



Photo: T. Paige Dalporto

*My mother's words, like
empty boats, floated*

Talk

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The voice has meaning independently of what it says.

— Roland Barthes

In São Paulo, Brazil, where I traveled for an extended business trip, the dense humidity in the air gathered itself together each afternoon and concocted a fast, crackling thunderstorm that dropped curtains of rain on the hilly streets. Torrents of water rushed down the gutters, bags of garbage surfing by like small hovercrafts. People huddled under awnings and in doorways to wait out the storm. A half-hour later, when the squall had exhausted itself, the air smelled clean and sweet, and the streets steamed, cool water kissing hot tar.

It reminded me of the way my mother talks. She starts up gently, like the Amazon River, whose source in the Andes is not a spring, but clouds. Thoughts and observations solidify and trickle down; she meanders, exploring tributaries that divide and branch into smaller story-streams. Then she backpaddles upstream to the main plot line, only to get pulled by a side current into a mangrove swamp, a tangled alleyway of thought:

Louie called. He's really worried because his leg is taking so long to heal. He always said he'd take care of his diabetes after he turned sixty, but he got himself into trouble. That's what we all do, then we wonder how we got there, and we feel sorry for ourselves — but, you know, it's dollars to doughnuts they're making fifty grand a year between them. Dolly has a high-school diploma, and Louie dropped out in tenth grade. I say, Get on your knees and thank God. Jack's dead — they're all dead down there, drinking and all that stuff. Look at Kate smoking; she's half dead.

Some psycholinguists believe that, as infants, we imprint our mother's speech: rhythm, assonance, intonation, sound play, repetition. My mother has a lovely voice, not high-pitched or breathy, not low and raspy, but a smooth, clear, fluid *Sprechgesang* — singing speech — like rap but without the sharp edges. She rarely stammers or says “er” or “ah” or

“um.” She barely pauses, but inflects and gestures and repeats and talks fast — *allegro*, “jolly” in Italian. Music to my ears.

I didn't always crave my mother's talk. One afternoon around my twelfth birthday (just before my parents divorced), my older sister Sally summoned me: “Mom wants to talk to you.” Being singled out among my six siblings was rare, so it carried an ominous overtone, especially given the way Sally was smirking. I found my mother ironing in the cellar, and I plopped down on an inflated inner tube on the cement floor.

“What?” I said.

“You're becoming a young lady now, and there are a few things you need to know.” She sprinkled water over my father's shirts from a glass bottle fitted with a metal nozzle, like a watering can.

“Pretty soon you'll start menstruating.”

My mother liked to use proper nomenclature, even more so after she and my father separated and she enrolled in a one-year course at Peabody Vocational School to become a licensed practical nurse. *Vagina. Penis. Labia.* I wished she would use the slang terms my girlfriends and I had invented: *chuck* for periods, *gee* for any part of the female genitalia, *screws* for tampons.

“Mom, I already know this,” I said. “Can I go now?” This was not the chummy mother-daughter parley my friends seemed to have with their mothers.

By seventh grade I had become deathly embarrassed by my mother's good-natured chatter, her clichés worn as smooth and soft as chamois: *The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree. Lay him out in lavender. By hook or by crook.*

“Mom, don't forget to pick us up after softball practice,” I said one morning. “And don't say anything while my friends are in the car, OK?”

That afternoon, my mother drove into the dusty parking lot near the ball fields of Fisher School, perched on a pillow to see over the steering wheel (she was four-foot-eleven and has since shrunk with age), her dark hair wound around

my sadness away.

pink foam curlers, her brow smudged from gardening. As my friends and I, in stretchy nylon brown-and-orange uniforms, climbed into the station wagon, my mother said, "You live on High Street — right, Becky?"

I gave my mother a look to remind her of her vow of silence.

"I'm only asking where she lives," she said, and then she remained quiet for the rest of the drive. After she had delivered my friends to their homes, I tried to talk to my mother, but she was in no mood for conversation.

When I was in high school, my mother began dating Ed, an acquaintance of her sister in New York. My mother occasionally visited Ed in New York on weekends, but more often he stayed at our house. Ed was in many ways my father's opposite: blond and blue-eyed, Italian, a hunter and a fisherman, a skilled tradesman who could fix or build anything, a Vietnam veteran, generous and smart, but quick to anger. My father was tall with black hair and almost translucent white skin, a Boston Irish city lad, artistically inclined and intellectual (he likes the *idea* of nature), but mechanically a "dunderhead," as he sometimes called us.

On weeknights, my mother worked the three-to-eleven shift at the hospital, and I had a job pumping gas until 10 p.m. When my mother was home, I was generally out with my friends, so I didn't see her much and can't recall any long and intimate conversations from those years.

Then I left for college. My mother sent letters periodically: xeroxed copies of an original, addressed to "Susan, Sally, Maureen, Joanne." My name would be circled, and at the bottom she'd add one or two handwritten lines.

I didn't call my mother much while I was in college, mainly because I was seeing an older man, David, whom my mother immediately disliked. In David, I saw a handsome Latino; a talented, self-taught musician; a Sufi who was intellectual and worldly. My mother saw a scrawny, divorced father of a five-year-old, a janitor who drank too much and wore gold velour pants and ill-fitting Oxford wingtips — clothes discarded by the students whose dorm rooms he cleaned. My mother wrote me a four-page letter beseeching me to leave him. It had the opposite effect, naturally. So, for the three years I was seeing David, my mother and I bristled at each other.

When I graduated from college, I left David behind (my mother was partly right: he drank too much) and went to work for my mother and Ed at the Hitching Post, a small country bar they'd opened in Wappingers Falls, New York. I stayed at Ed's house, but my mother still lived in Massachusetts and drove up nearly every weekend to take care of the business. My youngest brother, Mikey, who was thirteen, came with her. Though she and I still had occasional flare-ups, without David as tinder, the underlying animosity dissipated. Working side by side in the restaurant every weekend for a year, we grew close.

The pressure of working full-time and running a business on the side took its toll on my mother and Ed's relationship.

One weekend, they had a terrible fight, and sometime after midnight, Ed threw us all out of his house. My mother was too tired to drive Mikey and herself home to Massachusetts, and I was scheduled to work at the restaurant the next day, so we decided to stay in a hotel. First, we stopped off at the Hitching Post and made ourselves roast-beef sandwiches on bulky rolls. Then we drove the winding, one-lane roads abreast of the Hudson River, looking for a room.

We finally landed at the seedy Balmville Motel, where the mattresses sagged in the middle, and the pillows felt as though they were stuffed with newspaper. The fourteen-dollar room was warmed by a rusty electric space heater with a frayed, cloth-covered cord. At two o'clock in the morning, my mother, Mikey, and I sat on the beds and ate roast-beef sandwiches as if we were having a picnic, my mother cussing out Ed, all of us laughing deliriously.

My mother and I talked well into the morning. "I guess it's my challenge in life to figure him out," she said finally, and we both rolled over to sleep. I stayed awake, though, for fear we would perish in an electrical fire the minute I shut my eyes.

In the dark, I could hear my mother quietly crying.

(end of excerpt)