

## Try Harder

by Julie Wittes Schlack

“Which dish towel do you use for dishes?” my mother-in-law Roz asked while helping to clean up after dinner at our house one night. This was in the early days of my marriage, when her ways were still new to me.

In the span of a microsecond I wondered: How many dish towels do I have? How many dish towels should I have? What else would I use a dish towel for besides dishes?

“Oh, any one will do,” I answered genially, magnanimously, cluelessly.

“Really,” she said, almost trembling with the effort it took to contain her judgment. “I know I’m always grabbing a towel to clean up a spill on the counter—you know, if I overflow the coffee cup or I get a little dirty water run-off from the dish rack or ...” (chuckling) “... I remember one time I was spraying the cast iron skillet—this was before the days of Teflon—I was spraying the skillet—this was my mother’s old frying pan that she probably got from her mother, that’s how old it was—I was spraying the skillet with *Pam*—the butter-flavored *Pam*—I don’t like the olive oil flavor; I find it too heavy somehow ...”

Lost in *Pam*, I thought. I’m safe. She’ll never find her way back to my misuse of dish towels.

“... so I’m so absent minded that I ended up trying to dry a glass—one of my nice crystal glasses which don’t come cheap, you know—with the same towel I used to wipe the *Pam* from the counter! Which is why I have two sets of towels—the gingham for spills, and the blue terry for drying dishes.”

I tried to get by as the easy-going, devil-may-care house maiden in counterpoint to her relentless, methodical house frau. I hoped to charm her into submission, or to at least slow her down, by exposing my soft white underbelly and signaling that I was no challenge to her authority in these matters. But she was undeterred by my breezy refusal to engage.

“Do you put your eggs into the water before it’s boiled or after?” she asked as we were preparing to make egg salad for my kids one day.

*Think, think* I urged myself, but came up empty. “After,” I answered emphatically, knowing that this was a question on which I should have a definite and defensible position and adopting one, based on nothing but bravado.

“Oh really?” she answered. “That’s interesting ...”

*Interesting*, I silently wailed, as my internal buzzer screamed and giant lights flashed out *Error, Error!*

“... because I find that if I put them straight into boiling water, they crack.”

She stopped on that one, single and hard-syllabled word. Apparently eggs that crack was the catastrophe that could stop even the juggernaut of Roz’s monologue dead in its tracks.

“Unless, of course, I put vinegar in the water before hand, which I usually do,” she resumed, and I could breathe again.

“Oh, of course,” I hastily agreed. “Yeah, I always put vinegar in the water first.”  
Saved.

I’m remembering these kitchen encounters as I pack up Roz’s pots and pans, dishes, aprons, and appliances. Most will go to an agency that helps poor people get settled in new homes. Her beloved toaster oven, her Melita coffee pot, and two mugs that she bought on a trip to Spain will go with her to her assisted living apartment.

She is uncharacteristically passive as I cull the contents of her kitchen. Occupying only a fraction of the chair, arms crossed—less in defiance than in an effort to keep her body warm on this December day—she is silent and small.

Looking over at her now and then, keeping up some mindless patter but no longer trying to engage her in decision-making, I realize that it wasn’t just my ineptness in domestic matters that made me so uncomfortable in the thirty years of our relationship, not even primarily that. It was my unstylish and large body next to her tiny, immaculate one. Of course this self-consciousness wasn’t helped by the fact that Roz keenly observed every morsel of food that everyone in her immediate vicinity put into their mouths, and couldn’t help but comment on each. We’d sit down to breakfast when

visiting her in Great Neck, to a table arrayed with bagels, eggs, orange juice, more bagels, two kinds of cream cheese, and a collection of natural fiber cereals more suitable for mulch than for human nutrition. I'd spread a wafer-thin layer of cream cheese on my bagel, delicately slice it into quarters (something I never did at home), and just as I was about to take the first bite, Roz would note with surprise that felt an awful lot like judgment, "Oh, you put *cream cheese* on your bagel?"

I knew that the best defense was a good offense, but I couldn't muster the wherewithal to say "Oh, you *don't*?" No, instead, sounding like Gomer Pyle, through my clogged mouth I'd cheerily reply, "Yes. Yes, I do."

"I thought you didn't like cream cheese on your bagels," she'd reply, and this was a ritual that we repeated countless times over the years.

It wasn't that she consistently misremembered my taste in condiments that amazed me, but rather that she noted or tried to remember it at all. But once Roz formulated an impression about you—positive or negative—that was it. A legend was born. You became "the kind of person who...."

I took slim—well, modest—comfort from the fact that when watching a *National Geographic* special about the South Pacific, Roz felt obliged to comment on the imposing size of Samoan women. (I guess they ate too much cream cheese on their bagels....) But when I heard her fret about her daughter's eating habits, I relaxed still more. Ruthie was and is whippet thin—a personal trainer, for God's sake—and one of the most inoffensively health-conscious people I know.

No, it wasn't just that Roz was obsessed and judgmental about weight. She was obsessed about bodies and bodily functions in general, and convinced that there was a right way and a wrong way to do absolutely everything in life, from flossing to making love to completing a crossword puzzle. She wasn't sweeping in her judgments. You weren't a bad person if you were too fat or too thin, just a person who ate incorrectly. But if you also cleaned your counter with an overly abrasive cleanser, styled your hair inappropriately for the shape of your face, voted for the more corrupt of two political candidates, spent your money profligately on movies when they were first released or failed to save your tin foil, paid too much attention to your children by giving them equal or even more time than the adults at the dinner table or too little attention to your

children by not inspecting their homework every night, brushed your teeth in a circular motion instead of a unidirectional top-to-bottom motion, ate broccoli while you were breastfeeding so of course your baby was gaseous, or parallel parked too far from the curb—well, you could be a good person who did a hell of a lot wrong.

But she was equally hard on herself. Her first pregnancy ended in a stillbirth; the baby was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. Whenever Roz alluded to this heartbreaking event (which she did quite freely), she'd usually add "The doctor said this sometimes just happens, and in those days, they didn't have the ultrasound or any other of this fancy equipment to see what was going on." But the aversion of her gaze and flatness in her voice, the utter lack of conviction as she recited this palliative explanation, always left me feeling that she saw this loss not as fate, not even as the medical malpractice she was generally so swift to detect, but as her biggest failure.

She seems to feel the same way about aging. Misplacing her keys, forgetting where she parked her car, unable to sleep when the sun goes down, only when it rises—she thinks these are all signs of her own ineptitude. And it's clear from her shocking docility that moving to the Assisted Living facility four blocks away is her punishment.

When Roz got breast cancer at the age of sixty, she blamed it on having smoked in her thirties. Never mind that her section of Long Island is a notorious cancer cluster, or that her form of breast cancer is relatively common in post-menopausal women. And when she had a small melanoma on her arm seven years later despite wearing SPF 30+ sun block religiously, she was as hurt and angry as she was at sixteen upon getting a B in high school Biology despite having worked diligently, turning in all her assignments on time, and acing the final.

"It isn't fair," she protested fifty years later. "I couldn't draw well enough. That's why I got the B. My pictures of pistils and stamens were just not very well executed. I just don't have the fine motor coordination for it."

Roz had a hard time letting go.

Even at the age of eighty, she could sound remarkably adolescent, railing against her mother's over-protectiveness. Roz was an only child, born to Eddie and Heddy (whose rhyming names never amused her), a woman who lost her brother to WWI and

her mother to a car accident on the North Fork of Long Island within three weeks of each other.

“I never learned to ride a bicycle. My mother was afraid that I’d hurt myself or get hit,” Roz complained bitterly. “And even after I was married,” she roared incredulously, “even after I was a mother myself, if I drove anywhere in the rain she’d insist, INSIST, that I call her when I got home so she’d know I was safe.”

The first time I heard this complaint I smiled sympathetically—*mothers!*—but in fact my sympathy was far greater for Heddy, so fearfully stranded on her island of loss, surrounded by danger from unsafe drivers, warring nations, influenza, bee strings, and spoiled mayonnaise. After the fifth or sixth time I heard this complaint, I said “So she’d calm down after you gave her a quick call, right?”

But the demands of her mother’s conventionality and her neediness were the hearty soil from which Roz’s energy and independence seemed to grow. “I wasn’t about to call her,” Roz snorted. “I refused to be tied down by her mishigas.”

And she meant it. Very bright (though very sure she wasn’t bright enough), she went to Queens College to study Spanish at sixteen, and at twenty-one, heady with the excitement and opportunity that World War II created for women, she made a mad dash for freedom.

“I went to Washington DC in August, for training as a translator at the State Department. And boy, in those days we didn’t have air conditioning,” she said, shaking her head, “so you can imagine! Between the BO and trying to clean the sweat stains off of the light cotton dresses and suits we wore all the time ... of course nobody could afford dry-cleaning ...”

“So Washington must have been quite a place during the war years,” I interrupted desperately. “All these young women in the workforce for the first time, all these guys in uniform eager for one last fling before being shipped out, all these spies and cryptographers ...”

“Oh, it was a beehive,” she said with gusto, laughing delightedly at the reminder of all those free and purposeful young people, exhilarated by the memory. “I lived with a group of girls from the State Department in a rooming house—that’s what we had in those days. Women would take in boarders and turn bedrooms into dormitory-style

rooms with three or four beds and a bathtub ... well, the bathtub was just lined with our nylons that we'd carefully wash in the sink, because nylon was just so scarce in those days. They used it for parachutes, of course, because this was really before synthetics—well, besides plastic, there really weren't any synthetics, none of your poly-cotton blends, just wool, which in that heat, well forget about it, and linen, which wrinkled terribly and of course we couldn't just hang it in the bathroom to get the wrinkles out while we were showering because we had no showers, only bathtubs—”

She'd done it again. Just when you thought she was on a tangent from which there was no return, defying all mortal expectations, she'd found her way back. “—and the bathtub rim was covered in individual nylons that we'd carefully lay there to dry after hand washing them in the sink with some very gentle soap, Ivory probably, though with rationing, even soap was hard to come by, and in that heat ....” And magically, we were back to BO.

Now and always, her body's betrayals ring out like tympanies and trombones in Roz's mental din. I heard about her rhinitis within five minutes of meeting her (and found out what it meant about twelve years later). Her deviated septum, her propensity not just to rhinitis but to sinusitis as well, her tendency towards chipped nails, gingivitis, mitral regurgitation, a tendency to break out with rosacea after eating nightshades (it took another decade for me to decipher that one), her difficulties getting a good haircut because she has “a big head and a double crown”—these are indignities that even as a young woman, when most of us assume we're immortal, she took as rebukes to her good behavior.

After that smelly summer in 1942, Roz had made her way by train, plane, and boat, to Costa Rica to work as a translator at the US Embassy in San Jose. I knew she'd gone, but never heard about this expedition. Aside from rare references to teas at the Ambassador's home, the one story I heard repeatedly over the years was about how difficult it was to pack a year's worth of possessions into a single trunk, how long it took that trunk to get to San Jose, and how guilty she felt about making a two-year commitment to the State Department when she knew all along that she intended to stay for only a year. (I was never clear as to whether that deception was driven by the fact

that she couldn't possibly fit two years' worth of possessions into one trunk. All I know is that the trunk and the lie are closely bound in Roz's mind.)

As bright as she was, Roz seemed constitutionally incapable of separating the conversational wheat from the chaff. She could neither recognize what was generally interesting and admirable about her life *nor* what was so excruciatingly boring to anyone but herself that it could drive her poor listeners to pull out their hair, one strand at a time, just for a little distraction. (My husband Mark—a man not prone to hyperbole—swears that as a teen, he once left the house for a half-hour and when he returned, not only was Roz still talking but she hadn't even noticed he'd left. Theirs was a small apartment, so this was no mean feat.)

Still, she managed to sustain a marriage for twenty years before divorcing Jack. She may have been shrewder than she herself realized when at twenty-seven, hovering on the brink of being an old maid, she chose to marry a man who was narcissistic enough to tune out the words or needs of anyone who wasn't in the midst of paying him homage.

Friendships were tougher. She had a broad circle of women who she dined and went to theatre and traveled with—women she'd met at NOW or at the Domestic Violence Speakers' Bureau or as a volunteer at the Rape Crisis Center. But these relationships, while mutually useful, seemed lacking in depth or intimacy.

"I've never been very good at friendship," Roz once told me matter-of-factly. "I don't know if I just don't know how to read other people, or if there's something in me that turns them off, but I've never really had close, lifelong friends like some other women do."

Was her apparent calm at this gaping void something she'd had to practice, or had grown into with time and resignation? I could never tell. Her affect suggested that this deficit was just one in a litany of many that she'd learned to stoically accept since an early age. She wasn't much of an athlete, she told me, and suspected that she never enjoyed sex the way other women did. She wasn't creative—not like her son and me. She could cook adequately, she knew, but not with flair, could never remember the names of books she'd read, rarely sang to her children because she couldn't carry a tune, and her handwriting was hard to read. The junior high school kids she faced for

fifteen years may have learned some Spanish from her, but she wasn't one of those popular teachers. She was tone deaf, she was only an adequate baker, and while she swam forty laps each day well into her seventies, she wasn't much of a swimmer ... not really, anyhow, not like some of the other women she saw at the Great Neck pool.

Never mind that she'd traveled the world when others of her age and class had stayed home doing their nails, supported two kids through college as a single mother, become a political activist at the age where complacency settles into the bones of most like chronic joint pain. Independence, lullabies, divorce, pot roast, opera, abortion, dish towels—these are all on a par in Roz's capacious but non-discriminating mind.

In recent years, gravity seems to have exerted an especially strong force on Roz. She started out short and has lost still more inches as she's aged. Her shoulders, always sloped, have taken on the shape of wet laundry hanging from a sagging clothesline. The wrinkles on either side of her mouth have grown deeper and rush downward, like valleys carved by ancient glaciers. But while becoming smaller and shorter, until the last six months or so, she'd also become more energetic—the clip of her walk even faster, the torrent of her words even more inexhaustible as she decried, with a startling new bitterness, the lack of causality between the care she'd taken and the fact that despite her best efforts, she was getting old and achy and forgetful.

A world that is arbitrary, a world that isn't uniformly governed by cause and effect, one where undesirable events are not always averted by talent or, failing that, by better informed, more conscientious behavior—this is a world that fundamentally terrifies and angers her. And so, like her mother, she is cataloguing—not external dangers—but her personal failures to triumph over the laws of nature.

And yet unlike her mother, she tried and so admirably succeeded in defying the social laws of her time—going to college, traveling, marrying late, working outside the home, divorcing before this was a mainstream activity.

Tonight, before packing up the photo albums she will take with her, we leaf through one of the earliest ones containing pictures from the 1940s. The adhesive

plastic on each page is cloudy and too brittle to lift, so we have to peer intently to make out the images underneath.

“Look at you on that a horse!” Mark exclaims. “Ride ‘em, cowboy. Where was that taken?” He passes Roz the album and she rummages around the top of her head for the reading glasses hanging around her neck.

“Costa Rica,” she answers crisply as soon as she finds them and puts them on. “What a day that was! We rode all the way from the US Embassy to the beach. The pain in my gluteus maximus when I finally got home ...”

*You’re back*, I think, and am suddenly, surprisingly dewy-eyed with relief.

Slowly, she leafs through the pages. “If I’d grown up in the sixties, in the time that you kids grew up,” she says to Mark now in a moment of uncharacteristic and calm self-reflection, “I don’t know if I would have gotten married and had kids.”

I looked quickly over at Mark to see how he is coping with this classic Roz moment of unflinching honesty coupled with complete obliviousness. Even at his age, it could potentially be tough to hear your mother essentially say *If I was born in a different time, I wouldn’t have had you*.

“It sounds like you have some regrets,” I observe.

“Not really,” she answers, then after a pause, she fiercely declares, “I always swore that I wouldn’t sacrifice myself for anyone, and I’ve been true to that.”

What an odd principle to build your life on, I think, torn between respect and deep sadness, to fundamentally define yourself in opposition.

“I had to do that, to stand up to the suicide threat, if I was ever going to have my own life,” she continues.

“The suicide threat?” I ask. Roz is clearly picking up the thread of some internal narrative that was still hidden from Mark and me.

“Yeah,” she answered impatiently. “My mother threatened God knows how many times to kill herself if I went to Costa Rica. But I couldn’t give in to that. So I went. She didn’t attempt suicide, of course, but she made me pay for it the rest of my life.”

Did Heddy make her pay? I don’t know. But I do think she made it tough for Roz, the frightened, determined, joyless swimmer of laps, to comfortably navigate the eddy of needs that’s created by people trying to live together. And I suspect that Roz’s endless,

undiscerning soliloquies were just the audible manifestation of her constant, internal dialogue between the only child who wanted to be good and the only child who wanted to be free.

She stirs her tea, the spoon clanging angrily against the cup. She has always equated a move to Assisted Living with the loss of independence and viewed a dependent life as one not worth living. Is this her slow suicide?

“I should have done crossword puzzles,” Roz declares. “They’re supposed to help prevent Alzheimer’s.”

“Well, it’s not too late,” Mark encourages her. “You can start doing them now.”

“No, I can’t,” she answers irritably. “They have all these tricks in crossword puzzles, special words that they use over and over again. But you need to do puzzles for years to learn them. It’s too late for me now.”

“Well, you don’t have to get all the answers right for it to be a worthwhile exercise,” I argue. “If you get stuck, cheat. The point is just to engage in the mental exercise.”

She looks at me blankly.

“You know,” I try to explain. “Like figuring out even just one or two letters in the word, then asking yourself ‘What’s a five-letter word for *nice* that starts with a *B* and ...’”

But I can instantly see that the point is lost on her. No, eyes looking skyward, she is off and running, trying to think of a five-letter word for nice that starts with the letter B. “Roz, that was just an example.”

“Oh,” she answers, with annoyance, confusion, and contrition colliding in that one syllable. I’ve never, ever heard the latter two tones from her, and they are breaking my heart.

She stops speaking, and though silence is what I usually pray for when with her, on this night, in this tiny, exasperating woman, it sounds like surrender. *Try*, I silently urge her. *Try harder*.



**Julie Wittes Schlack** is the author of a memoir in essays, *This All-at-Onceness* (Pact Press), named one of *Kirkus Review's* 100 Best Indie Books of 2019, and of the forthcoming novel *Burning and Dodging* (Black Rose Writing, December, 2021). She writes and teaches both fiction and creative nonfiction, and has an MFA from Lesley University. Her essays and stories have appeared in numerous literary journals, including as *Shenandoah*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *Ninth Letter*, *Eleven Eleven*, and *The Tampa Review*. She reviews books for *The ARTery*, and is a regular contributor to NPR station WBUR's journal of ideas and opinions, *Cognoscenti*. Julie lives with her husband in a co-housing community in Northampton, MA.