Shouting Out The Rat

Donna Ward, Author and Advocate, Melbourne Australia

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In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her.

In 1969, Carol Hanisch wrote in her famous essay, The Personal is Political, I am greatly offended that I or any other woman is thought to need therapy in the first place. Women are messed over, not messed up! We need to change the objective conditions, not adjust to them... the political act is to take off the rose coloured glasses, face the awful truth, then shout it out. Adopt 'the pro-woman line' that women are really neat people.

In 2004, Rachel F. Moran's stinging paper, How Second-Wave Feminism Forgot Single Women, exposed the way in which feminists, of all diversity, imagined and fought only for the emancipation of coupled and single mothers. Thus single women without children slipped off the third-wave's intersectional list.

In the nineteen-seventies feminism was a harsh religion of conflicting sects and sisters wrangling with their faith. Some were anti men and anti marriage. Some pro coupling and financial independence—separating if required. Others apologised for falling in love with a man, ditched the faith, and got hitched—shouting from the carriage: I'm not a feminist but... Whichever sect a woman chose, her sisters judged her fiercely—none more fiercely than women who desired husbands and motherhood, but employed their feminist right not to couple badly, or parent alone.

In 2003, Jill Reynolds and Margaret Wetherell's research, *The Discursive Climate of Singleness*, found that single women seesaw between social denigration and marginalization on one end, and a punishing feminism on the other. Single women, they found, stand perennially accused. Expected to claim strength and independence—but not too much, lest they be labelled selfish, choosy, incapable of love. Equally, they are expected to justify both the absence of, and any desire for a relationship. Unsurprising then, that women who don't chose singlehood, wriggle away from identifying as single. Reynolds and Wetherell never used the word, shame, but as I read their research, I smelled that rat.

In 2018, Kineret Lahad argued that feminist scholarship and protest are silent on the systematic marginalization of single women because feminism ignores the pervasive cultural pressure of family-making. And worse—feminism continues to regard transitory singlehood as healthy, but permanent singlehood as unacceptable, or unnatural.

These days postfeminists claim the fight is over, women have it all. And neoliberal feminists claim women have the power and resources to operate within the system and build a career without damaging family obligations. How easily we forget Hanisch's observation—the system must change, not the woman.

My book, *She I Dare Not Name: A Spinster's Meditations on Life,* (Allen & Unwin 2020) snuck out seconds before the world closed its doors to the angel of death. In that wing-rush, three shrill reviews fluttered through. Now, don't get me wrong, I don't mind harsh reviews. They court the controversy that sells. But these three Australian feminists intrigued me with their anti-woman line.

One, a serial monogamist, gave a mostly positive review, but questioned my statement that, 'being a spinster is the most courageous thing a woman will ever do'. She claimed fighting patriarchy is more courageous. Did she think being a spinster doesn't erode the structure at patriarchy's heart—the heteronormative family? Surely feminism has only achieved patchy equality for women *within* patriarchy. Equal votes, childcare, parental leave, equal wages—if they come—reproductive rights—

if they're not abolished. These things enable women to be dignified members of the patriarchy, they do not extinguish it.

Another, a grandmother with an unbroken marriage and no psychological training at all, suggested I was neurotically fixated on achieving 'true love', which I should understand was a privilege. Clearly a privilege I did not deserve because I was single. I'm not sure, her writing was obscure, but it stood out that, like so married many sisters, she could not refrain from enlightening this spinster on why she is a spinster. One could call it woman-splaining.

The third, a widowed grandmother, found me contemptuous. Treated me like a misguided adolescent wanting to lie with the enemy and, you guessed it, expected me to justify my desire for a relationship. She wanted another book, another me, another version of spinsterhood. Anything but the true story of a real spinster's life.

And, despite boundless feminist compassion for the sadness of wives, divorcees, and mothers, all three women disenfranchised my grief.

It is not egregious to expect all women to treat another woman's challenges and grief with dignity and respect. Or, include the various afflictions of all women on that intersectional list. Or. remember the fight continues for *every* woman's equality regardless of the relations she bears. Yet a spinster's presence triggers ferocity from her sisters that vaporises de Beauvoir's and Hanisch's foundational principles, and the academic truths of Reynolds and Wetherell, Moran, and Lahad. Single women without children, too, are really neat people.

In March 2020, I had a plan for flood and fire, but nothing for plague. I stocked up on basics. Extra toilet rolls—in case the hoarders had a point—a bottle of wine, a packet of chips, and a good supply of chocolate. Everything stashed and dinner in the oven, I poured a glass of red. And, as evening entered a sense of belonging entered with her. A belonging long forgotten yet tangible as a friend. For the first time in decades I was doing what everyone was doing—hunkering down like the Hebrews did millennia ago, the sacral blood on the lintel, the message clear—pass over this house.

There were four reasons to leave the house: food and supplies, exercise, medical care, work or education—if you must. No visitors allowed. No Visitors. I had not planned well.

There must have been an insurrection because three evenings, and another packet of chips later, they announced that intimate partners living apart—anywhere in the state—could visit each other and stay the night.

Mid-May we Victorians vanquished the plague and felt we'd done it for the nation. But one day in early July, I got out of the car into a high blue sky, and saw every human in the landscape bent over an iPhone in the palm of their hand. The iPhones operated like an Orwellian loudspeaker shimmering the Premier's voice through the air as he announced another lockdown.

The same restrictions. No visitors.

By August there was a 9 pm curfew, and no one could travel more than 5 km from home. Unless, of course, you had a lover. Then you could travel anytime, anywhere, as long as you stayed the night.

It took 178 days of protest before singles could choose a bubble buddy who lived no more than 5 km away and wore a mask while visiting. Meanwhile, intimate partners passed through all manner of boundaries to reach their one true love and do the wild thing—possibly with chocolate.

I was blurred in lockdown solitude when the Royal Commission's report into Australian Aged Care Sector titled, *Neglect,* exposed that aged care staff drug, beat, starve, and rape residents. Then in *The Monthly* magazine I read Russell Marks's reflection on his mother's nursing home experience.

> There's a strong tendency for everyone—staff, managers, doctors, regulators—to dismiss grumbling by residents almost out of hand. Old people can be easily assumed to be demented, senile, unreliable.

By old people and grumbling residents, Marks meant mainly women, since women live longer than men, and there are more women than men in Australia, and many of those women are without children to write about their horror in *The Monthly*. And, by staff, managers, and doctors, he meant mainly women again, for this is a feminized industry. This is women doing it to women, despite the relations they bear. One could almost call it misogyny.

Singlehood, once a personal issue speckled with feminist aspersions of neurosis, inadequacy, and illegitimate grief, had just got political.

I wrote to my Federal parliamentary member, Ged Kearney. I wrote about feminism, prejudice, ageism, elder abuse, and the struggle to live on one income in an economy built for two. She was visibly moved when we met. Promised action. But in those days she was a member of the opposition, and the government was in the full hysteria of neoliberalism where women must do it for themselves.

The days after the Federal election were hollow. Like that moment when you close the door on a frightful relationship and know, but can't quite believe, the terror has passed. You must wake into several mornings of the ordinary world, the soft notes of pigeons, the rhythm of trees and garbage trucks. You must wrap that rhythm around you and accept that recovery will take time. I was still in recovery when Ged called. Now, the Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care, with a particular focus on women, she said, Let's have a roundtable about your women. I'll get the Federal Minister for Women and Finance, to come, will you present? I said something like, Is Simone a feminist? Then she said, We've been launching the childcare policy all week, and every time I got to the podium I thought of you.

Her compassion shut me up. A feminist who had probably read de Beauvoir, but definitely not Reynolds and Wetherell, let alone Moran and Lahad, a woman in power, a with more family than I could imagine, had stopped, listened to me, then acted.

Thursday 9 December 2022. 9 am. The Assistant Minister scurried in from the horizontal sleet and rain. We hugged. The Minister for Women and Finance arrived, I smiled through my mask and shook her hand as a suited team from the Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet waltzed in behind her. You could call it an overwhelm of politicians. But then came the single women. Over 100, spilling in from the cold.

I stood, removed my mask, and described the singlehood tsunami rolling across the world. I told real stories about real lives. The woman abandoned in floods by the SES. Joan DelFattore's cancer story. The woman who tripped in a carpark, fell through all the loopholes in our health system and spent six weeks alone at home unable to walk. I spoke about work–nonwork pressures, job insecurity, surviving in an economy built for two, how the gender wage gap, illness, and disasters erode retirement savings and make it prudent for women to couple. I spoke about women's homelessness, and I shared Russell Marks' story of his mother.

The Minister for Women and Finance took furious notes, but the silence in the room was solid. And when the women did speak, they wept the tears that come when ostracism is witnessed. The moment was a still point and the world was turning.

In the weeks and months that followed, these two ministers voices echoed these stories throughout the parliament. The Assistant Minister went on a fact-finding mission, and when she got back she said to me, I've spoken to everyone everywhere, finance, superannuation, health, you name it. They all say single women without children are a real problem, we've got to do something about it.

The strategy, of course, was to galvanize single women into lobbying a government listening and willing to act. But too many were overloaded with work and care obligations. Those who chose singlehood saw no need to mobilize, those looking for a partner didn't feel single, but temporarily not in relationship. Then there was the rat. Shame. Shame of being seen as selfish, too choosy, unlovable, barren. If there is one thing I know, when shame is in the room protest is shoved outside and dissolves in the sleet and rain.

Feminists who forget women without partners and children forget to unravel patriarchy. Their protest and action creates an equality within patriarchy, and perpetuates the very thing de Beauvoir and Hanisch warned against. They see some women as more neat than others, confining all women to the relations the do or don't bear. All feminists must now shout out the rat. They must join these two Parliamentarians who are busy dancing into being a feminism which praises every woman is a really neat person regardless of the relations she bears.