

**NOT
THAT
KIND
OF
GIRL**

A young woman
tells you what
she's "learned"

Lena Dunham

***Not That
Kind of Girl***



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She's "Learned"*

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For my family, of course.

For Nora.

And for Jack,
who is just as she said he would be.

Deep in her soul, however, she was waiting for something to happen. Like a sailor in distress, she would gaze out over the solitude of her life with desperate eyes, seeking some white sail in the mists of the far-off horizon. She did not know what this chance event would be, what wind would drive it to her, what shore it would carry her to, whether it was a longboat or a three-decked vessel, loaded with anguish or filled with happiness up to the portholes. But each morning, when she awoke, she hoped it would arrive that day....

—GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, *Madame Bovary*

*How quickly you transform
the energy life throws you into
folded bows of art.*

—MY FATHER, admonishing me

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

I AM TWENTY years old and I hate myself. My hair, my face, the curve of my stomach. The way my voice comes out wavering and my poems come out maudlin. The way my parents talk to me in a slightly higher register than they talk to my sister, as if I'm a government worker that's snapped and, if pushed hard enough, might blow up the hostages I've got tied up in my basement.

I cover up this hatred with a kind of aggressive self-acceptance. I dye my hair a fluorescent shade of yellow, cutting it into a mullet more inspired by photos of 1980s teen mothers than by any current beauty trend. I dress in neon spandex that hugs in all the wrong places. My mother and I have a massive fight when I choose to wear a banana-printed belly shirt and pink leggings to the Vatican and religious tourists gawk and turn away.

I'm living in a dormitory that was, not too long ago, an old-age home for low-income townspeople and I don't like thinking about where they might be now. My roommate has moved to New York to explore farm-to-fork cooking and lesbianism, so I'm alone, in a ground-floor one-bedroom, a fact I relish until one night a female rugby player rips my screen door off the hinges and barges into the dorm to attack her philandering girlfriend. I've bought a VHS player and a pair of knitting needles and spend most nights on the sofa, making half a scarf for a boy I like who had a manic break and dropped out. I've made two short films, both of which my father deemed "interesting but beside the point," and am so paralyzed

as a writer that I've started translating poems from languages I don't speak, some kind of Surrealist exercise meant to inspire me but also prevent me from thinking the perverse, looping thoughts that come unbidden: I am hideous. I am going to be living in a mental hospital by the time I am twenty-nine. I will never amount to anything.

You wouldn't know it to see me at a party. In a crowd I am recklessly cheerful, dressed to the nines in thrift-shop gowns and press-on fingernails, fighting the sleepiness that comes from the 350 milligrams of medication I take every night. I dance the hardest, laugh the hardest at my own jokes, and make casual reference to my vagina, like it's a car or a chest of drawers. I got mono last year, but it never really went away. Occasionally, one of my glands blows up to the size of a golf ball and protrudes from my neck like one of the bolts that keep Frankenstein's monster intact.

I have friends: a kind group of girls whose passions (baking, pressing flowers, community organizing) do not stir me. I feel guilt about this, a sense that my inability to be at home with them proves, once and for all, that I am no good. I laugh, I agree, I find reasons to go home early. I have the nagging sense that my *true* friends are waiting for me, beyond college, unusual women whose ambitions are as big as their past transgressions, whose hair is piled high, dramatic like topiaries at Versailles, and who never, ever say "too much information" when you mention a sex dream you had about your father.

But that's also how I felt in high school, sure that *my* people were from elsewhere and going elsewhere and that they would recognize me when they saw me. They would like me enough that it wouldn't matter if I liked myself. They would see the good in me so that I could, too.



On Saturdays my friends and I load into somebody's old Volvo and head to a thrift store, where we buy tchotchkes that reek of other people's lives and clothes that we believe will enhance our own. We all want to look like characters on the sitcoms of our youth, the teenagers we admired when we were still kids. None of the pants ever fit me, unless I head into the maternity section, so I buy mostly sacklike dresses and Cosby sweaters.

Some days, my haul is massive: a peach power suit with subtle coffee stains, leggings with trompe l'oeil chains running down the sides, a pair of boots specially made for someone with legs of different lengths. But some days the