



# *The Monologue Project: Sisterhood Speaks*

March 4th, 2020

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\*A note to our readers: all stories above were submitted to **The Monologue Project: Sisterhood Speaks** call for submissions. The first six stories were selected to be read at a public event at the Newton Free Library on Wednesday, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020. **Sisterhood Speaks** is an intergenerational and intersectional creative writing project co-sponsored by the Newton Free Library and the City's Youth Services Department.

## **The Accidental Feminist – Clara Silverstein**

My mother became a single parent one morning when my father went to work, called to say he was having chest pains, and died on the way to the hospital. I was 7; my sister was 10.

After the funeral, my mother tightened her shoulders and trudged forward. We moved to her hometown, Richmond, Virginia, where she hadn't lived in more than 20 years. Its familiarity, and my also-widowed grandmother, comforted her.

It was 1968, five years after Betty Freidan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which my mother read before my father died. "I'm not oppressed," she had said. When she met my father, she was finishing a graduate program in education. After they were married, she taught preschool, and continued to work after my sister and I were born. My dad, a lawyer who specialized in legal aid, was ahead of his time, too, in encouraging my mom to study in a Great Books program and to learn how to play the guitar. He took my sister and me outside to watch the stars through a telescope, or to the natural history museum to see dinosaur skeletons.

Without intending to, my mother turned into a feminist pioneer. She became the sole breadwinner, stretching her teacher's salary to cover our needs. When she bought a car, she applied for credit in her own name. She mowed the grass and raked the leaves, recruiting us to help her after school. Some couples snubbed her at their parties because she was single. She made new friends with people who did not. "I don't want to sit home and feel sorry for myself," she said.

Growing up, I ached for my father's gentle care. He had often walked me to school. I had to learn to make myself breakfast, watching the clock to see when it was time to leave. My mother simply couldn't be there. It was up to me to bike to activities and schedule my own haircuts and other appointments. She made her presence known when it counted, successfully challenging a school librarian who restricted a shelf of books to older students. "Let children read whatever book interests them. If it's too hard, they'll put it back," she said.

Only when I went to college did I realize most of my peers had grown up with stay-at-home moms who put their husbands first. My fellow female students railed against the male hegemony. I already knew how to forge ahead without a man, following the example that my mother set.

When I finally did find the man I would marry, it felt like a positive choice, not a societal expectation. My mother -- who never remarried because she thought she could never find anyone equal to my dad -- walked me down the aisle. She deserved that honor. Instead of giving me away, she was guiding me into my new life, one that she had prepared me well to begin.

## Letters to Mom – Rachel Alpert Wisnia

“Mom, when will the day come that I meet my handsome prince charming at sunset?

When will he slip a ring onto my finger, crowning his new princess?

Pain sparks where my prince charming hit me, Mom.

He hits me because he likes me, you say.

How do I achieve the seeming impossible and contract his eye?

Will my chest’s plateaus ever blossom into the breath-taking mountains he craves?

Mom, why does his focus now drift down from my face,

Drift from my essence and individuality?

Why, like a rat to a trap’s lure, are my curves his gravest enemy, yet also his greatest desire,

Why is bulk craved on my chest but forbidden from my gut?

Mom, when will my bedroom evolve from an ocean of dirty makeup wipes,

A constant reminder of the polished doll he needs me to be?

When will my mirror seal its lips from shooting the bullets that rip through my esteem like a dove pierces the wind?

From peeling away the careless girl that used to stand before me,

morphing the Juliet that dreamed of a compassionate Romeo into a molded Barbie whose only option is to meet her master’s requirements?”

## Dancing Through Time – Rachel Silber Devlin

One thing I have long prided myself on is my ability to dance, to learn dance moves just by watching someone else do them. Early years of ballet taught me to believe in the innate connection between mind and body. And yet, over time I have lost touch with it. How often do I even have the opportunity to dance?

I recently felt the desire to reconnect with that earlier, younger self when I was scanning the schedule of exercise groups at the Newton Y. I noticed Zumba and decided to give it a try. But as the hour approached, I became nervous, and almost talked myself out of it. A sudden rainstorm fortuitously commenced, giving me the excuse I was looking for, but I pulled myself together and gave myself a stern talking to in order to get out of the house.

The loud, insistent Zumba music was playing as I entered the dance studio. A few young women were clustered near the front, talking and laughing animatedly, obviously regular members of the class. I made my way to the back of the room where I unobtrusively stationed myself next to a wide windowsill on which I stashed my bag.

I was rather startled by the image of the older woman facing me on the mirrored wall behind the instructor. Is that really me? Do I really look like that? I rarely see a full-length image of myself that isn't up close. I looked at myself curiously. I seemed to stand out, a figure all in black—black t-shirt, black yoga pants, black sneakers—unlike the young women all around me, attired in bright, multi-colored outfits.

No time to dwell on it as the class began. A bit hard to keep up, but I made the steps, first to the right, then to the left, then forward and then back. I couldn't quite get the swinging hips and writhing stomach. That would have to come later. I was feeling a bit complacent until the instructor called out, "Good warm up, Ladies!"

At that point, the music went into high gear and I found myself going the wrong way, totally confused, trying to do what the women in front of me were doing, but often starting out on the wrong foot, confused by the mirror image, and having to readjust.

I had a scare when I got my feet tangled and actually tripped, luckily catching the windowsill rather than hitting the floor. From then on, I modified my efforts. Moving but not trying to do every step. One good thing, concentrating on the moves kept me from obsessing over my reflection!

So much of the joy of life can be lost over time if we don't seek it out. It was thrilling to move, to dance. I was reclaiming my earlier self. Who knows where this journey will take me next?

## **The Girl Next Door – Carole Noveck**

I grew up in a two-family house in Newark, NJ with a typical, for the time, extended family. It was female centric household- my mother, grandmother, two aunts and me with our one male, my Yiddish speaking great-grandfather Poppy. It was the end of World War II, and my father was still traveling with the US Merchant Marines.

My baby sister appeared one day while I stayed home with Poppy. We continued our daily routine of walking to the supermarket, then cooking and eating the delicious smelling traditional food. The library was a favorite destination. It was my special job to climb up the steps to the third floor at 4:00 to bring Poppy his "schnapps". I was intrigued with the baby and assumed that life would go on, until my beloved Poppy passed away. WWII ended and my father returned to our family and his job.

On one of our daily walks I noticed a girl next door, who appeared to be about my age, we smiled at each other, and began our friendship, as five-year-olds do, giggling, skipping together, going to the park. When we started school, RayAnne and I walked with one of our parents or my aunts. Soon we asked to visit one another in our apartments and would often come home from school to one house or the other, continuing to giggle, sing, tell secrets, and laugh together.

My sister grew up to become my friend. My aunts moved on with their lives. Going to school, playing my violin and interacting with RayAnn and other friends filled my time. But, as young as I was, I became aware of a tension, an undercurrent, in our neighborhood. Something was different. Our Sunday routine of meeting up with cousins continued but subtle changes developed as more and more families planned to leave the Newark community for the suburbs.

Every week, I took a bus downtown where I received my religious education. We always stopped at a candy store right at the bus stop to get our goodies before we began our study. The candy store suddenly changed owners and became the headquarters of a different religious group. Each week I noticed that more and more of my friends were leaving the area.

And then, my mother said that we were moving also-- to a new safer community. Since I felt comfortable in Newark, I was confused and anxious about leaving. I asked my mother if RayAnne was moving also. She avoided giving me a direct response.

I loved my new single-family house. School was much further away, but I could walk with my new friends or ride my bike. I often asked my mother if I could invite my good friend to visit, but she put me off each time.

Mom warned me to be extra polite to our new neighbors. She told me that we had left our old house in Newark because the community was changing. Suddenly, I had a shocking awareness that although RayAnne and I were friends and we felt welcome in one another's home, there was a major difference between us.

Bringing my friend to our new home would not be comfortable, Mom warned, because RayAnne represented what we all were trying to escape. Realtors in Newark had tried to frighten residents about the influx of new "undesirable" groups. Families who could afford it moved to the suburbs in a phenomenon dubbed White Flight.

As Jews, we had to act as invisible as possible to assimilate into our new community. Having my African American friend visit might be too challenging for our new world. I was told to say good-bye to my old friend. Now, even after all these years, I think of RayAnne and regret that I didn't fight harder for our friendship.

## Locker Room Steam – Cheryl Ebenstein

The hot tub is the ideal place to schmooze about our latest love or failed relationship, a postponed adoption, a child's struggle in school. And, there is always a lot to celebrate: Jan's latest fashion designs, Deborah's dance performance, Miriam's current play. We attend all we can to cheer each other on.

We swim, we shower, we steam and soak together carrying on some of the freeing activity of the 60's into the 80's and decades beyond. When a female lifeguard is on duty, we swim nude. It is our greatest joy!

We are the women of the West End House, the oldest Boys and Girls Club of America, right here is Boston. We women swim from six to ten in the morning. Some of us swim every day, but even more infrequent swimmers are welcomed to our intimate community.

One day I walk in looking a bit down. Joyce immediately asks what's wrong. In tears I say, "my mother is ill and failing". Joyce responds, "Let things unfold as they will. You don't have to wish for anything".

It is hard to hide anything in the group shower. When our youngest member appears rounder than usual, Karin asks, "are you pregnant?" Distressed and relieved, Susan is tearful.

"Don't worry", Martha consoles, "we will all be your helpful aunties!"

Anne was orphaned in England and met her husband at the end of WWII. "I moved here," she exclaims in her charming accent, "not knowing anyone, including my husband." When her son and his wife who have four children decided to adopt one more, Anne was worried and upset. "What is he thinking?" From my point of view," I offer, "You could have been that child without parents. This is a tribute to you".

Our oldest member, Jennie at 85, arrives each morning asking, "do we need suits?" When Nathaniel is the lifeguard, she rebels by wearing her loosely crocheted green two piece. Because Nathaniel is embarrassed, I tell Jenny, "you need a new suit!" and give her one of my extras.

Helen, our next oldest, is dubbed Queen of the West End. She is warm and loving, treating everyone as most special. In her mid-sixties, she tells us, "I finally stood up to my mother". I tell many clients about her coup: it is never too late!

Each morning we find Helen's bagel defrosting in the sauna. For her 70th, we have a poolside surprise party with a giant bagel baked by Kupel's. Years later, Helen experienced dementia. We guided her through her locker room activities, making sure she brought shampoo to the shower, not skin cream. We loved her until the end.

It is twenty years later now. We have lost Jenny, Anne and Helen.

Many of us have dispersed to various pools as the West End House closed its doors to adults. Still, our beloved community is etched in every stroke, for we are the women of the West End House.



## Freckle Sugar – Rose Giroux

My 8th summer toasted the skin cinnamon  
And sprinkled brown sugar across my cheeks  
For the first time

My mother's 9th summer gave her a sunburn  
And etched soy sauce dots on to her skin  
For the first time

I wore my freckle sugar  
like a pearl necklace those months,  
Scraps of midsummer in an oyster shell

She wore the marks  
Underneath a broad-brimmed sun hat  
Her father told her to wear

My freckle sugar collected in clumps,  
Sediments soaked brown in sea water,  
Stars in the night sky

The marks smeared  
Their way across her face,  
Carving out chasms in their wake

Then fall fell,  
School began with the usual ceremony  
My freckle sugar remained perched on my cheeks

Underneath a well-paid doctor's laser,  
Between beauty marks and bamboo curtains,  
'You should burn them off,' her mother said

On sunny sidewalks  
Outside while jumping rope and being pretty  
'I wish I had your freckles,' my friend would sigh

They never tasted sweet to her  
They reminded her of dirt under the fingernails,  
Grains of rock salt carved into her features

She was crying again  
Soft blue Sunday bathrobe  
Damp with tears that tasted of tetanus

Digging into her peachy-tan skin  
Leaving divots and dents  
Tarnishing into brown nothingness

My agong was the only person  
She skyped on weekend mornings  
She would never be enough

Puckered lips and pale faces  
Flew by from the inside of a Beijing taxicab  
Brown sugar was not a nice color

I flung my skinny arms around her soft neck  
And turned the brown nothingness into pearls  
Pearls that still shone on September mornings

For just a second  
It was summer again, and  
Us and our freckle sugar were pretty.

## **My Name – Elgie Ginsburgh**

My name is unique. I made it up, then went to court to get it. I was named Ethel Louise Ginsburgh and disliked it. Mother addressed me as "Ethel-Louise-dear (please set the table)"; my father as "Lollipop", which surprised my dates as we exited my home. Dad would say "Have a good time, Lollipop", and outside, my date would murmur "Lollipop?"

And I was NEVER the sweet type.

I tried nicknames starting with 'e' and my older brother decided just to scream 'eeee' when he wanted me. At 12, a friend of Mom made me a sterling bracelet with 'ELG' cut into it. I wore it always, asking everyone to call me 'Elgie'. This finally worked in college, where many used nicknames, my roommate Doris Ruth used 'Dotsie', and all new dates called me Elgie

When David Levin and I married, our wedding included many relatives, but his cousin Gerry could not get leave from the Air Force. However, he was in Washington DC, our honeymoon choice, David called from the hotel there, "Hey Gerry. Elgie and I are here. Can we arrange lunch?" I could hear Gerry say "Thank goodness! I knew you were dating Elgie, but the wedding invitation was for a different girl!"

Back at home in Boston, David suggested that I change my name legally. Suffolk County Court gave the forms and instructions: I was to have criminal records checked, but no trouble there. I was to have my request printed in a daily Suffolk paper of 10,000 circulation, in case anyone objected. The Morning Transcript would do -cost \$10. Oh, one more thing: a form to take home for my husband to sign, giving me permission TO CHANGE THE NAME MY PARENTS GAVE ME! It was 1955 and I was 26.

So, I took THE FORM home, served David a nice supper, then gave him the form and a pen. "Well, you know", said he, "You could use any name you want, anyhow". I responded sweetly, "When I bring your coffee, how do you know If I put arsenic in it instead of sugar?" "Gimme that" said he and signed.

Since then, I have made two legal name changes, but that is another story.

## **My Name is Julie – Julie Ginsberg**

I was named after my mother's dog.

My parents met on a boat to Bermuda. Each was traveling with friends. My father was from Boston, my mother was from Dundalk, Maryland, and after spending fifteen days together, five of them on the boat, they got married. The only almost deal breaker was that my mother came with a yappie little dog name Julie. No way was my mother going to be parted from that dog. Ten months later I was born – a pudgy, not very smiley baby.

My father had no say in my name. Julie was my mother's favorite name – my name was Julie. Now, Julie the dog was not impressed with pudgy, not very smiley Julie. Apparently, neither was my mother. When I was one my mother wrote in my baby book, "You are now one year old. Why don't you ever do anything?" I guess I didn't react much when dog Julie was not too nice to baby Julie.

Anyway, after a while life became complicated. No-one ever knew who was supposed to come when my mother called for Julie, but whoever it was, was supposed to come very quickly. Finally, my father put his foot down insisting that only one of us could have the name Julie, and that pudgy, not very smiley Julie should win. My mother gave in. Julie the dog was re-named Blenda, (a blend of many breeds).

Blenda and I never became friends, and my mother never forgave me for forcing her to give up her favorite name for her dog. She and I continued to have issues although, I finally emerged as not so pudgy, and pretty smiley. But always I have known that I carried with me the name that my mother loved unconditionally.

## **Relations with a Cellular Phone: Three Stages – Maryanne Ozernoy**

### **Stage One: An Elation**

My first cell phone is ringing in a car's cup holder on a West Virginia's Highway. OMG! I can't believe it! I could hear my husband's voice right in my ear while driving. I look in complete awe at tall trees around the empty highway. I am in the middle of nowhere. I am in a car, and I could talk on a phone! We both can't believe it's real. That was at the beginning of President Clinton's era, in the middle 90s. Soon cell phone helps me to kill time on my long trips. And I just love it. Wouldn't you? And that was practically a Bronze age of cellphones before the smartphone's revolution.

### **Stage Two: From Irritation to Hatred.**

Almost everyone has a smartphone nowadays, mostly iPhones or Samsungs. I don't feel cool to own it. Even if the iPhone recognizes my face, I paid an infuriating price to have it. I am downright irritated when some moviegoers mute their cellphones instead of switching them off entirely. They even don't bother to lower the brightness of their cell screens! The cell screen beams right into my eyeglasses. It distracts me. I wonder if the movie is really so boring that they browse their phones instead? The stoplights are the next irritant. Two geeks in front of my car are so absorbed texting that they don't notice that stoplight had turned green. GREENEEN!!! They reluctantly wake up from their profound phones' addiction. By that time, a red light is on again. And all the cars wait and wait. I hate that too, wouldn't you?

### **Stage Three: Closure**

People nowadays stopped calling cell phones in public places unless they are aged foreigners. Now a desirable mode is to text messages. My grandchildren never ever use any phone to call me or anyone else. They were born with "Messages" on iPhones instead of a pacifier. They use these soothies into adulthood. Don't you see the benefits of texting instead of talking? I have checked the weather and fed my dog while I was waiting for my daughter to answer my text. I know she is writing because the Messages app has a little cloud on which you could see blinking dots. Isn't that convenient? And didn't you figure out by now that I am back in awe of my phone? My grandchildren totally are good and quiet during family dinners, birthday parties, and alike. They are seen but not heard. They don't talk back. My friends say that my grandchildren are super polite and well behaved. I proudly beam. Never mind that they lost in their iPhones. They communicate, but they don't communicate with me. And at this thought, I panic. What if we all spend the rest of our lives in silent solitude? I call my daughter immediately and leave the message: "Please, sweetheart, call me back. Don't text. I need to hear your voice."

## Spiritual Practices – Suzanne Buchko

A few years ago I joined a Facebook declutter group that doesn't get much traffic these days, but every so often someone pitifully asks for help with a big, impossible pile of junk in an attic or basement or on a dining room table that is never used for meals. And the answer is always: grab a garbage bag. Fill it. Take it out of your house. Don't look at the stuff that needs boxing or selling or putting away. Just do one garbage bag today.

One garbage bag is a spiritual practice. When it was time to reclaim my Madison house as mine and the basement was full of boxes, some that were moved twice without opening, and it all seemed impossible to sort and decide what to do with what, I was the pitiful one. In desperation, I made the rule of three. I promised that every day I would go downstairs and get three things out of the house. Anything that could be put in the garbage or driven to St. Vinnie's qualified. Everything easy qualified.

The corollary to my rule of three was that if a box could be sorted into an identifiable pile, it counted. So, the box with two textbooks and miscellaneous papers counted as a box disposed of if the books went into a book pile, papers went into a paper pile and the box collapsed and put into recycling. When a box overwhelmed me, I put it aside. I worked around the edges of piles. I searched for the easy. Boxes created in the haste of moving or after a DIY project. I put garbage bags full of clothes and linens, toys and kitchen stuff into the trunk of my car and did not worry when they would make it to St. Vinnie's. Later, I had garage sales and offered stuff to friends.

Best giving away story: As I was carrying an eleven-year-old, slightly bent tv monitor out to the curb in hopes that someone might take it, a couple walked by and asked if it worked. It did and it was gone. But that was almost at the bottom of my pile of tasks. After just one week of my rule of three, 21 boxes had left the house and I saw change. I needed the physical change to believe in the change. And even though part of me held onto the belief that the 'better person' would have dug straight into the boxes chock full of deeply sentimental unnecessarys, the imperfect me took on the tiny tasks first.

And then, one day, I dug into the deeply sentimental unnecessarys. Today, the 'boxes' are the lists of tasks awaiting me: finding therapists, a route to school, a brighter light bulb and new friends for me. Plotting Julia's future trajectory, editing the novel and hanging my big pictures on horsehair plaster walls.

And the only practice that makes sense at four in the morning when eyes pop open with three more things to add to the list is to work around the edges and the rule of three. And I am sure this is a spiritual practice because, I have to keep learning it over and over.

## Re-Making Christmas – Suzanne Buchko

A reminder pops up on my laptop from Calendar: Christmas Eve. Obviously, Apple's Calendar is not able to look around this house. Yet. I'm grateful. Facebook reminds me of past Christmas Eve postings. Pictures—New York City with my girls, Julia in full Hogwarts regalia at the Wizarding World during Christmas with the Mahoney's, trees and stockings and kind Santas who patiently listened to Julia's rambling wish lists.

One post from December 24, 2010, catches my eyes: Julia and I are bedded down in Brooklyn. We are remaking Christmas. In a few years it will be ours again. Peace and love to all. Hug your partners and parents and friends and kids while they are close. The post garnered loving wishes, cyber hugs and acknowledgements of David's death.

Seven years later, my heart still responds to the comments. Thank you: Lori, Sherri, Jennifer, Jana, Karen, Jen and Scott. Thanks to those who liked or loved. And although I complain often, Yay! Facebook.

This year, we have indeed re-made our holiday—lighting the menorah, making latkes for friends, putting up Christmas early for Julia, playing Christmas music right after Thanksgiving, baking cookies, stringing up far more lights than I did last year, and planning a quiet Christmas day. We, I mean I, have lost many expectations for winter holidays. Next year, it may be different. It will be different.

Little was ever traditional in our house, but it is amazing how I wedded I was to a decorated tree, home for presents, special breakfasts, big dinners and lots of cheer. Like the Grinch, I've come to see "It came without ribbons. . . without packages, boxes or bags." This 'it', this holiday time, is only time, and it comes naked, unadorned, and unencumbered. I've learned there are no ribbons or bags, or loved ones without whom a holiday will not happen.

There is only the possibility of an open heart, a heart that needs refilling and renewing during this time, a heart that needs to burrow safely in the darkness and open to the light. And with each trip around the sun, the needs and wants and growing places are different, even if only subtly so.

The white sparkling dinosaurs we made the year (I could not look at Christmas decorations) live in the same box with my grandmother's 5 & 10 cent store glass balls. The new to us Chanukah snow man with a menorah on his head which gives me such a chuckle, this year will do the same.

I am grateful for the learning even when I was a reluctant student.

I have arrived here, today. Christmas Eve. Julia is happy that it is snowing. I am happy to sit in front of a fire. Meals for tomorrow are planned. I chose breakfast, Julia the dinner. And so, to paraphrase: Julia and I are bedded down in Madison. We have remade Christmas. Now and again, it is ours. Peace and love to all. Hug your partners and parents and friends and kids while they are close. Happy Christmas Eve!