

# DIFFICULT WOMEN



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Also by Roxane Gay

*Ayiti*

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# DIFFICULT WOMEN

ROXANE GAY



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*For difficult women, who should be celebrated for their very nature*

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# I Will Follow You

**M**y sister decided we had to go see her estranged husband in Reno. When she told me, I was in a mood. I said, “What does that have to do with me?”

Carolina married when she was nineteen. Darryl, her husband, was a decade older but he had a full head of hair and she thought that meant something. They lived with us for the first year. My mom called it *getting on their feet* but they spent most of their time in bed so I assumed *getting on their feet* was a euphemism for sex. When they finally moved out, Carolina and Darryl lived in a crappy apartment with pea-green wallpaper and a balcony where the railing was loose like a rotting tooth. I’d visit them after my classes at the local university. Carolina usually wasn’t home from her volunteer job yet so I’d wait for her and watch television and drink warm beer while Darryl, who couldn’t seem to find work, stared at me, telling me I was a pretty girl. When I told my sister she laughed and shook her head. She said, “There’s not much you can do with men but he won’t mess with you, I promise.” She was right.

Darryl decided to move to Nevada, better prospects he said, and told Carolina she was his wife, had to go with him. He didn’t need to work being married to my sister but he was inconsistently old-fashioned about the strangest things. Carolina doesn’t like to be told what to do and she wasn’t going to leave me. I didn’t want to go to Nevada so she stayed and they remained married but lived completely apart.

I was asleep, my boyfriend Spencer’s arm heavy and hot across my chest, when Carolina knocked. My relationship with Spencer left a lot to be desired for many reasons, not the least of which is that he spoke only in movie lines, thinking this made him more



credible as a cinephile. He shook me but I groaned and rolled away. When we didn't answer, Carolina let herself in, barged into our bedroom, and crawled in next to me. Her skin was damp and strangely cool, like she had been running in winter. She smelled like hair spray and perfume.

Carolina kissed the back of my neck. "It's time to go, Savvie," she whispered.

"I really do not want to go."

Spencer covered his face with a pillow and mumbled something we couldn't understand.

"Don't make me go alone," Carolina said, her voice breaking. "Don't make me stay here, not again."

An hour later, we were on the interstate, heading east. I curled into the door, pressing my cheek against the glass. As we crossed the California border, I sat up and said, "I really hate you," but I held on to my sister's arm, too.

\* \* \*

The Blue Desert Inn looked abandoned, forgotten. Mold patterns covered the stucco walls in dark green and black formations. The neon VAC N Y sign crackled as it struggled to stay illuminated. There were only a few cars in the parking lot.

"This is exactly where I expected your husband to end up," I said as we pulled into the parking lot. "If you sleep with him here, I will be so disappointed."

Darryl answered the door in a loose pair of boxers and a T-shirt from our high school. His hair fell in his eyes and his lips were chapped.

He scratched his chin. "I always knew you'd come back to me."

Carolina rubbed her thumb against the stubble. "Be nice."

She pushed past him and I followed, slowly. His room was small but cleaner than I expected. The queen-size bed in the middle of the room sagged. Next to the bed were a small table and two chairs. Across from the bed, an oak dresser covered with used Styrofoam coffee cups, one bearing a lipstick stain.

I pointed to the large tube television. “I didn’t know they still made those.”

Darryl’s upper lip curled. He nodded toward the door leading to the next room. “You should see if the room next door is available.” He patted the bed and threw himself at the mattress, which groaned softly when he landed. “Me and your sister are going to be busy.”

In the office, an older man with a large gut and thick head of red hair leaned against the counter, tapping a map of the hotel, explaining the merits of each of the available rooms. I pointed to the room adjacent to Darryl’s.

“Tell me about this room.”

The motel clerk scratched his stomach, then cracked his knuckles. “That there is a fine room. There’s a bit of a leak in the bathroom ceiling but if you’re in the shower, you’re already getting wet.”

I swallowed. “I’ll take it.”

He looked me up and down. “Will you be needing two keys or will you be needing company?”

I slid three twenties across the counter. “Neither.”

“Suit yourself,” the clerk said. “Suit yourself.”

The air in my room was thick and dank. The bed carried a familiar sag as if the same person had gone from room to room, leaving the weight of memory behind. After a thorough inspection, I pressed my ear to the door separating my room from Darryl’s. Carolina and her husband were surprisingly quiet. I closed my eyes. My breathing slowed. I don’t know how long I stood there but a loud knock startled me.

“I know you’re listening, Savvie.”

I pulled my door open and glared at my sister, standing in the doorway, hands on her hips. Darryl lay on his bed, still dressed, his ankles crossed. He nodded and grinned widely.

“Looking good, little sis.”

Before I could say anything, Carolina covered my mouth. “Darryl’s taking us out to dinner, at a casino even.”

I looked down at my outfit—faded jeans with a frayed hole where the left knee used to be and a white wifebeater. “I’m not changing.”

The Paradise Deluxe was loud in every way—the carpets were an unfortunate explosion of red and orange and green and purple; classic rock blared from speakers in the ceiling. The casino floor was littered with bright slot machines, each emitting a high-pitched series of sounds that in no way resembled a discernible tune, and at most of the machines drunk people loudly brayed as they pushed the SPIN REELS button over and over. As we walked through the casino, single file—Darryl, Carolina, me—he nodded every few steps like he owned the place.

The restaurant was dark and empty. Our waiter, a tall skinny kid whose hair hung greasily in his face, handed us menus encased in dirty plastic and ignored us for the next twenty minutes.

Darryl leaned back, stretching his arms, wrapping one around Carolina’s shoulders. “This,” he said, “is paradise. They serve the best steak in Reno here—meat so tender and juicy a knife cuts through it like butter.”

I pretended to be deeply absorbed in the menu and its array of cheap meats and fried food.

Darryl kicked me beneath the table.

I set my menu down. “Must you?”

He slapped the table. “The gang’s together again.”

While we waited, Carolina idly rubbed her hand along Darryl’s thigh. He did weird things with his face and started smoking, ashing his cigarette on the table.

“I don’t think you’re allowed to do that,” I said.

Darryl shrugged. “I’ve got pull here. They’re not gonna say anything.”

I stared at the small mound of ashes he was creating. “We are going to eat at this table.”

He exhaled a perfect stream of smoke.

Carolina touched my elbow lightly and looked across the table. “Leave her alone,” she said.

Darryl and my sister married at the justice of the peace. I stood by her side, wearing my best dress—yellow, sleeveless, empire waist—and pink Converse high-tops. His brother, Dennis, stood up for him. Dennis couldn't even bother to wear pants and hovered next to Darryl and my sister in a pair of khaki shorts. While the justice droned about loving and obeying, I stared at Dennis's pale knees, how they bulged. Our parents and brothers stood in a stiff line next to Darryl's mother, who chewed gum loudly. She always needs a cigarette in her mouth. After ten minutes without one, she was hurting real bad.

After they exchanged vows, we stepped into the busy hall filled with people going to traffic court and renewing their driver's licenses and seeking justice. We had been in the courthouse three years earlier seeking something but we didn't speak of it that day. We pretended we had every reason to celebrate. Dennis reached into a backpack and pulled out two warm beers. He and Darryl cracked them open right there. Carolina laughed. A cop whose gut hung over his pants watched them through heavy-lidded eyes, then looked down at his shoes. Everyone started slowly shuffling toward the parking lot but Carolina and I stayed behind.

She pressed her forehead against mine.

Something wet and heavy caught in my throat. "Why him?"

"I'd be no good to a really good man and Darryl isn't really a bad man."

I knew exactly what she meant.

Darryl worked nights managing a small airfield on the edge of Reno, the kind frequented by gamblers and other cash-rich miscreants who appreciated discretion where their travels were concerned. It was a mystery how he had fallen into the job. He knew little about managing, aviation, or work. He invited us to join him like he was afraid if he let Carolina out of his sight she might disappear. A friend of his, Cooper, was going to bring beer and some weed. As we drove to the airfield, I sat in the backseat, staring at the freckles on his neck pointing toward his spine from his hairline in a wide V. When Carolina leaned into him like they had never separated, I looked away.

“Don’t you have actual work to do?”

He turned around and grinned at me. “Not as much with you ladies here to help me.”

“You could just take me back to the motel.”

Carolina turned around. “If you go back I go back,” she said, sharply. “You know the deal.”

“Are you two still joined like those freaky twins, those what you call ‘em, you know, like the cats?”

I picked at a hole in the back of the driver’s seat. “Siamese?”

Darryl slapped the steering wheel and hooted. “Siamese, yeah, that’s it.”

I nodded and Carolina turned back around. “We’re something like that.”

We were young once.

Where Carolina went, I followed. We are only a year apart, no time at all. Our parents moved out of Los Angeles after I was born. With two daughters, it seemed more appropriate to live somewhere quieter, safer. We ended up near Carmel in a development of large Spanish casitas surrounded by tall oaks.

I was ten and Carolina was eleven. We were in the small parking lot adjacent to the park near our neighborhood. There was a van, with a night sky painted on the side—brilliant blues filled with perfect dots of white light, so pretty. I wanted to touch the bright stars stretching from the front of the van all the way to the back. Carolina’s friend, Jessie Schachter, walked up to us and they started talking. The van was warm against the palm of my hand, so warm. I had always imagined stars were cold. The stars started moving and the door was flung open. A man, older like my father, crouched in the opening, staring, a strange smile hanging from his thin lips.

He grabbed me by the straps of my overalls and pulled me into the van. I tried to scream but he covered my mouth. His hand was sweaty, tasted like motor oil. Carolina heard how I tried to swallow the air around me. Instead of running away, she ran right toward the van, threw her little body in beside us, her face screwed with

concentration. The man's name was Mr. Peter. He quickly closed the door and bound our wrists and ankles.

"Don't you make a sound," he said, "or I will kill your parents and every friend you've ever had." His finger punctuated every word.

Mr. Peter left us at a hospital near home six weeks later. We stood near the emergency room entrance and watched as he drove away, the shiny stars of his van disappearing. I clutched Carolina's hand as we walked to a counter with a sign that said REGISTRATION. We were barely tall enough to see over it. I was silent, would be for a long time. Carolina quietly told the lady our names. She knew who we were, even showed us a flyer with our pictures and our names and the color of our eyes and hair, what we were wearing when we were last seen. I swayed dizzily and threw up all over the counter. Carolina pulled me closer. "We need medical attention," she said.

Later, our parents ran into the emergency room, calling our names frantically. They tried to hold us and we refused. They said we looked so thin. They sat between our hospital beds so they were near both of us. Our parents asked Carolina why she jumped into the van instead of running for help. She said, "I couldn't leave my sister alone."

When we were released, detectives took us to a room with little tables, little chairs, coloring books, and crayons, as if we needed children's things.

On the first day back at school, three months had passed. I sat in homeroom and waited until Mrs. Sewell took attendance. When she was done, I walked out of the classroom, Mrs. Sewell calling after me. I went to Carolina's classroom and sat on the floor next to her desk, resting my head against her thigh. Her teacher paused for a moment, then kept talking. No matter what anyone said or did, I went to Carolina's classes with her. The teachers didn't know what to do so eventually the school let me skip ahead. My sister was the only place that made any sense.

At the airfield, we followed Darryl into the tiny terminal. A long window looked onto the tarmac. He pointed to a small seating area—three benches in a U-shape. "That's the VIP area," he said,

laughing. He showed us a cramped office, filled with dusty paper, bright orange traffic cones, some kind of headset, and a pile of junk I couldn't make sense of. Carolina and I sat in the seating area while Darryl did who knows what. A few minutes later he said, "Go to the window. I'm going to show you something." As we stood, I leaned forward. Suddenly, the entire airfield was illuminated in long rows of blue lights. I gasped. It was nice to be surrounded by such unexpected beauty.

Darryl crept up behind us and pulled us into a hug. "Ain't this a beautiful sight, ladies?"

A while later, a heavy-duty truck pulled up in front of the window.

Darryl started jumping up and down, flapping his arms. "My buddy Cooper's here. Now we're going to party." He ran out to greet his friend. They hugged, pounding each other's backs in the violent way men show affection. They jumped onto the hood of the truck and cracked open beers.

I turned to my sister. "What the hell are we doing here, Carolina?"

She traced Darryl's animated outline against the glass. "I know who he is. I know exactly who he is. I need to be around someone I understand completely." She pulled her hair out of her face.

Carolina was lying but she wasn't going to tell me the truth until she was ready.

She ran to the truck and the guys slid apart so she could sit between them. I watched as she opened a beer and it foamed in her face. She tossed her head back and laughed. I envied her. I didn't understand a single thing about Spencer, not even after nearly two years. I wanted to know how he felt about that. He answered on the first ring.

"I don't understand you," I said. "I need to be with a man I understand."

Spencer cleared his throat. "Pay strict attention to what I say because I choose my words carefully and I never repeat myself. I've told you my name: that's the who."

I couldn't take his arrested development for one moment longer. "You know what, Spencer? Goodbye."

I hung up before I had to listen to him say another stupid thing.

I joined my sister and Darryl and his friend on the tarmac. Carolina grinned and threw me a beer. "How's the video clerk?"

"We're through."

Carolina threw her arms over her head and crowed. Then she was crawling up the windshield and standing on top of the cab and shouting for me to join her. Cooper reached into the truck and turned up the volume on the radio. We drank and danced on the top of that truck while the boys passed a joint back and forth below us. The night grew darker but we didn't stop dancing. Eventually, we grew tired, and climbed down into the truck bed. We stared up at the stars, the night still warm. I wanted to cry.

Carolina turned toward me. "Don't cry," she said.

"We're not going home, are we?"

She held my face in her hands.

I woke up and blinked. My eyes were dry and my mouth was dry. My face was dry, the skin stretched tightly. The desert was all in me. I sat up, slowly, and looked around. I was back in my motel room—the dank smell was unbearable. I grabbed my chest. I was still dressed. The door to Darryl's room was open and Darryl was asleep, sprawled on his stomach, one of his long arms hanging over the edge of the bed. Carolina was sitting against the headboard, doing a crossword, her glasses perched on the tip of her nose.

"You didn't sleep long."

"How long have we been here?"

She looked at the clock on the nightstand. "A couple hours." Carolina set her crossword down and led me back to my room. She helped me out of my jeans and pulled a clean T-shirt over my head. She washed my face with a cool washcloth and crawled into bed with me.

I turned to face her. "You should sleep."

She nodded and I pulled the comforter up around us. "You keep



watch,” she whispered.

My chest tightened. “Hush,” I said. “Hush.”

I stared at the ceiling, brown with age and water damage. Carolina started to snore softly. When I grew bored, I turned on the television and listened to a documentary about manatees off the coast of Florida, how they were on average nine feet long and how most manatee deaths were human related. When the scientist said this, the interviewer paused. “Man always gets in the way,” the interviewer said, ponderously.

We were young once and then we weren’t.

Mr. Peter drove for a long time. We were so little and so scared. That was enough to keep us quiet. When we stopped, we weren’t anywhere we recognized. He didn’t say very much, his hands clamping our necks as he steered us from the van into a house. He took us to a bedroom with two twin beds. The wallpaper was covered with little bears wearing blue bow ties and had a bright blue border. There were no windows. There was nothing in that room but the beds and the walls, our bodies and our fear. He left us for a minute, locking the door. Carolina and I sat on the edge of the bed farthest from the door. We were silent, our skinny legs touching, shaking. When Mr. Peter returned, he threw a length of rope at me.

“Tie her up,” he said. I hesitated and he squeezed my shoulder, hard. “Don’t make me wait.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, as I looped the rope around Carolina’s wrists, loosely.

Mr. Peter nudged me with his foot. “Tighter.”

Carolina started babbling, her voice quickly rising in pitch as I pulled the rope tighter. Her lips wet with tears, spit, spite. “Take me,” she begged. “Just take me.” He refused. When I was done, he tugged on the rope. Satisfied, he pulled me by my shirt. Carolina stood and held my hands. Her fingertips were bright red, knuckles white. As Mr. Peter dragged me out of the room, Carolina tightened her grip until he finally shoved her away. My eyes widened as the door closed. My sister went crazy. She yelled and threw her body against the door over and over.

Mr. Peter took me into another bedroom with a bed as big as my parents'. There was a dresser, bare, no pictures, nothing. Carolina was still yelling and hitting the door, sound from a faraway place.

"We can be friends or we can be enemies," Mr. Peter said.

I didn't understand but I did; there was the way he looked at me, how he licked his lips over and over.

"Are you going to hurt my sister?"

He smiled. "Not if we're friends."

He pulled me toward him, rubbing his thumb across my lips. I wanted to look away. His eyes weren't normal, didn't look like eyes. I did not look away. He forced his thumb into my mouth. I thought about biting down. I thought about screaming. I thought about my sister, alone in a faraway room, her wrists bound and what he would do to her, to me, to us. I did not understand why his finger was in my mouth. My jaw trembled. I did not bite down.

Mr. Peter arched an eyebrow. "Friends," he said. He pulled me to him. My body became nothing.

Later, he took me back to the other room. Carolina was slumped against the far wall. When she saw us, she rushed at him, barreling into his knees.

He laughed and kicked her away. "Don't make trouble. Me and your sister are going to be good friends."

"Like hell," Carolina said, rushing at him again.

He swatted her away and tossed a box of Fruit Roll-Ups on the floor and left us alone. After we heard him walk away, Carolina told me to untie her. I stood in the corner, wanted to wrap the walls around us.

My sister studied me for a long time. "What did he do?"

I looked at my shoes.

"Oh no," she said quietly, so quietly.

We fell into a routine—we'd explore Reno during the day and go to the airfield at night with Darryl. Sometimes, he let us play with equipment we had no business touching. As planes landed, we stood on the edge of the runway, arms high in the air like we were

trying to grab the wings. After planes touched down, we chased after them like we could catch their wind.

Spencer never called, made no grand gesture to win me back. I didn't care. Our parents were long accustomed to Carolina and me chasing after each other. Once they were assured we were safe, they sent us text messages every few days to remind us they loved us, to call if we needed anything. They didn't understand us. They did not know the girls who came home after Mr. Peter.

One morning, I couldn't sleep, and found Darryl, in bed, watching over Carolina, who was asleep. I crawled in next to her and he looked at me over my sister's narrow frame.

It's like he knew exactly what I was thinking. "I'm not that guy anymore," he said. "I'm all grown up and I aim to be true." He kissed my sister's shoulder. I nodded and closed my eyes.

Every day, Mr. Peter came and made me tie up my sister. He took me to the other room. He took what he wanted from my body. Carolina went mad, always trying to reach me, always trying to make me tell her what happened. I couldn't.

It was worse for her until Mr. Peter made her tie me up. I screamed until my throat bled. I spit blood at his feet. "We were supposed to be friends," I said. "You promised."

He laughed. "Your sister is going to be my friend, too, little girl."

While she was gone, I threw myself against the door, bruising my body with rage, calling out her name. I knew too much. When he brought her back she limped over to me and untied my wrists. We sat on the floor. She said, "It's better this way, more fair," but she was crying and I was crying and we didn't know how to stop.

After that, Mr. Peter came for us every day, sometimes more than once a day. Sometimes there were other men. Sometimes we lay next to each other on his big bed and stared at each other and we would never look away, no matter what they did to us. We'd move our lips and say things only we could hear. He bathed us in a little bathroom with a sea-green tub where we sat facing each other, our knees pulled to our chests. He wouldn't even leave us alone to clean ourselves. He made our whole world the windowless rooms in his house, always filled by him.

The smell of the Blue Desert Inn was driving me crazy. The air was moldy and too thick. It covered my skin and my clothes and my teeth. One morning I saw a cockroach lazily ambling across the television screen and snapped. I stomped into Darryl's room and found my sister curled up in his arms while he smoothed her hair. I looked away, my face growing warm. I hadn't considered that such intimacy was possible between them.

"I am not staying here for one more day."

Carolina sat up. "I don't want to go home." The edge in her voice made my heart contract.

I was ready to argue but she looked so tired. "We can stay somewhere nicer." I waved around the room. "But we're not going to live like this."

She poked Darryl's chest. "What about him?"

"Aren't you guys playing house right now?"

Carolina grinned. Darryl gave me a thumbs-up.

As we pulled out of the parking lot of the Blue Desert Inn, the sign read VAC Y.

The police caught Mr. Peter when we were fifteen and sixteen. His name was Peter James Iversen. His wife and two sons lived in the house in front of the house where he kept us. The authorities found videotapes. We didn't know. Two detectives came to our house. Carolina and I sat on the couch. The detectives talked. We did not blink. They told us about the tapes; they had watched. I leaned forward, my forehead against my knees. Carolina put her hand in the small of my back. Our parents stood to the side, slowly shaking their heads. When I sat up, I couldn't hear anything. The detectives kept talking but all I could think was *people have seen videotapes*. I stood and walked out of the room. I walked out of the house. Carolina followed. I stopped at the end of the driveway. We watched the traffic.

"Well," she finally said. "This sucks."

A convertible sped by. There was a woman in the passenger seat and her red hair filled the air around her face. She was smiling, all white teeth.