

My Voice: A Catalyst for Change

Olga (1917)

As the market bustles with chatter and the clink of coins, I weave my way through crowded alleys without drawing attention. Pushing aside shoulders and elbows, I occasionally perch myself on my toes to get a better sense of direction. Off in the distance stands a building with blue crooked shutters, the meeting location of the National Woman's Party.

As I edge my way closer, I cautiously pull my hat lower onto my face and shrink back into my coat. If any of my family sees me, they'll get me married tomorrow. At least, that's what *Ojciec* threatened when I told him I would be joining the NWP. My father doesn't like how I'm ... different. He doesn't believe in rights for women like I do, even with a wife and four daughters. However, I refuse to continue sitting in silence while men control women and uproot our lives. Becoming an activist allows me to pursue my ideals.

After all, it's the 20th century. Change is coming, whether we like it or not.

I jump when a familiar voice calls out my name. "Olga!" Marie exclaims, waving at me. She hustles towards me and briskly pulls me to the side. "What happened? The meeting just ended. I thought you would come," she speaks in hushed tones, eyes drifting left and right.

"I was going to!" I whisper back. "I didn't realize it's already over. My family isn't too happy with my decision to join NWP, so I had to sneak out of the house last minute."

"Oh!" Marie gasps, then smirks. "You're quite the revolutionary, Olga." I can't help but smile. "Anyways," she continues, "since *someone* is so rebellious, you should come to the protest outside the White House next week. We're congregating outside the building and holding up signs for the president to see."

I nod. "I'll be there." Even if he doesn't notice us, the rest of the world will.

"The best part of it all? Our name," she says with a gleam in her eye. "Silent Sentinels."

Nina (2017)

The walls are closing in on me. I can feel the producers occasionally glance at me, wondering who let a young woman become the director of this movie. I gulp. I guess I should

say something, maybe thank them for investing in the movie, but a part of me is afraid of being a fool in front of them. Especially when I'm the only female here.

I shift my legs uncomfortably when the casting director, Oliver, barges in with a USB drive in hand. "Sorry to keep all of you waiting!" he says, throwing his hands up in defense. "Good news: I've finally narrowed our female lead options to two. Here are the tapes of them interacting with our male lead." He plugs the USB into the computer, and our attention immediately reverts to the screen.

The first actress is, well, picture-perfect. She's classically attractive: round curves, rosy cheeks, and pale skin. Most of the room is practically swooning over her, though her acting is good but easily forgettable. With the male lead beside her, the pair looks like Barbie and Ken.

The second actress pops onto the monitor, snagging my attention. Her acting is phenomenal; I can see her character breathing inside of her. Her tone, dialogue delivery, and diction—exactly what we were looking for. She naturally interacts with the male lead and commands equal attention on the screen rather than existing in the background like the first girl. She's gorgeous, too, but the visual opposite of the first option: dark waves, high cheekbones, and almond-shaped eyes.

The executive producer, Mr. Harris, stands up abruptly. "I think the first one is the obvious catch. She's the typical girl that our male audience desires." The room mutters in agreement.

"I—I disagree," I say, battling my fear of being judged. "Our second option is a far better actress, and she's exactly what the movie needs."

Mr. Harris shakes his head. "It's an action movie. Our actress needs to be attractive in our target audience's eye and appropriately complement our hero, like a believable damsel in distress.

"I understand, Mr. Harris, but our goal is to select the best cast possible." I wave my hands in exasperation. "The other actress encapsulates the character's personality better. We should give her a chance."

I hear a few snickers coming from the other producers. Blood rushes to my face, my breath hitching.

"I think we've made our decision, Nina," Mr. Harris pastes a smile on his face.

No. “Fine,” I spit, walking out of the room, leaving silence in my wake.

Olga (1917)

I never realized before that silence could be this loud.

Now, standing outside the White House, I hold up a sign that reads “Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?”

I wear my purple, white, and gold sash-like regalia. I look at the women beside me, all in a single profile line, the wind gently blowing our NWP flags. The president and everyone else at the White House won’t only be forced to hear our voice; they’ll have to hear our roar.

United, we are strong. United, we have faith in a better future. United, we can finally speak up.

“Olga!” *Matka* exclaims when I reach home. My mother’s mouth twists into a grimace as she takes in the NWP sash on my dress. “I told you not to meddle with *them*,” she hisses, dragging me into the foyer.

“This ‘*them*’ that you’re speaking of are women’s liberationists. And I had—”

“Olga, I don’t have time for this! A suitor and his family are coming to meet you soon, and I still have more work to do! Oh, and please take that sash off before *Ojciec* sees you. Wear something presentable,” *Matka* saunters into the kitchen before I can retort. I hear her mutter a quick prayer in Polish.

Minutes later, I stand in front of the mirror, my corset choking me. My voice is hoarse from screaming into my pillow, but *Matka* won’t let me speak in front of the suitor anyways.

I can’t do this. I can’t put my life in someone else’s hands at 19. My head starts to spin as nausea slowly creeps into my body.

With all that’s left in me, I make up my mind and go downstairs.

Nina (2017)

It takes me six minutes after I rush out the door to realize that I forgot my car keys in my office room. I'm too stubborn to show my face in the building again, which means I'll be walking home. In the rain. Without an umbrella. Great.

"Nina! Come in!" Grandma exclaims, opening the door. She takes in my damp hair and soaked clothes. "Tough day, huh?" Sitting me down in the kitchen, she finds a towel from somewhere and gently wraps it around me. I decided to come here instead of going back to my apartment because it's closer from work, and *maybe* I needed some comfort after today.

"Something like that," I bury my face into the towel. "Actually, well, work was horrible today." Grandma gives me a nod to continue while passing me a plate of scones. "Even though I'm the director, no one values my opinion. And I'm not just overthinking it."

As I continue, Grandma sighs and shakes her head. "Nina," she says. "These men don't respect you as a person, nor as a director. You told them why you believe the other actress deserves the role, and they didn't take your opinion into consideration?"

I shrug. "I don't know; sometimes, I just want to quit."

She pours me a glass of milk. "*Moja wnuczka*, listen. You got this job for a reason, and you absolutely deserve it. This is your chance as a director to stand up for yourself and help turn your movie's situation around for the better. It's your right to lead."

"I know, Grandma, but I just— I don't know if I can."

She pauses before responding, "My aunt did."

"Your aunt?" I ask. Grandma hasn't said much about her family before, and I'd never bothered to ask.

"Yes. My *Ciotka*. She was... amazing. When *Ciotka* was young, my grandparents tried to coerce her into marriage, but she refused. Instead of staying quiet, she went straight to my grandparents and told them how she felt. Obviously, they didn't take that very well," Grandma smiles. "For most people, that would've been the end of it. But *Ciotka* persisted. She even took them to one of the protests, for them to understand her better."

"What happened after that?"

Grandma shrugs. “My grandparents came to appreciate that she asserted herself and gave her their blessing to follow her dreams. They still tried to get her married, but she refused.

“Anyways, my point is,” she says, helping me dry out my hair, “You should never be afraid of speaking your mind. Especially,” Grandma adds, “if you do it in a respectful manner.” I pull her into a hug, and she chuckles, planting a kiss on my forehead.

Olga (1919)

“Olga! The Nineteenth Amendment!” Marie runs into my tiny flat, nearly shoving me in the process. “The Nineteenth Amendment just got passed!”

“Hu–what?” I squint at the newspaper, catching flashes of “Silent Sentinels,” “Congress,” and “19th Amendment” on the front.

“Women now have the right to vote! We did it!” she exclaims, clasping my hands as we spin around in circles.

We collapse in a squealing, giddy heap, thrilled that our constant protesting prompted the government into action, and visions of what the future might bring flash before me. Life as a women’s suffragist, continuing to work with NWP. Spending time with the next generation’s bright children, perhaps children not of my own, but my sisters’ instead. Becoming a role model for other women, inspiring them to raise their voices too.

For the first time in a while, I finally feel heard.

Nina (2017)

It’s time to fight for my voice.

“Thank you all for coming to this last-minute meeting,” I look each and every person in the eye, my newfound confidence surfacing. “We need to discuss our choice for the female lead.” Some of them raise eyebrows, tentatively glancing at each other.

Mr. Harris stares me down. I stare back at him. “I thought we already finalized our cast,” he finally says.

“*We*,” I point at me, “did not finalize our cast. You did. And as the director of this movie, you must allow me to speak my opinion.” It takes him a few seconds, but he nods.

“Thank you,” I say. “So, I did a little digging into how viewers feel about your previous action movies, and overall, the stats aren’t looking too good. Many women on social media have complained about the mild sexism and objectification of women in your movies, which we don’t want in this film. In other words, we don’t need another girl for the hero to toy around with. We need a female *lead*—someone who can shine on screen as well as the male lead does. By only focusing on what male audience members may like, you’re alienating the other 50% of possible viewers. If you want better ratings, you need to listen to the female audience and not just the male ones.” I suck in a breath.

I’m ready for the men to start protesting, but no one says a word. And then, to my surprise, they all start nodding in agreement—even Mr. Harris.

I fail at my weak attempt to hide my smile. My voice feels free, thanks in part to Grandma’s aunt.

I want to do the same. I want to use my voice to help others, to let them know that they have a right to their voice. I want to show them that their voices are gifts, and our world is a better place when they are heard.

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My Voice: A Catalyst for Change

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