed around at the multi-storied wooden houses with their open frontages. In one, a corpulent woman of indeterminate age lay across the second storey entrance. Their eyes met. The woman's gaze was languorous, incurious, brief. She felt a pang of longing so strong it made her catch her breath.

I want to drowse in the doorway of a two-roomed wooden shack built on stilts, and grow fat on sunshine as I watch the world walk by, raising a hand lazily in greeting and swatting away the flies.

She started as her husband slumped back in the car, complaining about the heat. Covering her confusion she opened the can he passed her, drowning the words that were fizzing on her lips with chemical bubbles.

The week passed slowly. She would have enjoyed it more if not for the strain of being in his company day and night, rationing her conversation. Each evening, she waited until he was snoring before sneaking out of the bungalow and walking along the beach in the dark, her stored up words murmuring along with the ebb and flow of the gentle tide on the shoreline.

It was a guilty relief to be home. Alone, she vomited her stored up words into the trunk. There were so many she had to sit on it to get it to close. It seemed to tremble in the corner of the room. She glanced dubiously at it as she put on her make up. Was there a rumbling sound coming from the trunk? Surely not – her imagination was working over time. Again.

Zigzagging slowly through the supermarket aisles, she tried to remember if she'd turned off the gas on the hob. Becoming aware that people were glancing at her disapprovingly, she realised she was muttering aloud to herself. A couple moved away from her by the freezer cabinet, so she bit her lip, trapping the sound. The check out assistant looked at her askance as she gathered up her shopping and, running the back of her hand over her mouth, she realised there was blood on her chin.

Walking up the hill towards the house, she became aware gradually of a low, ominous rumbling noise, like a train passing beneath her feet. She frowned, quickening her pace as she realised the sound was growing louder the closer she came to home. The lights were on in the house, a beacon in every room, and she paused at the front gate, trying to remember whether she had switched them off.

The gate vibrated under her hand and she snatched it back, her eyes rising instinctively to the bedroom. The window was closed, but the curtains were moving, as if a breeze was blowing. She watched, mesmerised, as the lights grew brighter, flickering violently as the rumbling grew louder, turning into a roar. Backing away, she knew she should run, call for help, but for once she was struck dumb, her feet rooted on the tarmac.

She saw the trunk explode in the bedroom a fraction of a second before the glass blew out of the windows and showered her with sparkling fragments. A tsunami of sound poured through the window, tens of hundreds of thousands of words released like a waterfall that cascaded around her and flowed down the street.

Whispered words, sobbed words, shouted words and anguished words, they swooped and fell and swirled around her head until she could stand no more.

“Stop! Stop! Oh please, STOP!” she cried aloud, putting her hands over her ears and closing her eyes. But they would not stop. Set free, they were endless, joyous, angry, hysterical, relentless... vengeful.

The roaring in her ears overwhelmed her until, finally, there was a deafening bang – then silence.

Once her physical wounds had healed, they transferred her to a psychiatric facility to be soothed with chemicals and kind words. She liked the way the staff moved calmly about the building, dressed all in white. Her husband must have plundered his private health insurance to keep her in such comfort and respectful care, she speculated. She was not expected to do anything here. They let her wander through the neatly kept gardens, take her medication, gaze through the window at the breeze-ruffled trees.

Her husband and daughter visited regularly, brought her books she never opened, magazines she never flicked through, urged her, over and over, to speak to them.

"Why doesn't she talk?" she heard her daughter ask the care worker, "It's been six months. Surely the shock of the explosion should have worn off by now?"

"Give her time," the girl replied, patting her daughter kindly on the forearm.

She wanted to get up, move across the room, take her daughter in her arms and reassure her that she was happy, that she didn't need to worry, but her limbs were gripped by a lethargy she couldn't shake off, not even for her own child.

"It's just so unlike her." Her daughter bit her lip as she glanced back into the room at her mother, watching her. "She's so quiet, so still."

That week, in therapy, the doctor allowed the silence to hold sway for a good ten minutes. Normally, she gave up, frustrated, but this time she leaned forward and touched her lightly on the knee.

"You must talk," she said gently, "there's no physical reason why you've stopped. No real psychiatric reason, either. Talk to me. I'm here to listen."

The words made her eyes widen. I'm here to listen. Talk to me. She felt a stirring, a faint, but familiar susurrations of words in her head.

"Yes."

The doctor started. It was a whisper, a rusty syllable that cracked over unused vocal chords. The warmth of her breath, moving softly between her lips, caused tears to rush into her eyes and spill silently over her lower lids until they ran like a hot, salty benediction down her face. *I'm here to listen.*

Gradually, haltingly at first, she began to talk. Over the next few weeks, the doctor brought in reinforcements so she had someone new to talk to every day. Once released from silence, her words tumbled, unchecked, from her lips, falling over each other to find expression. She was so overcome with gratitude, so relieved that her words were welcomed.

She gripped onto her husband's arm when he visited, unable to stop the outpouring of joy as she tried to explain. They were welcome here, her words, people listened to her. She was happy, so happy! Why was he looking at her so sadly? Her joy wavered as she realised he still wasn't listening. He would never listen.

They walked together to the bench overlooking the duck pond. They sat, and he turned towards her, taking one of her hands between both of his.

"I've arranged for you to go on living here," he told her, gently. "Hush – just for a moment, ssh! I don't understand what you're saying. You're bombarding me with random words... you're not making any sense. You don't make any sense... no one knows what you're trying to say... do you understand?"

She smiled softly at him and touched her fingertips to his face. He said she could stay here. Here, where there was someone to listen. Here, where there was no use for a trunk of secrets in the corner of the bedroom. And finally, she knew she was where she belonged. She was home.

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She is the Author of:

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