



Lena Dunham

Fablesick

A Memoir

BY LENA DUNHAM

Not That Kind of Girl

Famesick

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A Memoir



Random House
New York

Random House

An imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

randomhousebooks.com

penguinrandomhouse.com

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Hardcover ISBN 9780593129326

International edition ISBN 9798217197804

Ebook ISBN 9780593129333

BOOK TEAM: Production editor: Robert Siek • Managing editor: Rebecca Berlant • Print production manager: Richard Elman • Copy editor: Scott Heim • Proofreaders: Nicole Ramirez, Kevin Clift, and Cameron Schoettle • Ebook production manager: Kyle Madigan

Cover design: CHIPS

Cover photograph: Anna Gaskell

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland.

<https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>

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For Jean Seberg, Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, Amy Winehouse, Liam Payne, Janis Joplin, Chris Farley, Elizabeth Wurtzel, Brittany Murphy, Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes, Maria Schneider, Sharon Tate, Eve Babitz, Gia Allemand, Whitney Houston, Heath Ledger, Aaron Swartz, Robin Williams, Caroline Flack, Dana Plato, Gilda Radner, Gia Marie Carangi, Jonathan Brandis, Jiah Khan, Daul Kim, Louise Brooks, and anyone else who was too Famesick to be cured.

And for Russell and Cy, Matt and Michael, who are alive and well and always will be.

Author's Note

This is a work of nonfiction. Certain names and identifying details have been changed. I supplemented my memory with extensive datebooks, diaries, emails, and medical records, and sometimes all I had to do was google my own name to locate a date, an image, a picture that solidified a memory.

Introduction

My name is Lena Dunham. That's the name my mother gave me—and, as is the case in many of the most successful marriages, my father had little choice in the matter. Lena was the name of my great-grandmother, a woman who had emigrated from Russia with seven children, having already buried two or three depending on who tells it, with burns up and down her chubby arms from taking bread in and out of the oven. My mother's name, Laurie, shared only the first letter of her grandmother's—my own grandmother said it was Ashkenazi tradition, but in fact that only applied to living family members, and Lena was dead. In actuality, my grandparents wanted their daughters to have all-American names, untraceable names—Susie, Laurie, Bonnie. “Diminutive names,” my mother had always called them. “They weren't *strong* names—they were names for little girls.” Laurie spent her teens irate about this, sure that as a Lena her life would have been full of lust and glamour, whereas a plain old Laurie was relegated to supporting character status, cute at best. My mother loved my father's surname—loved that it was WASPy, older than America itself—unlike hers, Simmons, which had been changed at least four times over the generations to disguise its origins. There would be no middle name—she considered them vaguely frivolous. Just Lena Dunham. My mother said she chose it because it sounded like the name of someone who could be a movie star or a lawyer with an equal measure of success.

I carried the name through preschool, where I learned to write it early but didn't understand that an E could only have three lines protruding from it and so insisted on dozens; through lower and middle school, where it took on the hard-to-shake stink of unpopularity, a name usually used in the

context of hoping someone would *not* be joining the social function; and through high school and college, where I used it to sign endless poems about abstract feeling of dis-ease. All these uses were natural, the classic stuff of growing up as oneself. It was only when the name entered the spin cycle of mass media—surprising my early classmates, my family, but no one more than myself—that it started to feel alien, like a character in a film I didn’t write. It became a mark of excellence, then a signifier of a certain kind of millennial absurdity, and—finally—a punch line that felt more like a slur.

By the time I was twenty-six, I trusted few people. I stopped wanting to share my name—one I had proudly offered as a child, announcing to anyone who would listen “I’m Lena Dunham. I have no middle name,” as if the very fact made me interesting. But now, I didn’t trust people to handle it with care, and I didn’t trust myself to protect it.

And so, at various times over the last decade, I have called myself Rose O’Neill, Renata Halpern, Lauri Reynolds, Ruth Stein—dealer’s choice of fake names to use when checking into a Hyatt, an assortment of people to be when sent a galley copy of something or, best case scenario, a free purse to my home address.

It wasn’t that anyone was out looking for me or that I’d be harassed if my location was discovered (although I have had a few brushes in my doorway with strangers to whom the name meant something other than what my mother intended—elegance, style, fortitude—and certainly something different than what it meant to me). It was that, when given the option, I simply preferred not to be myself. I had heard my given name so often, and in so many unnerving contexts, that it ceased to belong to me. It belonged to the world, to anyone who said it, and it had been perverted to mean something specific—and not altogether pleasant. To be Lauri to room service, to be Renata on my cable bill, to be Rose at rehab or Ruth at the hospital—offered freedom in a life that seemed, to anyone looking from the outside, to be lousy with it already. It was only me who had forgotten that I had the gift of choices. Maybe I was dead set on eliminating them.

. . .

I've spent much of the last ten years sick. Sometimes in a hospital bed, more often in my own bed, most often at work or out to dinner, pretending not to feel how I feel. It's very hard to remember a time—aside from brief flashes of adrenaline on a set or on a date or at a fashion party where people are inadvertently dressed like kids in a school play about Greek gods—when being in my body didn't feel like towing a wrecked car across town at midnight.

That's not, strictly speaking, a truth that anyone wants to hear. The people who love you, with whom you feel safe, want more than anything for your pain to cease—and so you speak in language of “good days” and “the big picture,” leaning on the idea that the arc of the universe is always bending toward a better reality. With people you know less well, you say things like “it's been a really good period” or “it's totally manageable.” After a few ugly misfires, you learn to mold your approach to what they can take. As a result, the truth—the fears for what the future might look like, and whether there is one at all—is expressed mostly in the middle of sleepless nights, and only to your pillow.

I've also spent the last ten years famous. Like my illness, that has vacillated in both intensity and quality—good days; okay periods; very, very bad ones. Unlike being sick, when you're famous, nobody feels sorry for you. Fame is viewed, largely, as a condition of privilege that you've brought upon yourself. It's your fault, and it's also a good thing—even the bad parts seem, to those outside the experience, to be outweighed by the perks.

After all, the bedrock amusements of American life—pageants, talent shows, being discovered at the mall—are predicated on being chosen for glory.

Only my father, who has approached the response to me and my work with a visible disgust that confuses his friends but charms the shit out of me, seems to understand, and even applaud, that my relationship to fame, notoriety, and at times infamy has often been a toxic one. That's not because

of the kind of attention I've gotten—although much of it has been unpleasant—but because I didn't start this looking to be a celebrity. Instead, I'm here because of an almost unrelenting drive toward self-expression, which manifests as workaholism AND single-minded obsession that actually runs counter to a skilled manipulation of fame. My father is also the only person who really understands just how sick I've been. He has picked me up off the literal floor. He has brushed my hair when my stomach was too swollen to lift my arms. After endless days seated by my hospital bed in a suit and sneakers, legs crossed at the knee and *The New York Times* rustling in his callused hands, he has witnessed the monotony of illness and also the quick spikes of existential drama. Blood pressure plummets, nurses descend, and an hour later you're drinking a Starbucks Frappuccino. Sometimes you leave the hospital cured, but sometimes you leave the hospital and head to rehab—hey, life comes at you fast.

“That doesn't look comfy,” he says when my pillows are a mess, adjusting the landscape of the bed and then leaving the door ajar in case I call. I've experienced other kinds of devotion, but only he can make me feel that something so wrong—my body turning on me many years before it was meant to and right in sync with the public—might just be the most important story of my life.

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 pillowed 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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