

Black Rainbow

Black Rainbow

*How words healed me: My journey
through depression*

RACHEL KELLY



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Dedication

For Sebastian

Contents

1. Bless the Bed That I Lie On – mid-May 1997	1
2. My Grace Is Sufficient for Thee – mid-May to mid-June 1997	16
3. I've Got to Have Something to Hold on to – mid-June to mid-July 1997	32
4. All Things Are Passing – late June to late July 1997	48
5. Love Bids Me Welcome – end of July 1997	66
6. Folding Up My Map of Desolation – early August to mid-August 1997	83
7. The Pearl of Great Price – mid-August to late August 1997	105
8. That's the Way for Edward, Georgie and Me – August to September 1997	129
9. Kindness in Another's Trouble, Courage in One's Own – September 1997 to May 1999	146
10. Sweet Joy Befall Thee – June 1999 to November 2003	165
11. The Sea Dried Up Like Sandpaper – December 2003 to March 2004	184

12. Cure Me With Quietness – April to August 2004	205
13. Happiness – It Comes On Unexpectedly – July to December 2004	225
14. Balm of Hurt Minds – 2005 to 2006	243
15. I Would Be Sillier Than I Have Been – 2006 to 2007	259
16. Some Definite Service – 2008 to 2009	279
17. Joy Illimited – 2010 to 2012	296
18. Ordinary Human Unhappiness – 2012 to the present day	313
Reflections	317
Afterword: Sebastian’s Story	328
Appendices	333
Exercise	335
Diet	338
Supplements	345
Getting Help	348
Mental Health Charities	353
About the Author	356
Permission Acknowledgements	357
List of Poems and Extracts	358

Chapter One

Bless the Bed That I Lie On

MID-MAY 1997

Sunday, mid-May 1997

One day I fell ill.

It began between six and seven o'clock on a Sunday evening in May, when, as was routine, I started putting our two children to bed.

Our little trio set off up the three flights of stairs to the children's attic bedrooms, the kitchen abandoned as if an army had retreated from battle. On one hip rested three-month-old George, his plump legs slotted around me. With my free arm I held onto two-year-old Edward's hand as we slowly climbed stair by stair, talking of the day we had spent together: how he had fallen over in the park near the ducks and Daddy had given him a ride on his shoulders; how I had dropped a plate – silly Mummy! – while we were having tea but it didn't matter as we didn't want that plate anyway; and could we remember exactly how many fish fingers he had eaten? We could not.

All the busyness of the day slowed as the three of us shared a bath, my wound-up limbs softening in the hot pine-scented water with baby George on my tummy and Edward at my side. After our bath, I lined up the boys on a white towel on the chequered bathroom floor. Then, in our usual

Black Rainbow

post-bathtime ritual, I deposited noisy, messy kisses on each of their rounded tummies before Edward imitated me and kissed his brother.

The last few months had been exhausting but life was getting easier: George was now more or less sleeping through the night. I was beginning to think about my return to being a reporter when my maternity leave ended in three months.

I could hear the clatter of Sebastian tidying up downstairs. So far, so normal, and so lucky.

But by seven my heart was pulsing noticeably. I had a feeling of observing myself as I sat down to breastfeed George. It was as if there were two of me, and my thoughts had been diverted to someone else's head. When Sebastian stepped into the room to offer me a glass of water, I heard someone saying 'Thank you,' only to realise after a few seconds that the someone was me.

By the time the two of us had supper an hour later I was sweating, though the night air that filtered in through the French windows of our little front room was cool. I felt a strange lightness in my body, despite being heavier after having another baby.

I tried to talk about our day and our children, Sebastian's forthcoming week at the office and my return to work. Already I felt as if I had lost a limb during those hours when I wasn't with the children. But I kept having to ask Sebastian to repeat what he was saying.

As he switched off the bedside light at about ten-thirty, Sebastian mumbled that it was my turn if George woke in the night. He had done a run of listening out in case George cried, for the previous four or five nights. 'Fine,' I replied, while registering a tightening of my shoulders. Sebastian rolled over

Bless the Bed That I Lie On

towards me as if he had sensed something was wrong. ‘You’ll be okay with George,’ he said, giving me a hug. ‘You can always rest in the day if it’s a busy night.’

I told myself the odd feelings would pass. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t listened out for George before. I knew how to settle a baby back to sleep, even if I had missed the last few nights and felt strangely out of practice. Of course I knew what to do. For goodness’ sake, he was my second baby.

Soon Sebastian lay deeply asleep, like a dog after a good walk. As the clock ticked, I tossed. And turned. And stirred and turned and tossed. I went to the bathroom, opened the bedroom window more widely, closed the curtains more tightly, rearranged the pillows. A few minutes later I reshuffled the pillows, closed the window, nudged the curtains open and returned to the bathroom.

All the while I had refused to look at my alarm clock. It would be better not to know how long I had been lying awake. But eventually I looked. It was nearly one.

My shoulders tightened another notch and my breathing became shallower. I was sweating heavily. I began to hug a pillow against my chest like a shield in the face of an unknown enemy. We were used to an early-ish bedtime on Sunday nights, no later than eleven. Like everyone, I had occasional insomnia, staying awake for an hour here or there, and getting enough sleep had always been something of a preoccupation with me; but this acute sleeplessness was new. I laid the alarm clock face down on my bedside table.

Two minutes later I decided that I could at least be of some use and check the children. George seemed to be visibly absorbing sleep’s nourishment, the smoothness of his even pink skin only interrupted by the surprising blackness of his

Black Rainbow

thick lashes. I inhaled the sweetness of his breath and could almost hear his pulse. If only I could shrink and snuggle into George's cot and become a baby again myself.

Then I gazed at Edward's curls in the stillness of his room next door. His arms were thrown back behind his head in happy abandon; a smile seemed to play across his mouth and every now and then he twitched as though enjoying a delicious dream. I knelt over him and breathed in deeply, murmuring under my breath the prayer that I would always recite at the children's bedtime. Now I hoped its magic would work on me.

*Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Bless the bed that I lie on.
Four corners to my bed,
Four angels round my head,
One to watch, and one to pray,
Two to bear my soul away.*

My heart was still beating just as wildly when I finished. I almost slammed the door before marching downstairs, fists clenched and eyes pricking with hot tears.

Perhaps, I thought, it was because I was hungry. I went to the kitchen and quickly ate some cereal, then a slice of toast and a banana. My hands were trembling and I managed to cut myself as I sliced the bread. My mother had always advised starch as a cure for insomnia but all that happened was that, back in bed, I felt sick as well as wide awake, as alert as if I were about to sit an exam.

The hours ticked by and my sleeplessness threatened to encompass the whole night, as did my worries. I worried

Bless the Bed That I Lie On

about my nausea, breathlessness and palpitating heart. I worried about how I would manage tomorrow, senseless from lack of sleep: the getting up and getting dressed and making breakfast (had I used up all the milk?), the to-do lists and the play dates, the dry-cleaning and the dishwasher, the buggies and the promises I'd made, my life as mother, wife and daughter.

And, beyond those immediate worries, I worried, too, about my transition back to work. I worried that my ability to be a good mother would be compromised by being divided between the children and work. I worried that my ability to be a decent journalist would be compromised by worrying about the children. I worried about missing the job I loved if I stayed at home. I worried about missing the children if I went back to work. I worried that in my present state, I wouldn't be able to fulfil any role at all.

Such worries had been present for a while but now, lying sleepless and frightened in the middle of the night, they seemed to multiply, overwhelming me like creepers choking a ruined building. I could find no peaceful thought in my head. My mind no longer seemed to be my own. I kept trying to think of soothing subjects, happy memories, splashing with the children in the bath only a few hours earlier. But the worries wrenched me back. The spacey feeling was getting worse, my heart beat faster, all my reactions were horribly speeded up. Perhaps I was having a heart attack.

I retraced my steps, quickly this time, practically leaping upstairs to check the children once more, then swiftly back down all the way to the moonlit kitchen, the floor now slightly sticky beneath my bare feet where I had spilt some milk. I had never noticed the particular feel of the floor before, or,

moments later, the touch of the sheets as I hurriedly got back into bed. Despite my racing heart, I tried to keep very, very still, like a child hiding from a monster.

The clock seemed to tick more and more loudly by my bedside as my hearing became more acute. Every second clicked past as though a gong were being struck. I was aware of each beat of my heart and my body's slightest shift, again with a sense that I was observing someone else. I kept wondering if I was better off lying on my left side. Or my right. If I was too hot. Or too cold. Or was it a case of quieting the ticking by muffling the clock under a pillow? Or the opposite, calmly facing the time again?

Maybe I should try to read. But then I might wake Sebastian by putting the light on. Was there a noise bothering me? I could use earplugs. But then I wouldn't hear George cry, should he wake up. That was my responsibility. At least I could manage that.

I went downstairs again and tried to sleep in the sitting room, fashioning a boat-like bed out of the sofa's red cushions. But the spacey buzzing in my head worsened. No sooner had I settled than I realised I wouldn't be able to hear George two floors up. Then I decamped to the spare bed in Edward's room. At least I wouldn't miss the children crying from here. But I felt even worse. An itinerant in my own house. I returned to our room, still sleepless, still hyper-alert, my heart still racing.

As dawn broke and the first inkling of sunlight began to colour the day, I imagined I could hear George crying. I was sure I had heard him. And if so, at least there had been a point to my vigil. Up I went again – only to find him sleeping like the baby he was.

Bless the Bed That I Lie On

In the end I stayed up all night, as vigilant as a soldier on watch, and just as lonely.

The next day the house was littered with nests where I had tried and failed to sleep.

Monday, mid-May 1997

If I acted normally, I reasoned, I would feel normal. So I told Sebastian only that I'd had a bit of a bad night. We exchanged our usual brief morning chit-chat as he rushed to get to work. Live to fight another day – it was one motto on which I had been raised as a child. We talked of our respective days ahead, my electric toothbrush whirring. He had documents to prepare for his job at Goldman Sachs, where he worked long hours and travelled a huge amount. I planned my usual trip to the park with the children. Act normal, I kept saying to myself. Refasten activity to its rightful hour: breakfast at breakfast-time; lunch at lunchtime; and sup at supper-time. Then you will sleep at bedtime.

So I washed and dressed in my favourite white cotton shirt for luck. Then I breathed deeply and went to get the children up.

Normal meant being up in the day and going to bed at night. It meant spooning porridge into Edward and strapping George into his pram for our morning outing to the park; it meant unmatched socks and scraped knees, the hiss of the kettle and the faded pinks and reds of the chequered tablecloth. It meant deadheading flowers in the front garden and watering pots of geraniums on the terrace of our tall, wisteria-clad house in west London. (The terrace doubled as a sandpit full of small diggers for Edward.)

Normal meant trying to rest after lunch while the children napped and making sure the prawns had defrosted for the fish pie in time for Sebastian's return. It meant calls to make, *Thomas the Tank Engine* to read, dry-cleaning to collect, friends to see, articles to read and pyjamas to sort. It meant snatching a look at the papers while breastfeeding George and then hunting for Edward's duck in the bubbly bath when all three of us got into the tub.

It meant swapping notes with Sebastian about our respective days and appreciating the blast he brought back from the outside world. That night he came home with my favourite apricot tart from the late-night Spanish patisserie nearby.

All this I did. But inside I felt no different. Physically I remained as helpless as if a spell had been cast on me by a wicked witch in a fairy tale. As I queued at the dry-cleaners I had tried to ignore the fact that the spacey lightness of being hadn't gone away. Now it felt as though my head had been scissored from my body and had a life of its own. There was a further tightening of the stomach and an alarming twitchiness in my arms and legs.

I had had short nights before; I knew that headachey feeling the next day. This was different, as if the symptoms had been forced into me with hostile intent. I felt as if I were a delicate glass bottle over-filled with a livid liquid that threatened to explode. I was bursting with an active sense of dread that disaster was about to strike. The car was about to crash, the boat to sink. Something terrible was going to happen and I couldn't do anything to stop it.

That evening, when Sebastian and I sat down to supper, I had to explain away hardly touching the food. After we'd eaten he went up to check on the children and I tidied up. The

Bless the Bed That I Lie On

tablecloth was just as chequered and the radio was still tuned to Radio 4 and the door creaked just as it always had. But everything now seemed different and bewildering, as if I were at a fairground where all the shapes were distorted.

I sat down carefully and stayed very still, trying to remember what people did in emergencies. They drank hot sweet tea and flasks of soup. I was in such a rush to heat the tin of tomato soup I found at the back of the cupboard that I only half warmed it through and forgot to stir as I did so. I thought how odd it was that the soup could be streaked with hot and cold at the same time. I just managed to get to the downstairs bathroom in time but there was no disguising the smell of vomit afterwards.

I could not have imagined that by the end of the week I would have lost almost a stone and that I wouldn't even be pleased.

The next few days were blurred. I wish I could impose more chronological order on events but I know one thing was consistent: I had this terrifying sensation that I was continuously falling, hurtling downwards as if on a crashing plane. I had once been on a plane that landed under emergency conditions in Dubai. The feeling was similar: I was braced, rigid with fear, waiting for the crash. This time the landing didn't happen.

I no longer pretended I was fine to Sebastian, who hadn't believed me anyway. He now gave the children their bath, made supper and listened out for George at night. Any petty bickering about whose turn it was to load the dishwasher evaporated as we united against the common foe of whatever it was that was taking me over.

Meanwhile, our nanny Julie looked after the children in the day. Our two pressured careers with long hours based far from home had given us little option but to hire a nanny when I returned to work a few months after Edward was born. Being based in Wapping and working in a newsroom meant I often didn't return till seven and none of the nurseries I investigated were willing to cover such hours. Julie allowed me to return to the career I loved. She was a disciplined, trained professional who loved children and produced perfectly arranged plates of orderly food for them, little mounds of mashed potatoes and neatly aligned fish fingers. Even the peas seemed to line up in a tidy fashion for her. She had continued to work for us through this period of my second maternity leave. The house felt a little crowded with both of us at home, but we knew the arrangement was temporary.

Now, thanks to Julie, the household ran smoothly and the children were scrubbed and fed. I had nothing to worry about in the day, nor any person for whom I should wake at night.

I hardly noticed what was going on. Every ounce of my being was devoted to my own survival. I still felt as though I were falling. Naturally I kept trying to stop myself by holding onto something, ideally Sebastian. His arms were a livid red from my grip. My need to hold tightly on to him meant we mostly retreated from family life to our room, for fear of alarming others in the house. I cried much of the time, begging to be better and for what felt like madness to stop.

I longed to be pottering in the garden, with the sun on my face and my hands muddy from wet earth. I wished to be upstairs tucking the children into bed under their Bob the Builder duvets. Or in the kitchen making banana muffins with Edward. But my world had shrunk to one room. The strangeness of it was terrifying.

Bless the Bed That I Lie On

The only time I was quiet was when others came near. I hid under the covers if I heard Julie coming up the stairs. I felt I had to appear normal in front of her, be the competent mother who could get back to work with no problems; that was the deal that underpinned the household and our jobs. The pretence exhausted me further. I also hid if I heard the children, as I didn't want to frighten them, Edward in particular.

Sebastian stayed by my side as much as he was able while still caring for the children and going to work. He remained calm, seemingly taking in his stride my sudden strange behaviour, and helping in practical ways. While I didn't move from our room, he at least made sorties down to the kitchen to bring me trays of food. The apricot tart he tried to tempt me with lay untouched. Given that I now began to protest loudly if he left me alone, even if he went to the bathroom or nipped downstairs, he asked my mother to come and help. If neither Sebastian nor my mother were there, I held on tightly to the edge of the bed.

While the boys slept without a murmur, my insomnia continued as the week wore on. I might catch an hour or so in the night, but not enough to enable me to get up in the day. Bone-tired, I lay outwardly still, worn out by the effort of clinging on; inside, my body was furiously busy. I had a permanent headache, as though dozens of vicious, heat-maddened wasps were massed behind my eye sockets, stinging my soft, unprotected brain. My rancid stomach fiercely knotted and reknotted itself, spinning in a sharp-pointed pirouette. I no longer even seemed to be able to throw up. I kept repeating that I was going to crash.

The only faint relief came from lying underwater in a near-scalding bath emptied of plastic ducks and patterned flannels.

My head and stomach were soothed by the friendly warmth and only my mouth and nose were not submerged, like an otter. Sometimes I would almost fall asleep, only to be jolted back to consciousness by the slowly cooling water. I momentarily wondered if my symptoms had gone, only to realise they hadn't. I sat in the bath crying.

Very soon there was no difference between night and day. In the space of just a few days, my life had completely unravelled. A trapdoor had opened beneath me. I no longer struggled to get up. I stopped getting dressed. I couldn't think of a single thing I could do to get the crashing sensation to go away.

I worried I would never be well. I worried about Edward and George being left largely in Julie's care. I had long worried about tiptoeing out of the door every morning to go to work and only getting back at seven. Now I feared I might never be able to look after them at all, nor return to work. And I dared not confess any of this to Julie. Or to anyone. Saying it aloud might make it more true.

As the week progressed and it became clear that I was bedridden and always at home, Julie started taking the children out early to the park and staying out of the house as much as she could, naturally drawn to cheerier environments. Life was bleaker still with the house emptied of their jolly chatter. As a nanny used to being in sole charge, she didn't welcome having a mother and now a granny at home, too. I couldn't help feeling threatened. At least she couldn't replace my role of feeding George, which forced her back to base and a baby into my arms. This was my one moment when I rallied slightly and felt I was still a mother, my other faint relief from the crashing. But even this happiness was under threat. Given

Bless the Bed That I Lie On

how little I was eating, it was hardly surprising that my milk was drying up. My appetite had not returned. My mouth was permanently dry.

And my worries continued to multiply, endlessly spinning round my head: that I would never recover, that I would never again care for the children or Sebastian, that I would never get back to work, that I couldn't fathom what was happening to me. What was this illness? Cancer? An impending heart attack? A brain tumour? Was something causing the sleeplessness, or was the sleeplessness causing everything else?

Answers came there none. The cloud of insects became ever blacker. My head was now bursting with the swarm within. A few black thoughts had been replaced with a lowering darkness of thousands of wasps devouring the insides of my skull, swarming relentlessly and stinging me with furious, hate-filled abandon. There was nothing I could do to stop the violence of their assault.

It seemed I would never sleep again, for all that I was permanently in bed.

Wednesday, mid-May 1997

From feeling normal to being bedridden had taken around three days and three nights. Each second of each minute of each hour of each day had been lived at such a pitch of intensity that to me it felt like an age.

On Wednesday my mother and Sebastian hatched a plan: maybe it would help if I went to my parents' house, just a few streets away. My mother scooped me into her arms in my dressing gown, drove me back and put me to rest in my rose-wallpapered childhood bedroom while she watched over me.

She brought up the supper I had most appreciated as a child when I was unwell: roast chicken and mashed potatoes. She sat down with me to eat on the edge of the bed, hoping her company and a properly laid tray with a linen napkin and a small bunch of flowers would defeat my nausea. But what had once been soothing in its familiarity was now as bewildering as my own beloved kitchen. I retched when I tasted the chicken; maggoty insects seemed to be crawling out of the rosebuds on the walls and the flowers on the tray. I caught a glimpse of red eyes as my mother walked towards the door with the barely touched food.

We returned to my house on Thursday morning. There was hushed whispering outside the bedroom door as my husband and my mother tried to decide what to do. My mother argued that they should turn to her doctor, who had known me as a child and might come to the house. Persuaded by the desperation in my mother's voice that this was an emergency, he agreed.

In his mid-sixties with pepper-and-salt hair and a face creviced from a life of caring for others, Dr Ross exuded certainty and competence. He had been our family doctor when we were growing up, though I had ceased to see him as an adult. However distressed we were as children entering his surgery, he would always wash his hands first with a lavender-scented soap, which suffused the room. Whatever was wrong, the slow deliberation of this ritual would mean we had quietened by the time he turned to us.

He kept up his imperturbable demeanour when he came upstairs and found me moaning in bed more than twenty years later. My mother's face was pale. Dr Ross had known her for forty years but he later confided that he had rarely

Bless the Bed That I Lie On

seen her so stricken. He put his arm around her, reminding her that I had always been an anxious child. She steadied herself, thanking him for coming while expertly wheeling a curious Edward out of the door and telling him, 'No, darling, that's Dr Ross's briefcase.'

I was adamant that I didn't want to see any doctor. Doctors meant pills. Pills meant I might not be able to feed George. That was my only meaningful action, the delivery of the liquid gold I could still manufacture, just. So all the niceties that had governed my childhood relationship with Dr Ross dissolved. When he arrived, I asked him to leave. Even saying it was an effort, but as he approached the bed I surprised myself with the strength of my voice. I begged those who should have been my most loyal supporters: 'PLEASE tell him to leave. Take him away!'

My mother tried to calm me as I thrashed in an effort to escape him but I was encircled by the three of them, blocking the light from the windows and holding me still. Then I was shocked at the sudden ache of an injection in my arm. The jab of some mysterious sedative washed through me like a warm bath. I felt my eyelids close with the firmness of a door slamming shut. The much-longed-for sleep came quickly and easily. I was finally gone.