

Conversation Pieces
Volume 49

Unpronounceable

by
Susan diRende



*To all the fierce and funny women in my life: my mother,
big sisters, grandmothers, nieces, collaborators, and friends.*

Chapter 1

Diplomatic Impunity

I wouldn't never have left New Jersey, let alone the planet Earth, if it wasn't for my sister, Alice, who you should know up front got all the genetic engineering bonus points my parents was assigned, leaving me with whatever they could come up with naturally, sperm-and-eggwise. Considering the DNA that was brought to a certain Christmas party exactly twenty-eight years and nine months before my last birthday, I consider myself lucky to have a full set of body parts and smarts enough not to get run over by a bus.

It all started when Alice made that crack about how Rose—that's me—wasn't going anywhere with her life. I get this on top of my boyfriend, Bob, sleeping with the landlady in my bed on my purple satin sheets that I had bought to seduce him with (which worked like a charm and hence him being my boyfriend). Excuse me, ex-boyfriend, because walking in on him making like the Little-Train-That-Could with her reminded me that I do have some pride, even though Bob possesses the kind of washboard pecs that can make a girl forget sometimes, and I told him to remove his rubber ducky from the premises.

I knew I also had to prevent Bob from ever wanting me to take him back, because with his build and his flawless self-absorption, me, I'd probably do it, Landlady Moss and her circus skills notwithstanding. So, only to protect myself from myself, not for the pleasure of telling a man the truth

about sex for once, I let him in on a few of his personal inadequacies, including those regarding the size and shape of his favorite toy.

I must have laid it on good, because he's so mad he goes and tells the landlord a thing or two, not about the basement Barnum-and-Bailey performances with the missus, oh no, but about Rose—me again—having an illegal sublet in his rent-controlled apartment. Can you beat that?

So there I am, admiring Bob's killer instinct enough to miss him, which shows you the wisdom of my earlier preemptive thermonuclear verbiage, and having no place to live right when my period is due.

Meanwhile, the government has been sending one embarrassment to humanity after another to be Earth's Ambassador to the planet of the Unpronounceable (don't ask me to say it) until the United Nations gives up and figures anybody will do. *Anybody*. Be honest, do I sound like a diplomat to you?

The French, they invented diplomacy, send the French, I say. But no. That French guy that went looks like Pepe Le Pew on that old cartoon. Le Pew, the skunk, spends ten days on their world and it's back to the Eiffel Tower with him. The General, the one after Frenchie, four stars and he comes home with a nervous breakdown. The Japanese guy kills himself, so I guess that makes him the only diplomat that wasn't actually sent back in disgrace.

They figure maybe the Unpronounceable don't like diplomatic types. They try a businessman. Disaster. They try a poet. Didn't even know he was on another planet. They pick a whole Crayola assortment of doctors, scientists, anthropologists, philosophers, you know, bright but messy. The group lasts a whole month before they come back home with a note pinned to their collective collar asking us not to use their planet as an insane asylum. The Unpronounceable would welcome any sane person, but please to stop with the nut cases.

This poses a problem for the government. Should they just admit to our first interplanetary contacts that all of humanity was insane? Never.

So, the bureaucrats start thinking. Well not really thinking, but they think they're thinking. They figure if all sensible criteria pick somebody the aliens call crazy, then crazy criteria just might pick a winner. The United Nations go for the dumbest way to pick a representative of the human race and come up ace—a Lottery. I mean, think about it. Who wins lotteries?

A big announcement gets made all over the world. Anybody who wants to be humankind's envoy to the only extra-terrestrial sentient race discovered in a hundred worlds could just put their name in a hat, no questions asked. The space program gets what they want. Wackos. Evangelists. People too dumb to see it's a set-up so's there'll be some lunatic to blame for messing up interplanetary relations for the rest of us. Nobody in their right mind would go near the thing.

See, now you're wondering about me. The only reason I put my name in at all was because Alice made that crack at the dinner table the very day the announcement of the Lottery came out. I'm thinking anyplace still in the same solar system with Alice is not far enough to count as going anywhere, and this is why I never made the effort. Unpronounceable would put over a thousand light-years of interstellar void between me and my sister. I announced my decision to apply right after the minestrone.

I was reckless, but hey, the odds against me being chosen were more than Einstein could figure. Besides, I never win anything. Anything good, I should have remembered, because I did win that fish in fourth grade that died on the way home, and I had to listen to a lecture from Nonna about how I was going to Hell for murdering one of God's creatures.

The point being, I'm not exactly happy when the name that pops up out of the gazillion of nudniks who actually do want to go is mine: Rosalba Bellicosa Delancy, Italian/Irish, actress/waitress, three-semester community college dropout, two serious boyfriends, both history; just your ordinary

American gal having a dry spell in romance, acting jobs, luck. It's not like I'd be leaving anything special.

Still, I try to get out of it. "I can't go up in a rocket. I'm afraid of heights."

"No, no it's not like that at all, Rose. More like being in an elevator," they tell me. I should've said I was afraid of elevators. How was I to know?

Unpronounceable is even further out from the center of the galaxy you and I call the Milky Way than Hackensack is from Heaven. To get there, the ships do some funny folding stuff with space and time, so that instead of the trip taking thousands of years, in which case everybody you went to school with would be dead, which if you ask me would be an incentive to go, but no, you get there in a couple of days. Actually, it only seems like a couple of days, because time is all screwed up and apparently anywhere from a week to nine months passes on Earth. It depends on the Fold, they say. I say I want to live my life the old-fashioned way, one day at a time, but nobody laughs.

You'd think this would be my shining hour. The problem is that when all the news hounds converge on our house, those cameras take one look at my sister and suddenly she's showing up in more interviews than me. It's no fun knowing the entire world agrees that, "Alice got the looks and brains, but Rose got more than her share of," —and here you have to do Aunt Mizi's now-famous roll of the eyes— "personality."

I have to admit it was good to get away. There's a crew on the ship, but they just shake their heads at me all sad and sorry, and leave me alone.

One guy, Maurice, he tries to explain their attitude has more to do with the aliens than me, so I shouldn't take it personal. Like I cared. Actually, I think Maurice is kind of sweet on me, which makes him even less interesting. He wants to warn me, he says.

Too late, I say. I'm stuck with going and making a fool of myself in front of the whole planet Earth, not to mention my Aunt Mizi, whose idea of a good story is some humiliating

experience her dearly beloveds have brought on themselves, which she proceeds to tell every human she meets on the bus, in line at the grocery store, or panhandling on the street. Gotta love her, or she'd be dead.

Maurice says no, not warn me about Earth, but about the aliens, how the public don't know, but they are sadists who torture people for fun. Maurice puts his nubby fingertip on my shoulder and leans in close enough for me to smell his breath mint and write him off my dance card forever. "You must never go to a [*spitting-choking-word*]."

"Gesundheit," I say back.

"No, no. A [*spitting-choking-word*] is some kind of torture chamber. Both of the guys who went to one had to have emergency medical care on the return ship because all their skin was gone. They looked like pulsing globs of bloody red meat."

I feel my neck and armpits get clammy as my stomach has second thoughts about lunch. I know humans have blood inside of them, but I don't like to think about it. When I first started getting my period, I used to faint on the toilet until I learned how to use tampons with my eyes shut and the bathroom light off.

I try to put on a good face in front of Maurice. If I started crying, he'd want to kiss me, dontcha know, and what with my heaving stomach already, that wouldn't turn out too good. So I say I grew up in New Jersey and am experienced in handling sadists. He laughs and feels better, I guess. At least he don't make a pass. Me, I go to my cabin and spend an hour trying not to throw up. I fail.

See, I am not brave. I am stupid, which sometimes makes me look brave, but there's a big difference. Not if things go bad: then brave or stupid is both dead, and it don't matter. No, but when it turns out good, the brave person feels better about herself having done the right thing, whereas the stupid person knows deep down not only does she deserve no credit, but that someday, somewhere, she's gonna be just as stupid again.

I lay down and try to think of one good thing about all this. I fall asleep instead. I spend the next few days avoiding Maurice and trying to think of one good thing. It helps pass the time till we arrive at the planet nobody can pronounce, so why don't they just call it something easy. Right now it sounds like a Bronx Cheer, and I refuse to begin diplomatic relations by sticking my tongue between my lips and blowing a raspberry at these aliens.

I've had pictures to look at to prepare me for the first meeting, so I know they look like blobs of Silly Putty, shiny and gray-pink. Still it's weird when I see them for real because this Silly Putty is alive. They constantly stretch and wobble, looking like Casper the Friendly Ghost after he's gone through a cotton candy machine. Who can take them serious?

Now I am glad Maurice warned me, because on top of looking cute as cartoons, they come across so polite and sensitive, it could fool you if you hadn't grown up with Alice and didn't know someone could be all soft and gooshy outside and still be a bitch of steel on the inside. This thought gives me an idea. I imagine I'm home and these Unpronounceable Blobs are my family. Oh, sure, they act like they love you, but let them find out you're happy about something and they have to ruin it for you.

Like Ma's cousin Carmella. She coulda had her pick of the neighborhood boys, but she had to go and seduce the parish priest, which meant he's got to give up his church and marry her. Ruining his dreams wasn't enough for her. She proceeded to raise six Mafiosi sons. Make no mistake why nice Italian boys invented the Mob: their mothers.

You're probably thinking I'm too easy on the men just because I can always find an excuse for a guy and fall in love with him no matter how low his IQ or how cruel he treats a girl. You're absolutely right. This is why, not only will I imagine the Blobs is my family, but I will remember they are the enemy by seeing them as female Bellicosa-Delancys. The aliens won't know the difference, seeing as how they got no

sex of their own, and I will remain immune to those deadly social pathogens, empathy and sympathy.

So, like Eve before me, I start naming. My main contact I talk to, I'm calling her Mizi, after my Aunt Mizi, both of them being blobby masses of gelatinous flesh without a clue of how disgusting they look.

This Mizi has anywhere from one to seven arm-things depending on her mood, and no face anyplace. The face thing bothers me cuz I keep talking to where the mouth is and she keeps turning away and I am not in the mood to dance. After a couple of do-si-dos, I say, "Hey! This is making me crazy. I did not come here across the interstellar void to cha-cha. Where's your face, for Chrissake?"

Okay, not so diplomatic, you're thinking, but remember, all your diplomats didn't do so well, neither. This Blob, she makes what sounds like a fart and tells me that her people talk with the mouth part facing away.

So I naturally point out it's genetic incompetence to put the mouth where you can't see it to talk to it and not to expect me to do that. Mizi gets this funny stillness, and I think I'm gonna be invited to leave right then, a new record.

Then she says—get this—they don't use their mouth to talk to each other, they use gestures. The sound-talking is something they copied from us, dontcha know, because they figured out it was how we humans communicate.

Score. Not one of those diplomat-anthropologist-military-jerks found that out. Jersey girl earns her ticket. Then I get to thinking—a mistake, but my blood sugar is low—and once I think something I have to say it. So I ask, if the mouth's not for talking but just for eating, how is it they can make sounds with it at all? Not to mention putting it on the back means you can't see what's going inside when you eat. Your cousin could substitute a worm for some linguine and you wouldn't know till you were chewing, and that's a bit late if you ask me.

Mizi starts with the farting noises again and begging my forgiveness. I say not to worry, no bad smell, and in some cultures on Earth farting is like a thank you after a good meal. I say this

in part because I am supposed to be a diplomat after all, and in part, actually mostly, because we are going on six hours without a meal so I'm getting hungry and hinting, alright?

Mizi explains they don't eat with their mouths, neither. So naturally I ask, though I'm starting not to care about anything except maybe a pizza with black olives and onions, what the heck she's got a mouth for then, and—get this—she tells me it's not a mouth at all. It's an anus, and it's the only body part they have that can make the sounds of our language.

So I start laughing. No wonder they think humans are crazy, sticking our butts at their butts and “farting” ideas. I explain that humans eat and breathe here—and I point to my mouth—and we eliminate waste and pass gas through another hole at the other end. And just to make my point I let fly with a small but fruity one.

Well, she gets all excited, I mean, all seven arm thingies are out and waving. And she asks, “Two holes?”

I say, “Yes, two.” I know what you're thinking, but I am not mentioning no other hole to her. Instead, I change the subject. “So what about a face?” I ask. “I need to know where to look when I talk.”

She does some shifty thing with her skin, enough to give me a location that would put me facing her about right. Her “face” looks a lot like Teddy Roosevelt on Mount Rushmore, but I let it go for now. Mizi, the real one, she has a mustache, too.

Now that we got the talking and the face thing straightened out, I tell them if they want to hear me fart my appreciation back at them, they have to feed me first. Which they do, though it isn't until I'm alone in my room that I manage anything to write home about. Just for fun I try to fart the name of the planet, and it sounds about right.

So you're probably figuring we'll get chummy after solving the big butt-hole problem. Not this girl. Any fool can make friends with fart jokes. That don't mean you got me eating beans out of your hand.

In the morning, a knock at the door doesn't make me happy. Jet lag is to how I feel the way a headache is to death

by a car bomb. Still, I am a diplomat these days, envoy of the planet Earth, so I crawl out of bed. When Mizi comes in, I even talk to her.

“Hey, fart-face!” I say, just pretending, you know, to be falling for the friends thing. “I feel like you look. My bones are all jelly, and my face is falling off. It might almost be worth dying just so’s I could get off this rock and go back to Earth.”

Mizi, she starts wiggling all her arms around, making me dizzy. “I’m making conversation and all you can do is shake like a bad disaster movie. You do your St. Vitus routine while I take a whiz. All that bouncing’s making my bladder hurt.”

Well, suddenly her whole body collapses on the ground, the individual arms kind of melt back in and she turns into a single blob of quivering jelly. Okay, so maybe rudeness kills them, I’m thinking. I experiment.

“Get some dignity about yourself. Am I the Ambassador of Earth or am I the Avon Lady trying to sell you a lot of bad perfume just because it’s in a cute bottle?”

I turn my back on her road-kill impersonation and go into the bathroom thinking about my Aunt Celeste who collects Avon bottles. Says they’ll be worth something someday, says she’s gonna pass ’em on to her kids. I can just see Vito when he finds he can’t get one penny at the pawn shop for them. He’ll want to kill his mother, but she’ll already be dead. Such is life on Earth. Here on Unpronounceable, I come out of the bathroom and Mizi is still wiggling, so I give up on her and decide to find breakfast on my own.

I head toward the room where I ate dinner the night before, hoping breakfast with strong coffee and lots of sugary, fatty carbohydrates is a concept at least one of the previous missionaries got across to the natives. Mizi, she kind of flops and oozes after me like a balloon filled with jumping beans.

I run slam into another Blob going around a corner. It’s not as repulsive as you’d think. They’re warm and soft, but not slimy. Like a giant hot water bottle. This gal I bump into, she’s a real tank like my great-gramma Ronnie was. She takes

one look at Mizi and oop!, Mizi is on her feet and practically saluting. I feel a bit bad for Mizi, and so I go on the attack.

“Hey, you, how about a few interplanetary niceties like showing me a face, so’s I can ream you for running me over.”

Seven arms just shoot straight out of the tank-Blob and pop back in. Mizi starts to melt again, but manages to say, “Rose Delancy, Envoy of Earth, may I introduce [another-goddam-unpronounceable-name], high priest and doctor of Medicine.”

I offer my hand, the Blob puts out a paw, and we shake. I let her know, “I can’t pronounce your names and I’m not gonna waste time trying to provide comic relief for your otherwise empty lives. Forget it. You, I’m calling Ronnie, after my mother’s grandmother.”

“I’m honored.”

“Don’t be. She was mean and stubborn, and the Earth became a cheerier place the day she died.” They both start up now. “Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle. What is with you people? Every time I open my mouth, you turn into tapioca. It’s disgusting. Stop it.”

More wiggling. “Hey. You may be talking in signs here, but I’m not hearing anything so I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Our apologies. We are laughing. I keep forgetting, you humans make a screeching sound when you are happy. We will accommodate.” And suddenly I’m in the middle of a slasher movie. Alfred Hitchcock, you lived in the wrong century. I start flailing my arms trying to get them to stop, and they just scream louder. I realize they think I’m trying to laugh in their language, and it’s making things even funnier.

This pisses me off so I stop and stand absolutely still a few minutes, and the slaughterhouse soundtrack disappears. I am emphatic, “Don’t do that ever again. You bozos can just wiggle from now on, and I’ll know what it means.”

“We were not correct in our replication of laughter?”

“You were correct, alright, but it was a replication from Hell.”

“Hell is where, in your religion, souls go after life?”

“Only souls who do unspeakable evil and are tortured for all eternity, screaming and writhing in agony without end.”

“Odd. That is the sound several of your predecessors made when they enjoyed a rejuvenation bath at a [*spitting-choking-word*].”

“They were screaming in pain, numbskull. You stripped off all their skin, which is not a thing that should ever be done to a person, or even to meat if it’s still alive.” Mizi and Ronnie become still and change color. I’m philosophical. “Hey, not to worry. Those losers were nuts to come here in the first place. No harm done.”

Mizi and Ronnie brighten right up. “We did mean well. A [*spitting-choking-word*] for us is the highest experience of what it is to be an [Unpronounceable]. We were going to invite you tomorrow.”

“And while I was screaming in pain, you sadists would have just wiggled with glee. You’re a great bunch of gals, and if you don’t feed me some breakfast right now, I’m gonna tell the whole planet Earth you did it on purpose and they should nuke you till you glow.”

We go to the dining room and get some food. I sit on a chair. The gals don’t sit exactly. Their legs just squish under them. Ronnie holds forth while I chow down.

“It’s such a relief to know humans are capable of being properly concerned over bodily functions. Your predecessors never asked for food or sleep or would admit to elimination. Obviously, they were perverts sent off-world because their lives had no value to society. We tried to help them as a sign of interplanetary goodwill, but we kept failing. This is why we finally requested a sane person. You, we can talk to, and there is hope for peace between our people.”

Now a diplomat would have clasped their hands and made some promise of friendship. Me, all I can say is, “Don’t count on it. Humans wouldn’t know peace if every last one of them was dead. This soup stuff needs salt.”

Lots of laughter. I think they like me, and this does not bode well. If they think at all like me, war with the rest of

Earth is inevitable. These Blobs, they got no weapons, no ships; they're the ideal Evil Empire. The troops are probably already massing back home for the attack, and me, I would be your sacrificial lamb. Well, I have never been anybody's lamb, let me tell you. With a good lie, maybe faking an allergy to Blobs, I can go back tomorrow on the ship that brought me. They can blow up the place just as good without me.

Now before you get all indignant calling me a coward, remember, I'm just a gal from New Jersey. I could no more save a planet from the consequences of global incompatibility than I could keep my mouth shut at the dinner table. I'm scared, I run.

I finish eating and go hunt up Maurice, who is sweet on me and ripe to be conned into breaking a few rules. "Maurice, you gotta help me..."

He cuts me off. "I'm sorry Rose. I have strict orders. No matter how much you beg, I can't take you back to Earth." Something about the way he says it, I can see he hopes I'll beg anyway. I realize napalm couldn't be as bad as owing this guy a favor for the long three days we'd be together in that sardine-can size spaceship. Besides, I have never in my life admitted anyone was right about me when they were actually right.

"Don't flatter yourself. I gotta report to Earth, that's all, and you got the radio."

He huffs back at me, "Use the one in your office." I remind myself he's just some space-age oar-puller, shrug, and walk away like I know where I'm going. I look confident, that's what counts.

"Hey, Rose. You're going the wrong way." He's smirking.

"Are you sure?"

He nods. "Your office in your house, and your house..."

"I know where my house is. I just got turned around. Two things I always forget not to trust: my sense of direction and men." I do love getting the last word.

I phone back to Earth and spill all the dirt on the Blobs. My boss, a German guy named Reiner Something, his last name being another kind of spitting-choking-word I can't pro-

nounce, he listens like he's heard it all before, which I know he hasn't. This makes me mad, because you can bet your diplomatic immunity that when he writes it up for the press, he's gonna make it sound like he figured it out on his own.

I'm all ready to say, "Listen, I've done what all your experts couldn't. Now that you know why they took your guys for crazy, and how come that skin problem happened, you can coach a real diplomat on the finer points of Blob-talk. You don't need me. I feel it's time to come home..." when, dontcha know, he interrupts me before I can say one word.

"Congratulations Rose, you've done what our experts couldn't. Now that we know why they thought our envoys crazy, and how come the [*spitting-choking-word*] problem happened, we can coach a real diplomat to take your place. You've served your purpose and it's time you came home."

This is a low blow. Although I really do want to go home, there's no way I'm leaving after that crack. "You wouldn't know a real diplomat if one told you with a straight face your personality has nothing to do with why people vomit every time they talk to you." Reiner gets mad, which don't surprise me, since I have that talent. Alice got perfect pitch. I got perfect aim.

Apparently Mizi and Ronnie came in and heard my last comment. I don't see them behind me, but Reiner does. He quick puts on a shmooze face and talks to them like I'm not even there.

"Your Excellencies, I am relieved that our misunderstandings in communication have been clarified. This will open the door to much more effective relations between our peoples, which I feel..."

I turn to Ronnie and interrupt Reiner by saying, "He's the switchboard operator, but he thinks he runs the United Nations. Humor him or he gets violent, but don't believe a thing he says."

"Is everyone in your government insane?"

"Of course. Who else would want to bother?"

"Isn't anyone in charge?"

“No, I don’t think so.”

Ronnie turns to Reiner, who is in fact the head of the United Nations. “Mr. Lichtendorfman, we are most happy with the current envoy, Rose Delancy. Please allow us to extend our invitation to her for an indefinite period of time. We have found her a most congenial ambassador and excellent communicator. We regret past errors, and for this reason we wish to limit human contact until we have been able to learn more of your race, and you of ours, so that in the future such mishaps can be avoided.” Ronnie turns to me and whispers, “Can I handle crazies, or what?”

For the first time in weeks, I crack a smile. Reiner gets apoplectic, but what can he do? Earth is stuck with me being First Interplanetary Ambassador to the Unpronounceable Planet of Blobs for as long as I want the job.

Hey, Alice, I would call that going places, wouldn’t you?