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BY LENA DUNHAM

*Not That Kind of Girl*

*Famesick*

# Lena Dunham Famesick

A Memoir

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## Part I

## I'm Not a Girl

Having a well-managed versus a carelessly managed reputation plays out for a woman in practical terms.

—Lili Anolik (on Eve Babitz vs. Joan Didion), *Vanity Fair*

I've felt way too much sorrow for my little and abundant life lolol.

—Cyrus Dunham via text message

## Chapter One

## I Get Ideas

When I was freshly twenty, on summer break from college—a place tucked between scenic Midwestern cornfields and a postindustrial wasteland where meth had replaced sprockets as the major export—I made my first short film. I called it a satire, although I'm not sure I knew what that meant. It was about a teenage art dealer (played by my brother when he was still presenting as female) who ruled her gallery with an iron fist, bossing around people three and four times her age, an idea that seemed like a fairy tale but was, in retrospect, a rather prescient vision of my life to come.

I cast my family, used our home as both production office and set, and made ruthless fun of the very industry that had allowed me to grow up in the city and attend the esteemed liberal arts school I was currently enrolled in. I haven't watched the film in twenty years—I'm sure I would be both charmed and alarmed by its amateur presentation—but at the time, it felt like one small step for me, one huge step for womankind. It's that kind of hubris that defines being a young artist, and which should never be beaten out of anyone.

I submitted the film to Sundance's even more indie counterpart, Slamdance, and when I was accepted, it felt like the beginning of my life—not just as a filmmaker, but as a human being. I booked tickets to Park City and dragged along my two best friends at the time, Audrey and Sara—two stunningly petite brunettes who made me feel both more and less worthwhile when they flanked me. There was a Facebook group for accepted filmmakers, where cheap house shares were available, and we secured a single king-size bed in a run-down ski lodge, splitting the house—which had a dusty pair of antlers over the nonworking fireplace and a dubious “native” decorating scheme—with film bros in their thirties and their wanly supportive girlfriends. All we knew is that the film festival promised celebrity sightings (I kept track in scrawled notes on the back of an envelope—Jared Leto! Gary Coleman holding hands with Teri Hatcher! Scott fucking Speedman!) and, if we played our cards right, the chance to get very drunk with our fake IDs.

On the first night, we trooped in snow boots to a crowded “western”-themed establishment bar, where men shoved business cards at us—JOHN JOHNSON, INDEPENDENT PRODUCER—and we took advantage of the open bar, slamming cocktails which, we were told, were lower in alcohol because this was Mormon country. Audrey, with her winged black eyeliner and sideswept bangs, even attracted the attention of celebrity DJ Steve Aoki, who invited us to join him at a “Motorola x Budweiser activation.” How would we even be able to go back to college, eat in the sad light of the cafeteria, and take a class called “Intro to the History of Modern Agriculture,” after all this excitement?

The next day, my twelve-minute short aired to a sleepy crowd of twelve people—and my glory was over faster than the sex we'd been having with undergraduate men back in Ohio. The disappointment had barely set in—all the desperate all-nighters in the

media lab had amounted to this?—before I became enraptured by the short that came next. It was distinctly more impressive and assured than mine, well-shot, replete with pro actors and puppet choreography. Called “The Back of Her Head,” it told the story of a shy indie boy with a crush on the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in the apartment across the way. I was sure the filmmaker must be an adult, with years of experience perfecting his craft—this was the *(500) Days of Summer* of romantic puppet shorts! But when it was time for the filmmaker to stand up and take his bow, a pair of college boys stood up, baby-faced and dressed in the knowingly grandpa-ish garb that signified indie culture at the time. As they walked to the stage for the Q and A, one of them tripped. The audience gasped. They tripped again. They kept tripping all the way to the stage, a bit of immersive theater that nobody knew whether to laugh or wince at—nobody, that was, except for me, because I thought it was the funniest, most brilliant thing I'd ever seen in my fucking life. This was Josh and Benny Safdie, two Boston University students about my age, and we spent the rest of the festival running around with them, bound by a desire to make ebullient mayhem. By the end of the second night, as we ate dough balls on the pilled faux-suede couch in our ski lodge and talked about filmmakers I thought mattered only to me, I had decided they were the smartest boys I'd ever met.

Despite being undergrads themselves, Benny and Josh had already surrounded themselves with a remarkable group of technicians—cinematographers, production designers, actors—and when Josh graduated in May, he would set up a shop for them in a building on lower Broadway, not far from my parents' place. The office was a kind of dormitory for wildly talented indie film nerds: They were also native New Yorkers, and they ran with a crew of other filmmakers—boys, always boys—who had graduated

from Tisch, Columbia, schools where, unlike mine, the film departments consisted of more than a passed-around Super 8 camera, a broken projector, and one aging professor who enjoyed talking about Bergman and hugging us all for way too long.

While still in school, I took every trip home to New York as a chance to ingratiate myself further to them, offering to hold the boom, PA, wheatpaste fliers for screenings, or just pay for their dinner at a noodle shop in Chinatown because I was the only one still on an allowance. It was all worth it to listen to filmmakers act the way I thought filmmakers were supposed to act (I guess that was, in a word, *male*). All I wanted was to be around people who were making movies—not just talking about movies, or writing about movies on their Blogspots, like the one I kept where I reviewed Cassavetes films for no one—but really *making* them. Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost (the creators of both the film *and* the term *Catfish*, among other accomplishments), production designer Sam Lisenco, and early YouTube titans the Neistat Brothers had all taken offices in the same building. Ronald Bronstein and his wife, Mary, were hanging around, fresh off the festival runs of their films *Frownland* and *Yeast*. I'm not even counting the blond fuckboys with the streetwear brand or the guy who called himself a "sound sculptor" (obviously, that's the only one I got the chance to kiss).

Never in my life had I felt like I knew *what* was happening, much less known the locus of *where* it was happening. But 365 Broadway reminded me of the way my mother spoke about Soho in the early 1970s, when someone fascinating was always doing something fascinating, and all you had to do was get out of bed to find it. Sometimes the excitement even came to my bed, when we'd all pile in and watch some misunderstood classic like *Ishtar* on the flat-screen TV I'd inherited from my Uncle Bart, limbs tangled in that way you stop doing with your guy friends once

you enter your first real monogamous relationship (and never start again unless you're an adult who is into circus arts).

In the summer between my junior and senior years, the guys—who were known en masse as the Red Bucket collective—helped me film my first "feature" film, a misguided but ambitious hybrid of *vérité* digital and Godard-inspired Super 16 entitled *Creative Nonfiction*. The shoot, which took us to my great-aunt's house in Connecticut and the commune my mother had lived on when she was my age in the woods of Upstate New York, started with a literal bang when a light we had rented fell out the back of our white kidnap van on a country road at three A.M. A fight ensued: "WE'RE FUCKED. WE COULD BE ON THE HOOK FOR, LIKE . . ." None of us actually knew the amount—it could have been a thousand or a million, which were equal numbers as far as we were concerned—as Sam screamed at Brett who screamed at Chris who screamed at Josh, all certain the other one should have been responsible for properly latching the back doors. We returned the light, straight-faced, and never met a consequence. It seemed all was well that ended well, and we finished by dumping three massive bags of sand out on the floor of my mother's studio to create a faux desert and forgetting to clean it up.

When I graduated from Oberlin a year later, I decided the best use of my limited babysitting income would be to rent a 150-square-foot "studio" a floor below the Red Bucket office. Sara—the gamine film editrix who had accompanied me to Slamdance—took the desk next to mine. Now I wasn't just an interloper—I was a part of the fabric of the place.

A friend of theirs—an actress and writer named Greta Gerwig, who was already famous to me because she had starred in some of the premiere "mumblecore" films of the mid- to late 2000s that had beckoned from the shelves of Campus Video and

convinced me that a career in movies was within my reach—needed office space, too, and joined us on the fourth floor, where Sara and I were diligently shooting and editing episodes of a web series called *Delusional Downtown Divas*. Meant to skewer the art world, “DDD,” as we called it, averaged about 300 views, but it was a way to create at a breakneck pace, often shooting at actual art openings, live music events, and other spaces that made the lack of production budget look less glaring. It starred my three closest friends, Isabel, Joana, and Audrey—girls I’d met when I was one, three, and thirteen. At night, we partied prodigiously—in echoey lofts rented by boys who dressed like James Dean and had somehow been paid well for indie albums that didn’t chart, at the Jane Hotel, where you could spot the Olsen twins on a Tuesday night, and in our childhood homes when our parents left for the weekends.

During the week, I sped from my job selling couture-influenced baby attire to my little office, editing on a desktop computer I’d put on my first credit card and was paying off ten dollars at a time. Greta, meanwhile, used our little space as a place to film audition tapes, and occasionally I would act as her reader, assisting her in delivering scenes from scripts with code names like “Flight of the Pterodactyls” (this turned out to be a *Jurassic Park* sequel). We were all in awe when Greta booked her first studio film, *Greenberg*, and headed off to California—when she came home three months later, we threw her a massive party in Chinatown. When I asked her how it was, she shrugged and said, “Everyone hikes.”

This was, looking back, a very innocent time. Yes, there was drama—what are your early twenties if not a chance to burn every bridge and then build it back again, to hiss things like “Have a nice life, bitch.” A boy who knew a boy built us a loft to store our equipment and a ladder, in which he wood-burned the

Springsteen lyrics “I love you for your pink Cadillac” and so naturally I slept with him, then road-tripped with him to a wedding in Kentucky. By the end of the weekend, we weren’t speaking, except for when he demanded that I drive fifty miles on the highway in Baltimore so he could get some shut-eye, even though I had no license. Sara and I got into a fight when I found out she and her older paramour had been sleeping on the floor of the office at night, which seemed to me like an abuse of privileges (although it’s impossible now to imagine caring about that). Once, a jilted boyfriend of Audrey’s stomped into my office with a thrifted lamp she had forgotten at his place, smashed it, and screamed, “MAKE SURE TO TELL HER ABOUT THIS.”

We weren’t making money—if anything, we were losing it, living with our parents in order to be able to afford this odd little utopia. One day, Ariel (or ‘Rel, as we called him) spent hours constructing a phone system that went between floors, built from tin cans and twine, just so we could tell dirty jokes followed by “over and out.” To this day, I still get a pang every time I watch a documentary about an artist and they talk about this very moment, when they first became part of a creative community but nobody was doing it for the cash yet, when nobody had yet betrayed a trusted collaborator or called someone else a sellout. At the time, it all seems tentative and terrifying, impossible and inevitable. In all, it lasted only a year or so, but it felt much longer, or maybe wider—because it was when I *really* fell in love with movies, and it was also the first time I felt like someone worth knowing.

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I had been out of school for a year when the dread set in. Yes, we had the office. Yes, we had our day jobs—at that moment, I was

keeping Excel spreadsheets for an accountant who specialized in medical billing and palming my ass (a theme, it seemed, of young womanhood). But despite the merry mayhem of the movie dorm on Broadway, the sustainability of it all was starting to seem questionable. I could afford the rent on the office because I didn't need to pay for a place to live, but increasingly my parents seemed less delighted that I was home and more maddened by the logistics of living with someone old enough to drink but too young to honor a single instruction they gave about how to behave in their home. I couldn't bring myself to stay for longer than five months at any given job—it seemed to be about the cutoff when whoever was employing me would realize that I had no applicable skills.

I was involved with another Oberlin graduate who was living in San Francisco, and every few months I'd take out a new credit card to buy an economy ticket to visit him, where we would snort Adderall off his Selena poster and fuck half-heartedly on his desk chair in the weak light of sunrise over the Castro—but it was becoming clear that this placeholder was not, in fact, the great love of my life. Neither was the graphic designer who did taekwon do, or the ornithologist who called me every few weeks from the salmon fishing boat he was working on. At my brief job as a restaurant hostess—a few months that felt like years, during which I spent all my tips just to pay for cabs after sleeping past my alarm—I had met an older man; he was in his thirties and had a cleft lip, and I had immediately fixated on him, finding him sensual, damaged, and slightly dangerous. I left the job but kept his number, and we began having sex in the alleyway behind his job after he closed up at one A.M.—ostensibly for the thrill of it, but actually because he had a live-in girlfriend he referred to as “my roommate Hayley.” When I finally did see his home, which was a dilapidated row house he shared with a few

friends and his brother—who looked like how my paramour might have looked had he not loved cocaine—I was so shocked by the state of filth that I had to quickly decide whether to flee or deem it exotic. I chose the latter.

I could feel the disdain from my parents and sibling every time they cast their eyes over my pigsty of a bedroom, messy with expired makeup and polyester lacy underthings and mix CDs I'd stepped on in platforms while trying to creep into my bed in the dark. The rush of being newly out of college had maxed out.

Based on a comment from my mother—couched as concern, as these comments always are—I became aware that I had gained the freshman fifty and held on to it. And so I started dieting, counting my almonds, and eating cottage cheese with Splenda for all three meals (and a few snacks, too). I had gone from growing to shrinking—creeping into my father's closet every morning to weigh myself after my “first morning urination,” just as the pro-anorexia websites I frequented suggested. It was there that I would look myself in the eyes in the full-length mirror and think—with the rage of a boxing coach talking to a wayward prodigy—“you better make something of yourself, kid.”

It was from this place—the sense that life might just go on this way until I was too old for it to be cute, until I wasn't becoming someone new but just *was*—that I wrote *Tiny Furniture*. Impatient and afraid, hungry and heartbroken over no one in particular, I wrote the film over a few nights in my father's office. I had been in a period of conflict with my mother that felt, to me, like a biblical battle between good and evil but was really just about the fact that I never, ever cleaned up after myself. Looking for wine in the cabinet one night, I found a box of my mother's journals from when she was my age. With a logic as thin as my body was growing, I decided to ferret them away under my bed

and read them, night after night—and the person they revealed was shockingly like me.

I opened my eyes this morning and before I even registered where I was I had the feeling of being disturbed and unhappy. First thing when I woke up. Then all the reasons why filtered in. A lot of petty friend problems compounded with a lot of shit from my parents who, despite all their trimmings, have retained their straight, conservative, biased and fucked up values. The deadly liberals. Again I experience profound disillusionment in realizing who and what they are. Yesterday I caught my mother in her fucked up games.

#### A NEW LIST OF THINGS I WANT

A violin bow

A lover and please let it work to make me happy

To start getting my art together

To weigh 128 to 125 and to be healthy

A bathing suit

Frye boots in the winter

A new winter coat

To be friends with Ed

Please let Peter call soon because he cares

Nice bed sheets

Pair of dark green cotton pants

Velvet thongs

Long hair

Let things be OK with the Con Ed man

A shoe rack like Jane's

Toe operation

Tooth fixed

To be more discreet—tell less of my secrets, fears etc, esp.

Sex and unkind words about people

Today I feel bad and mad. What the fuck is gonna happen to me. 5th affair bombed out. Each one bothering me surprisingly less and less. This one ended absolutely absurdly. I never did describe Monday night. I got drunker than shit at the Whitney opening. 3 gin and tonics. Had the spins real terribly. Good old Peter took me home. I almost threw up in the cab. He got me to my bed and very carefully undressed me. Hung my beautiful new skirt, my beautiful new shirt, and my color coordinated Opaque Panty hose over a 2 x 4. He was so gentle about it. Then he proceeded to undress himself and got on top of me and fucked me which for some unknown reason I think is funny. If I didn't feel close to him I'd be outraged by the situation but I guess it's reached the point where a fuck isn't an outrage.

It revealed someone I had never known—my mother, as I had experienced her, had a level of composure as completely solid as the veneers on her teeth. She was always dressed impeccably but with the louche ease of someone who knows they're cool. She couldn't be rattled, to the point that my teenage fights with her often ended in me trying to shock her by beating the couch pillows or biting my own arm. Anything for her to register an emotion beyond hostile bemusement. This was, after all, the woman who told me not to hold her hand on the way to fifth grade because it would only increase my social isolation.

But here she was—lonely, weight-obsessed, angry, violated. These pages—hundreds of them—became a kind of call-and-response, a conversation I was having with the version of her that