

# DIFFICULT WOMEN



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# Strange Gods

There are things you do not know about me. These things are not inconsequential. We woke up this morning and before we got out of bed, you kissed my bare shoulder. I could still smell you from last night on my skin. You reached from beneath your pillow and set a small velvet box on my stomach, told me I could not say no. I opened the box and saw a bright prism of light, then tucked it under my own pillow, turned away. I smiled into the sheets, tried to control my breathing, lay perfectly still. You huffed and got out of bed and stomped around the house muttering things you wanted me to hear about commitment and patience and pushing limits. After you were dressed, you kissed me on the forehead and left for work but before closing the front door, you shouted, “You really are too fucking much!” That gave me a thrill. I love when you use foul language. This morning was your fifth proposal in four years; I understand your frustration. The first time, I slapped you. I left a mark. I’m sorry. In my defense, I was angry you would commit the rest of your life to me.

My mother holds on to grudges. To this day she can recount every wrong. She once told me to never forget anything. She said there’s no such thing as forgiveness. Then she reminded me of the time I was in first grade and got an answer wrong on a homework assignment, how I stuffed the paper with the teacher’s corrections into the folds of my bus seat because I knew my parents would be displeased. She told me how sad it made her that a six-year-old could understand deceit.

Our neighborhood was nestled in a vast forest of deciduous trees. I learned the word *deciduous* in the sixth grade. It is one of the few pieces of knowledge I retained because I love the meaning of the word, how the deciduous trees get rid of those things they no longer need, those things that have fulfilled their purpose. We spent a lot of time in those woods. We explored and made maps and created secret places meant for hiding. We grew older and the woods became less a place of discovery. We secreted ourselves between thick tree trunks, beneath the dark canopy of leaves. We smoked cigarettes and drank Mad Dog 20/20 and basked in being the worst kinds of suburban clichés. I also learned the word *dendrochronology*—analyzing the patterns of tree rings to know everything that has ever happened to a tree. This is how I love you. I am peeling back my skin, layer by layer, so you will finally know everything inside me.

My first boyfriend was a beautiful boy named Steven Winthrop. He had an older brother who went to Harvard. Steven loved to wear a Harvard sweatshirt to school over a polo shirt with the collar popped. He had long, dirty-blond hair and let his bangs hang over his eyes. Whenever he looked at me through his hair with his perfect green eyes, I thought maybe I loved him. We lived in a small subdivision of twenty-four colonial homes all less than a decade old. My father, a historian, thought it was an uncomfortable thing, the juxtaposition of new and old. He called our neighborhood a simulacrum, said everything in it was false and constructed. My mother would roll her eyes when he said things like this. She'd say, "And yet here we are," and he would grumble and go to his well-appointed study to grade and bemoan the illiteracy of college students.

The man who came before you once shared his recipe for the perfect date meal. He said it was simple food that tasted amazing. You are nothing like him. He said women were so impressed with the meal they not only slept with him; they also washed the dishes. Take two thick rib-eye steaks, richly marbled with fat. Season them liberally with coarse sea salt and freshly ground pepper. Preheat the

oven to 450 degrees. On the stove and using a cast-iron pan, sear the steaks on each side, sealing in the juices. Put the steaks into the oven using the same pan, and allow them to cook for five to seven minutes. Serve with fresh hot bread with butter over very cold lettuce using the meat's juices as dressing.

My mother always told me to cut away the fat from steak because it wasn't good for me. She's a vegetarian and holds a natural distrust of animal flesh and food slaughtered in captivity. I don't cut the fat from meat anymore. I love to eat it, love to feel it hot and salty and gelatinous between my teeth. I love the way it coats my throat and how it upsets my stomach, reminds me I am doing something I should not do.

That boyfriend served me his perfect meal. I slept with him after I washed his dishes but I don't credit the food, which was, as promised, perfect. The wine we drank was red and thick and sweet and it made everything in his hot, cramped kitchen blurry. We were drinking directly from the third bottle, laughing when we blew down the skinny glass neck and awkward sounds echoed back like we were playing recorders. He stood behind me and sank his teeth into my neck. His breath was warm and boozy and as his teeth pressed through my skin, I leaned into him. Later, I couldn't even walk to his bedroom. I was so drunk I crawled and he followed, pressing his bare foot against my ass to shove me forward. I let him do that. I did. He brought another bottle of wine. He threw me onto his bed, undressed me, and rolled me on my stomach.

Cooking is not something I enjoy. My mother often told me a woman should never cook for a man because doing so would give him permission to take her for granted. She resented my father in spite of her love for him. She resented that he got to come and go as he pleased and she resented the commonness of her resentment. She resented being smarter than him. Once I started school, my mother often spent her days in the back of my father's classrooms listening to him lecture. There's something about a man standing at a chalkboard, she would say. At night, she would help him grade and prepare conference presentations and write scholarly articles. She

would say, "I should go back to school," and he would pat her hand and chuckle and this made me resent him, too. You have never given me cause to resent you.

As I lay with my face pressed into his coarse sheets he spread my thighs. He planted a sweaty hand against the back of my neck, holding me down, and he fucked me with his wine bottle, the expensive merlot splashing all over the place. He had seen it in a movie once, he said. He was opening me up, he said. I wondered if the wine stained my womb. In that moment I felt wretched and low. It was a moment of such perfect honesty I came and he knew it. He stood above me watching me tremble and whimper and bite my lower lip. He said, "That's right, baby," with wonderment. I let him do much more. I did. The next morning, I had a dry headache and my mouth was a horrible, lonely place. I found my clothes and my keys and when I got home, I dropped my purse in the entryway and went upstairs and walked into the shower without removing my clothes. I stood there beneath the cold water, my jeans and my slutty T-shirt clinging to my body uncomfortably, fresh bruises spreading across my back, down my ass, between my thighs. I thought about how I am fond of repetition.

My best friend is in love with me. You know and you like it. You enjoy having something someone else wants. I like it, too. You worry my attention will wander because I have slept with women but they are too kind and too cruel and you are too true. My best friend is crazy and not in a charming way that inspires interesting stories. She is a middle child, raised by diplomats in the Foreign Service. She became scarred from moving around so much, being forced to blend in across so many cultures. You like to say she is unwell while twirling your finger next to your left ear and whistling loudly. She has an equally crazy girlfriend who lives in Northern California on some kind of hippie commune. They see each other during solstices and spend the rest of their time corresponding with long letters filled written in tiny, disturbed penmanship. Sometimes, her parents call our place to see if we've heard from her. They're afraid she's going to be one of those sad people who die alone in

their home and aren't discovered until it's too late—green and swollen, skin sloughing off. Before I met you, she and I were not different.

I know why you're with me or at least how what is between us began. I'm brown enough to satisfy your desire to be with someone exotic but I'm not so brown as to create insurmountable problems when we spend time with your family. You like to make jokes about how I'm the best of both worlds with my white father and my black mother and my good education—my bland Midwestern accent and caramel skin. You love me most in the summer when we spend our afternoons on the lake, bronzing and drinking and surrendering to mosquitoes and suntan lotion. My skin gets darker beneath the high sun but not dangerously so. It shines and when I'm sweaty, you like to lick my shoulder. You pull at my body with your teeth and moan from somewhere deep and I know you're mine. You are a much better lover in the summer.

Sometimes we venture into the water, curling our toes in the warm silt beneath our feet and you spin us around and around the shallow until we're dizzy. We walk far away from the shore, pressing through the water, talking about silly things. We go just past that shelf where the lake floor drops to unknown depths. You float on your back and I float between your thighs, resting my arms on your legs. You point back at the shore and say, look how far we can go when we're together, and the moment always chokes me. Three summers ago you asked me for the second time to marry you as we floated out there on the wide, blue water. I pulled away from you and let my body submerge completely. I opened my eyes and watched you looking down at me, your arms making wide, gentle waves. I said yes, my words slowly bubbling to the surface.

I love you because you're simple but not in that trite, insulting way to which men are often relegated. No. You are simple because you are an optimist. You believe that those who lead a good life will be blessed with all good gifts. You say we are good people. You say we deserve to be happy. I say I am not good and you say you know better. Your generosity of spirit moves me. I look at you with your



beautiful eyes and your smooth face, your open heart and your soft hands. I am a vile thing next to you. I am not beautiful or smooth or soft or simple. We rarely argue, but not for my lack of trying. I lose my temper and you stand there calmly and that makes me even angrier. I make impossible demands and you satisfy them. I say appalling things and you never throw my words back in my face. Only once have you walked out on me. I lied and said I hated you. I said we were just using each other. I said you were suffering from a severe case of jungle fever. Your eyes widened and I could tell I had finally pushed you too far. You wrapped one hand around my throat and pushed me across the room until my back was flat against the wall. As you raised your other hand, my breath caught and I relaxed. My whole body felt loose and free because I finally found who I was looking for inside you. I closed my eyes and waited. I waited for you to hurt me the way I deserved, the way I needed, but you didn't. You loosened your grip and you said nothing. As you walked away, you paused, turned, and pointed one finger at me. Your hand was shaking.

Balloons make me cry, as do marching bands and fireworks. When I was five, I was holding a perfect red balloon in a crowded shopping mall. My mother and I were on the escalator going down. I accidentally let go of my balloon. I started running up the escalator after it, tried to grasp at the escaping string, but I never got anywhere and then I fell against the steel teeth beneath me and broke my collarbone. My mother rushed me to the hospital and stood guard over me. I started to understand how much she loved me and I was terrified to know I mattered that much. There was little the hospital could do for me once they reset the bone. As two doctors held me down and pulled my bones into their proper places, my mother bared her teeth, violently rocking back and forth like something feral. The room went quiet. The doctor put my arm in a sling to keep it immobilized, to allow my body to heal, and quickly left the room. My mother never allowed me to ride an escalator again. That's why I have great calves.

I am my mother's daughter. If something happened to you, I would have to be put down. I would become an animal.

I was a mother once and you were a father and we had a baby or at least the idea of a baby was taking hold in my womb and in our hearts. We bought books and looked for a bigger home and we didn't tell anyone, not because we were worried but because it was wonderful to have this perfect mystery between us. You were the one who woke up with my blood on your thighs and you drove us to the hospital and carried me inside as terrible cramps rolled through me. You cried when the idea of our baby could no longer hold on. Scar tissue and uterine retroversion and plain bad luck, the doctor told us. How could you not know it would be difficult to conceive a child, the doctor asked. When you left the room, the doctor looked at me over the rims of his glasses. He placed his warm and slightly sweaty hand on mine, careful not to press too hard on the IV. He said, "Something happened to cause this kind of damage, the scarring." He said, "I'm sorry. It was a miracle you were pregnant at all." You came back to my room with flowers. You crawled into the bed next to me, and kissed my forehead over and over. For the fourth time you asked me to marry you. I curled into your body. I tried to hold on to you.

Hunting was big where we lived when I was young. Sometimes I'd see men pulling dead deer from the backs of their trucks, the slain animals looking alive save for a neat bullet hole blackened around the edges or a bleeding arrow wound in the neck. Hunters would hang their kill on the scale and gambrel at the general store in town. My mother would always try to cover my eyes but I would elude her protective embrace. I would stare at the fallen deer. I remember their dead bodies and how their eyes were always open during this final indignity.

Steven Winthrop is a real estate agent in Atlanta. He appears quite successful. He looks the same as he always has. His forehead has increased in size and there is a small victory in that, but on the whole, he remains handsome. He specializes in corporate real estate. On his website, he is wearing a gray suit and a pink tie. Beneath his

name, a motto: "Experience ex-SELL-ence." I wrote down the address of his office, his email, his phone number. I pressed down so hard the imprint of that information remains on my desk. When I'm working, I rub my fingers over the indentations of the numbers four, six, nine, seven, two. Last Christmas, while we were visiting my parents, I saw him twice. The first time, he was getting out of a late-model German luxury sedan with a tall blond woman and a little boy who looked just like him. He started to wave but stopped, his arm awkwardly hanging in midair. The second time, he was standing on his parents' front porch smoking while I was smoking. When he saw me, he didn't look away and neither did I. He didn't wave and neither did I. After three cigarettes, he stepped off his porch and headed toward me. I ran back into the house. I hid in my bedroom closet, where it was dark and tight. I couldn't breathe. You found me and when I wouldn't move, you sat with me.

A proper deer blind is well camouflaged and has a good gun rest. It should be sturdy, well balanced, and have some kind of floor covering for noise reduction. Steven Winthrop found an abandoned cabin in the woods behind our subdivision. It had two small windows at the right height to serve as gun rests and a dirt floor covered in rocks and sticks, stale cigarette butts, old beer and soda cans, shell casings, and a bright orange hunting vest. A small bench sat along one wall but other than that, the cabin was empty. "Hunters must have used it as a deer blind at some point," Steven said, "but I think they've moved on."

You were gone for three days after I finally pushed you too far, said things that could not be unsaid. Each of those days I went to work. I sat in my office and smiled and pretended to be alive. At night I drove around looking for you. I parked in front of your parents' house and watched their television flicker as they sat in their recliners. I drove by the homes of everyone you've ever known. I called your phone and left messages ordering you home. I logged into your email and bank accounts looking for a clue but you had disappeared completely. By the third night the whole wide world felt unknowable. I left a note in case you came home and I

went to the worst part of town. I walked into the loudest bar and looked for the meanest man. He bought me drinks and I drank them until my tongue felt heavy in my mouth and it was impossible to say the word *no*. He was tall and skinny but his body was tightly coiled with muscle. He had olive skin and narrow eyes and a wide nose. His face and neck were covered in stubble. There was a tattoo of an anatomical heart on the inside of his right wrist and when he wrapped his hand through my hair, the heart pulsed. I would have followed him home, and let him do what he pleased with me. I would have let him punish me but as we were standing in front of the bar, in a halo of cigarette smoke, my phone rang. I saw your name on the glowing screen. I fell to my knees.

In college, my best friend was also my roommate. She didn't date much. She was too strange for the gay-until-graduation girls, even at our overpriced, liberal university. Instead she followed me around all the time, earning the nickname Shadow. She thought it was a compliment. That's who she is—she never quite understands how things really are or at least she pretends so people will think she's harmless. I have a soft spot for that sort of thing. I would bring boys and girls back to our room. She would pretend to be asleep. I would pretend to believe she wasn't pretending. I would fuck boys and girls and I wasn't quiet about it and whenever I looked across the room, I saw that strange girl staring at me, the whites of her eyes shining, her breath ragged and matching mine.

The meanest man grabbed me by my hair again and pulled my face toward his crotch. He was already hard, insistent against my cheek. I swallowed hard and told him the whole night had been a misunderstanding. I said I had to excuse myself rather primly and he laughed. He laughed so loudly his voice echoed around us and out onto the street, and after a few seconds, he loosened his grip and pulled me to my feet. He said he hadn't laughed that hard in the longest time. He let me go home to you. You were pacing when I walked through the front door and I was still drunk so I started crying. You yelled at me. Your hands were shaking again. You tried to hug me but I held a hand out in front of me, kept you away. "You

don't want to touch me," I said. "I'm all fucked up." You agreed. You said, "Yes, baby. You are," and that was the first time you asked me to marry you. I didn't mean to slap you. It was instinct. As soon as I felt the bone of your cheek beneath my hand, you smiled. You winced and held my hand to your face, then pressed your lips to my palm. You pulled me against you tightly and said you were sorry for leaving. No matter how hard I struggled, you didn't let me go.

Steven Winthrop and I would often ride our bikes single file in the woods because the path was well worn but very narrow. I would linger behind him and admire his lean, athletic body and bask in the wake of him. Sometimes, we would have little picnics in the abandoned deer blind. We pretended we were sophisticated and romantic. We read Judy Blume novels aloud. We kissed for hours and he would lie on top of me, his Harvard sweatshirt soft against my skin. He would slide his hands beneath my shirt and trace my rib cage and tell me I had a beautiful body even though I had none to speak of. His lips always tasted like Red Grape Mad Dog and Swisher Sweets, no matter the time of day.

Your mother does not hate me but she once pulled me aside while you and your father were out chopping wood. She took me into her living room and handed me a glass of wine. She smiled politely, shifted in her seat, rested a hand on my knee, and said what all white mothers say when their precious white sons consort with brown girls. She was worried for our hypothetical children, how difficult it would be for those children, how difficult, really, it would be for her. She did not know about the idea of the baby we once held between us. She said I was different and special but that maybe we should consider the suitability of our union. I thought about the two of us in that hospital bed, how we mourned for so long. I snapped at her, said any child whose parents make six figures would probably not suffer too terribly. I told her my parents had never been a problem for me. Her eyes narrowed and she said money isn't everything, that my parents were the exception. That's why she thinks I'm greedy. I spoke without thinking. I told your mother I couldn't have children, not without serious medical

intervention, and her eyes shone brightly. Her whole body hummed. You should know that about your mother.

I believed in Steven Winthrop more than I believed in God. Sometimes we would sneak into his brother's bedroom and look at dirty magazines like *Juggs* and *Gallery* and then he would paw at me and try to understand how my body worked, contorting my limbs like the girls on the glossy pages. I let him do these things even when he made me feel more like meat than girl. My senior year in college, I worked in a porn store during the graveyard shift. The radio station was permanently set on a rock station. I know the words to every classic rock song. That's why I am excellent at karaoke. The store had ten jack shacks where men could rent and watch videos in dark little booths. There was a two-screen movie theater and aisle after aisle of rubber fists and vibrators in the shape of sea animals and red fur-lined handcuffs and high-end glossy Europorn. The best part of the job was selecting movies to air in the theaters. I found the most disturbing pornographic options—obese women being fucked by midgets, geriatric ladies getting hammered by Asian guys, amputees fucking twins with their stumps. It felt like justice.

I'm an only child. My parents had me and realized they had enough love for only one child and I have always appreciated their self-awareness. You have a brother and a sister and you're nothing like them. It's obvious to anyone that your parents love you most and maybe that's why your siblings are always in trouble. Your sister and I have a lot in common. I can tell by the curve of her spine—her body knows things. You worry I'm going to get tired of her late night phone calls asking you for a ride from the bar or to lend her money. You worry I'll get fed up with being trapped in the tense scenes when your family gets together but I won't, not ever. When you go out of town, your sister comes over and spends the night with me because she understands the curve of my spine. We watch Food Network and order pizza. We drink wine and sit on the deck holding sparklers, giggling as the shower of light burns our skin. We fall asleep on the couch and silently count the moments

until your return. It's not easy keeping a terrible mess from spilling all over the place. You and I will always do what we can for her until she finds someone to help her hold herself together the way you help me.

Men propositioned me a lot at the porn store. I let them. I did. Most customers were sad, poorly shaven, sagging but harmless. Others were not. A man once slid five crisp twenty-dollar bills and his business card across the counter in the small space hidden from the security cameras. Five minutes later, I followed him into a jack shack and sat next to him on the little bench. It was a dark, tight place, like the confessional, only more honest. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. While I listened for the chime of the front door, we watched Steven St. Croix and Chasey Lain go at it. Chasey stood against the shower door with one leg flung over her head. She was very flexible and wore green eye shadow that nicely complemented her blue eyes. I never got that man's name. He grabbed my hand and pulled it to his lap. His cock was dry and hot and small. I wanted the moment to end before it began but there was only one way out of that place. I didn't want to be hurt. He was not the last customer who gave me money in exchange for my mouth or my hand or something more. I still keep some of the business cards in a Rolodex in the back of our closet.

When you're my kind of mess, men can smell it on you. They hunt you down. Your brother is no exception. At your birthday party in July I was in the kitchen opening a fresh bag of ice. Everyone was out in the backyard, laughing and dancing beneath Japanese lanterns and citronella candles. You were drunk and doing the running man and pretending you were dancing ironically when you were really quite serious. You kept shouting for me to join you and you sang one line of your favorite song and I sang the next line back through the window over the kitchen sink. You're a happy drunk so I didn't mind the enthusiastic display even knowing later I would have to drag you to bed and help you get undressed and fall asleep with your heavy arm across my chest, your drunk snoring in my ear. Your brother came up behind me and I was startled. I thought I was

alone with you, surrounded by all our friends. Kool & the Gang was playing and I was swaying from side to side as I filled a bucket with fresh ice. My fingers were cold but the cold felt so nice. It was the hottest summer and even late at night, the air was thick and humid and humming.

Your brother grabbed me so hard his fingertips left eight small bruises on my hips. His breath reeked sweetly of fermented hops. He pulled me against his fleshy body, pressing his pointy chin into the top of my head. My stomach rolled uncomfortably and my chest tightened. I thought about my hatred of repetition. I stood perfectly still, slid my hands deeper into the bucket of ice, hoped for some mercy, hoped the ice would make my whole body numb so I wouldn't feel a thing. I didn't want to be hurt. He said, "I like a little coffee in my cream, too," and squeezed my ass, jiggling his hand. You called for me again and sounded so excited, like you hadn't seen me in the longest time. I said I would be right there and hoped I was telling you the truth. You proposed for the third time. You shouted, "Marry me, baby. Marry me now," and our friends laughed and cooed and I grinned and blew you a kiss. I said yes, but my voice got lost in the distance between us. My blood pounded so fiercely, I thought I might come apart. I told your brother, "Don't do this. Don't break his heart. Don't break mine." He trapped me between his body and the counter and the pressure of him took my breath away. Your brother made an ugly sound but he walked away. When he's around, I feel him watching me, waiting. Please don't ever leave me alone with him.

I told my not-so-best-friend, college roommate about my whoring past years after we graduated. We stayed in touch though I am not sure why. I suppose she was all I had. She thought it was the most interesting story. That was the exact phrase she used. We were sitting in her living room drinking gin and tonics and listening to some terrible womyn's music. She sat cross-legged, staring at me, her forehead furrowed deeply. "That is the most interesting story," she said, slightly breathless, overenunciating each word. She asked for an account of each indiscretion, rocking back and forth as I



made her my confessor. Her skin flushed darkly and she licked her lips over and over. Imagining me being used turned her on. She's overeducated and has taken too many women's studies classes. She uses words like *empowerment* sincerely. When my accounting was complete, she moved so close our knees were touching and placed her hand in the small of my back. She nuzzled her lips against my neck and I shivered uncomfortably. I leaned away, smiled politely. She slid her other hand beneath my shirt, gently cupped my breast, and then I was on my back, staring at the ceiling as she pressed her warm cheek against the flat of my stomach. She asked, "What would it cost me to be with you?" I hated her. I planted my hands against her shoulders, pushed her away, which only made her angry. She straddled my waist, pinning my arms to my sides. I recognized the look in her eyes, marveled that it was not unique to men. I brought my knee up between her thighs, hard, and she cried out, rolled off me. For the first time in my life, I said, "No." The word felt glorious and strange on my lips.

My mother took me to confession once a week, on Thursdays after school. I waited in the pews while she confessed her sins and I would try to hear what she was saying so I might have a clearer sense of what God expected. I was, for a time, a good girl. I got good grades. I had good manners. I said please and thank you. I wore skirts of an appropriate length. When I sat in the confessional, I couldn't breathe. I hated being in that dark tight place. I sat there and listened to the priest, Father Garibaldi, how he would lick his dry lips and urge me to confess, to confess, to repent. He smelled like garlic. He once gave me a pamphlet, *A Young Person's Guide to the Rosary and Confession*. I learned about the joyful, the sorrowful, the glorious mysteries of the rosary and how to go to confession, how to use the Ten Commandments as my moral guide. I would hear his frustration when I still had nothing to say, when I was unable to account for my misdeeds.

Popular teenage boys travel in packs. Steven Winthrop was the leader of a pack of five. Wherever Steven and his friends went, they moved in disciplined formation, their strides perfectly matched,

arms swinging at the same speed. They knew how to fill the space around them. His friends believed in Steven Winthrop more than they believed in God. In *A Young Person's Guide to the Rosary and Confession*, the First Commandment stated, "I am the Lord your God; thou shall have no strange Gods before me." We defied our immortal salvation for Steven Winthrop. We did so with joy in our hearts. You too have always been popular. I have seen the evidence in your childhood bedroom, meticulously preserved by your mother. Even now, you have packs of men following you, willing to make you their strange god. That is the only thing about you that scares me.

You lost your virginity during your sophomore year in college. You think it is almost shameful that you waited when people thought you hadn't. You think it is trite that you loved the first girl you ever made love to, that you planned your first time the way you plan everything—with a great deal of consideration and attention to detail. You cried after your first time because you finally felt complete. You told me this on our first real vacation, ten days in Barcelona when we didn't talk about work or our families or anything ugly. Instead we embarrassed ourselves when we spoke our college Spanish and visited castles and cathedrals and walked up and down Las Ramblas. We talked about how small we felt in the world and all the people who brought us to each other. You think I lost my virginity my junior year in college to a guy named Ethan. You laughed when I told you this fable, said there was no way a man named Ethan could satisfy a woman. You said you loved that I waited, too. You said you wish you had waited for me. I said I wish I had been given the choice and then I changed the subject.

On a perfect Thursday afternoon in June, when I was still so much just a girl, Steven Winthrop took me to our secret place in the woods. As I rode behind him, I kept staring up at the clear shafts of light piercing through the canopy above. I laughed and laughed and I shouted, "I love you!" into the wind. He turned back at me and grinned. When we got to the cabin, Steven Winthrop's pack was waiting for me. They offered me warm cans of beer but I said no.

They cracked jokes. I pretended to laugh. I pulled Steven Winthrop aside, said I didn't want to hang out with his friends. I tried to leave but those boys were far bigger than me. They blocked the doorway and they laughed. They said, "This one is going to fight," and they said they had always wanted a little taste of brown sugar. I stood in the middle of the cabin as it became dark and tight. I couldn't breathe.

A therapist once told me that with time and distance memories fade. He lacked imagination or compassion. He also told me I was too pretty to have any real problems. I started seeing him because I was eating everything in sight. From the moment I woke up until I went to sleep I stuffed myself with food. I ate past the point of disgust, until I could see my stomach rolling and misshapen beneath my skin. I was never hungry but I ate and kept eating until the people I knew stopped recognizing me. I ate until I made myself sick, until I made everyone I knew sick to look at me so I would never be trapped in a terrible place again. I won't ever go back to being a grotesquerie of flesh but at the time I needed someone to give me a reason to stop, to feel safe and that therapist, he sat in his expensive Herman Miller chair with his legs crossed effeminately and he helped me catalog my beauty but had nothing else to offer.

Steven Winthrop said, "I'm going first." That's when I understood. He ordered his pack to hold me down. The boys dug their fingers into my wrists and ankles and I screamed so loudly my voice unraveled. Steven Winthrop howled while he fucked me. He pounded his fists against my chest. He shouted, "I am the virgin hunter!" and his friends laughed and shouted in unison, "He is the virgin hunter!" Steven Winthrop's sweat fell into my eyes and then I was blind. I could not see. He smelled so ugly—sour and metallic—and his body was so heavy. He was rabid. He whispered in my ear, called me baby. He told me I liked it. When he came, he groaned loudly in my ear, stayed on me, panting for a long time. His sweat stained me. His pack grew impatient so Steven Winthrop rolled off and pulled his pants up in one motion and then he lay on his side watching. When our eyes met, he didn't look away. He smiled.

The pack took their turns. Their bodies were hard, muscular, demanding, insatiable. They tore me apart. They didn't care that I fought. The smallest of the pack was the cruelest, the most determined to undo me. The more wildly I resisted, the louder they brayed. After an hour or so, Steven Winthrop and his pack took a break, breathless and sweaty. They congratulated each other; they were proud. I sat in the corner of the cabin, my knees pulled to my chest. I stared up through a hole in the ceiling at the perfect sky on a perfect June day. When they started again, I stopped fighting. I just looked into the sun as it set and I looked into the dusky sky and I looked into the early dark of night.

Later, after the rest of the pack went home, Steven Winthrop helped me get dressed. Of all his cruelties, his kindness was the worst. He spit on my torn underwear and used it to wipe my face clean before slipping it into his pocket. He pulled my jeans up over my thighs and gently buttoned them. He kissed my navel and the bruises flowering around it. He pulled my T-shirt over my head and put his letter jacket around my shoulders. He kissed my forehead and told me I was a good girl. We were silent as we walked our bikes home. He escorted me all the way to the edge of my driveway. My parents came running out. They shrieked that they were worried sick and had called the police. They asked Steven where he had found me, their voices pitching even higher.

"I found her wandering in the woods while I was looking for my dog," Steven said. "I wish I could have found her sooner." My parents grew silent, took a hard look at me, said they hardly recognized me. They tried to hug me but I held my hands in front of my body, backed away, begged them to please not touch me, to just let me be. My mother shook her head slowly, holding her hand over her mouth. She cried. My father ran into the house to call an ambulance and when he returned, he thanked Steven for helping me. My father's hands shook as he took Steven's in his, squeezed them tightly. He told Steven to get inside before his parents worried, said there were dangerous people in the world, said the police might want to talk to him. Steven flashed his perfect smile but could no

longer look me in the eye as he leaned in, held my wrist, kissed my cheek. I moaned softly and hunched over, vomiting into the bed of yellow daisies surrounding the mailbox.

At the hospital, detectives and social workers and doctors and nurses asked me who had done this terrible thing. They took pictures and plucked and scraped and splayed me open like the deer on the scale and gambrel. They asked more questions, gave me a gray jogging suit, said they needed my clothes. I said nothing. I couldn't breathe. I wished for rain to find me, to fall, to wash everything clean. It was almost three in the morning when we returned home, my father driving, muttering angrily through gritted teeth. I sat in the back with my mother, Steven Winthrop's letter jacket still draped around my shoulders. As we walked into the house, I saw him watching from his bedroom. I let his jacket fall off my shoulders and onto the ground. After I took a shower, my mother sat on the edge of my bed, brushing wet curls away from my face. She twisted her wedding ring back and forth nervously. She said, "You don't ever have to talk about this." She said, "We can pretend this never happened." I didn't and we did.

Venison is peculiar meat—muscular and gamy, tough to digest but popular in many circles. I do not care for venison. I don't trust any meat slaughtered in the wild. You like to hunt, spending ten days in the woods each fall with your father and brother, huddled in tiny deer blinds, doused in deer piss, your fingers numb with cold. Hunting makes you feel like a man, you say. Every season you bring me butchered venison, venison sausage, venison jerky, ground venison. Your mother gave us a deep freezer and we store your spoils in the basement, carefully labeled. The word *venison* comes from the Latin word *venari*, to hunt. I find that cruel, to name something for that end which comes to pass.

You are the joy in my life. I am a mess but I will be the joy in yours. What we have is a perfect thing, like the baby or the idea of a baby we once had, how our unborn child was this sacred secret we held between our hearts. When you touch me, you feel through me, through the ugliness beneath my skin, you make me feel, you hold

me together, you push my skin back into its proper place. When you see me next, I will be wearing your ring on my left finger. I will say yes. You will hear me.