

## PERSONAL HISTORY

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# Difficult Girl

*Growing up, with help.*

BY LENA DUNHAM

I am eight, and I am afraid of everything. The list of things that keep me up at night includes but is not limited to: appendicitis, typhoid, leprosy, unclean meat, foods I haven't seen emerge from their packaging, foods my mother hasn't tasted first so that if we die we die together, homeless people, headaches, rape, kidnapping, milk, the subway, sleep.

An assistant teacher comes to school with a cold sore. I am convinced he's infected with MRSA, a skin-eating staph infection. I wait for my own flesh to erode. I stop touching my shoelaces (too filthy) or hugging adults outside my family. In school, we are learning about Hiroshima, so I read "Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes," and I know instantly that I have leukemia. A symptom of leukemia is dizziness, and I have that, when I sit up too fast or spin around in circles. So I quietly prepare to die in the next year or so, depending on how fast the disease progresses.

My parents are getting worried. It's hard enough to have a child, much less a child who demands to inspect our groceries and medicines for evidence that their protective seals have been tampered with. I have only the vaguest memory of a life before fear. Every morning when I wake up, there is one blissful second before I look around the room and remember my many terrors. I wonder if this is what it will always be like, forever, and I try to remember moments I felt safe: In bed next to my mother one Sunday morning. Playing with my friend Isabel's puppy. Getting picked up from a sleepover just before bedtime.

One night, my father becomes so frustrated by my behavior that he takes a walk and doesn't come back for three hours. While he's gone, I start to plan our life without him.

My fourth-grade teacher, Kathy, is my best friend at school. She's a plump, pretty woman with hair like yellow pipe cleaners. Her clothes resemble the sheets at my grandma's house, floral but threadbare, and with mismatched buttons. She says I can ask her as many questions as I want: about tidal waves, about my sinuses, about nuclear war. She offers vague, reassuring answers. In hindsight, they were tinged with religion, implied a faith in a distinctly Christian God. She can tell when I'm getting squirrely, and she shoots me a look across the room that says, It's O.K., Lena, just give it a second.

When I'm not with Kathy, I'm with Chris Conta, our school nurse, who has a perm and wears holiday sweaters all year round. She has a no-nonsense approach to health that comforts me. She presents me with hard facts (very few children develop Reye's syndrome in response to aspirin) and tells me that polio has been eradicated in America. She takes me seriously when I explain that I've been exposed to scarlet fever by a kid on the subway with a red face. Sometimes she lets me lie on the top bunk in the back room, dark and cool. I rest my cheek against the plastic mattress cover and listen as she dispenses medication and condoms to high-school kids. If I'm lucky, she doesn't send me back to class.

No one likes the way things are going, so at some point therapy is suggested. I am used to appointments: allergist, chiropractor, tutor. All I want is to feel better, and that overrides the fear of something new,



something reserved for people who are crazy. Plus, both my parents have therapists, and I feel more like my parents than like anybody else. My father's therapist is named Ruth. I've never met her, but I once asked him to describe her to me. He said she was older, but not as old as Grandma, with longish gray hair. In my head, her office has no windows; it's just a box with two chairs. I wonder what Ruth thinks of me. He has to have said something.

"Can't I just see Ruth?" I ask. He explains that it doesn't work that way, that I need my own place to have my own private thoughts. So I take the train uptown with him to meet someone of my own. For some reason, when we go to appointments to help my mind, it's always my father who comes. My mother comes to the ones for my body.

The first doctor, a violet-haired grandma-age woman with a German surname, asks me a few simple questions and then invites me to play with the toys scattered across her floor. She sits in a chair above me, pad in hand. I have the sense she will gather all kinds of information from this, so I put on a show that I'm sure will demonstrate my loneliness and introspection: bootleg Barbie crashes her convertible with off-brand Ken riding shotgun. Tiny Lego men are killed in a war against their own kind. After a long period of observation, she asks me to share my three greatest wishes. "A river, where I can be alone," I tell her, impressed with my poeticism. From this answer, she will know that I am not like other nine-year-olds.

"And what else?" she asks.

"That's all."

I leave feeling worse than when I went in, and my father says that's O.K., we can see as many doctors as we need to until I'm better. Next, we visit a different woman, even older than the first, but she's named Anni, which is not an old person's name. We walk up four flights to her office. My father sits with me this time and helps me explain the things that worry me. Anni is sympathetic, with a funny high laugh, and, when we walk out into the night, I tell my father she is the one.

But we are here just to get a referral, my father tells me. Anni isn't accepting new patients.

And so my third session is with Lisa. Lisa's office is down the block from our apartment, and my mother, sensing some trepidation, pulls me aside and says to think of it like a playdate. If I like playing with her, I can go back. If not, we'll find someone else for me to play with. I nod, but I'm well aware that most playdates don't revolve around someone trying to figure out whether you're crazy or not.

In our first session, Lisa sits on the floor with me, her legs tucked under her like she's just a friend who has come by to hang out. She looks like the mom on a television show, with big curly hair and a silky blouse. She asks me how old I am, and I respond by asking her how old she is—after all, we're sitting on the floor together. "Thirty-four," she says. My mother was thirty-six when I was born. Lisa is different from my mother in lots of ways, starting with her clothes: a suit, sheer tights, and black high heels. Different from my mother, who looks like her normal self when she dresses as a witch for Halloween.

Lisa lets me ask her whatever I want. She has two daughters. She lives uptown. She's Jewish. Her middle name is Robin, and her favorite food is cereal. By the time I leave, I think that she can fix me.

The germophobia morphs into hypochondria morphs into sexual anxiety morphs into the pain and angst that accompany entry into middle school. Over time, Lisa and I develop a shorthand for things I'm too embarrassed to say: "masturbation" becomes "M," "sexuality" becomes "oality," and my crushes become "him." I don't like the term "gray area," as in "the gray area between being scared and aroused," so Lisa coins "the pink area." We eventually move into her adult office but stay sitting on the floor. We'll often share a box of Special K or a croissant.

She teaches me how to needlepoint, with a focus on abstract geometric designs in autumnal threads. When I turn thirteen, she throws me a private atheistic bat mitzvah—just us two. We eat half a pound of prosciutto.

One evening, I see her on the subway, and our interaction, warm but disorienting, inspires a poem, the last lines of which are “I guess you are not my mother. You will never be my mother.” I make her a painting, a girl with big Keane eyes crying violet tears, and she tells me that she’s hung it in her bathroom, along with a free-form nude I did using gouache. I bring my disposable camera and take pictures of us hanging out and drawing, just like pals do.

The work we’re doing together helps, but even three mornings a week isn’t enough to stop the terrible thoughts, the fear of sleep and of life in general. Sometimes, to manage the images that come unbidden, I force myself to picture my parents copulating in intricate patterns, summoning the image in sets of eight, for so long that looking at them makes me nauseated.

“Mom,” I say. “Turn away from me so I won’t think of sex.”

Sitting with my mother in the beauty salon one afternoon, I come across an article about obsessive-compulsive disorder. A woman describes her life, so burdened with obsessions that she has to lick art in museums and crawl on the sidewalk. Her symptoms aren’t much worse than mine: the magazine’s description of her most horrible day parallels my average one. I tear the article out and bring it to Lisa, whose face crumples sympathetically, as though the moment she’d been dreading had finally arrived. It makes me want to throw my needlepoint supplies in her face. Do I have to do everything myself?

One day, when I’m fourteen, Lisa warns me that she might get an important call during our session. She’s sorry, but she has to take it, wouldn’t do it if it wasn’t a real emergency. She’s gone for about ten minutes, and when she returns she looks rattled. Takes a deep breath. “So—”

“Where’s your wedding ring?” I ask her.

“I’ll see you Wednesday, Leen,” Lisa says, and I pull on my orange parka and head for the elevator. In the waiting room are two teen-agers—a blond boy, the kind of underdeveloped but cute thirteen-year-old male that drives seventh-grade gals crazy despite being four feet seven, and a girl with green streaks in her hair. I stare at her for a moment too long, because I recognize her: she’s the one in the photo in Lisa’s Filofax, which sometimes lies open on her desk. That’s Lisa’s daughter, Audrey.

I leave the office a beat before they do, but they catch up with me at the elevator, and I’m holding my breath as we ride down together, trying to somehow take her in without looking directly at her. I wish she were a picture in a magazine, so I could stare, rotate the page slightly, stare again.

Does she know who I am? Maybe she’s jealous. I would be. When we reach the ground floor, she looks right into my face. “He thinks you’re hot,” she says, motioning to her friend, then bolts.

I step out onto Broadway, beaming.

What happens over the next few months is like the plot of a children’s movie, the kind where a dog finds its owner in spite of insurmountable odds and prohibitive geography. Through shrewd detective work, Audrey discovers that her camp friend Sarah is my school friend Sarah, and begins passing me notes. They are fat envelopes, decorated with puff paint and star stickers. Inside the first one is a letter, in the kind of fun teen scrawl they use in “Saved by the Bell”: “HEY YOU SEEM AWESOME! I bet we’d get along. My mom says we would if we could meet. I love shopping, the Felicity soundtrack, oh, and shopping. Here’s a pic of me at the Wailing Wall after my Bat Mitzvah! INSTANT MESSAGE MEEEE.”

I write back an equally effusive note, laboring over which picture to share, before finally settling on a shot of me lounging on my sister's bunk bed in a vintage crop top that reads "Super Debbie." "I also luuuv the Felicity soundtrack, animals, acting, and DUH SHOPPING! My screen name is LAFEMMELENA."

I know our correspondence is wrong, and so I tell Lisa, who confirms my belief that this is inappropriate. "It's too bad," she says, "because I think you two are very similar. You would probably be good friends."

When I'm fifteen, I stop working with Lisa. I'm ready to stop talking about my problems all the time, I tell her, and she doesn't fight me. I feel good. My O.C.D. isn't completely gone, but maybe it never will be. Maybe it's part of who I am, part of what I have to manage, the challenge of my life. And for now that seems O.K.

Our last session is full of laughter, fancy snacks, talk of the future. I admit how much it hurt me when she reacted with disgust to my belly-button ring, and she says she's sorry she displayed her personal bias. I thank her for having let me bring my cat to a session.

I miss her the way I missed our loft after we moved in seventh grade: sharply, and then not at all. There is too much unpacking to do.

Within six months, I'm ignoring my homework and skipping class so I can hang out with my pet rabbit, Chester Hadley. My parents think I'm depressed, and I think they're idiots. Because of my medication, I'm sleepy all the time, and I become notorious at school for napping in my hood, snapping to attention the moment a teacher says my name: "I wasn't sleeping."

My fascination with Lisa's daughter has never died, and our lives overlap just enough that I have a sense of where and how she is: I'm told she pierced her own nose at summer camp and is dating a graffiti artist named CECS. Once, our mutual friend puts us on the phone together, and I can barely speak.

"Hey!" she growls.

"It's you," I say.

My struggle is deepening, and my father tells me that I am going to see Margaret, a "learning and organization" specialist whom I met with a few times years earlier when my parents discovered I had been stuffing all my unfinished homework under my bed for half the school year. (I've changed the name to protect her from nosy patients like me.) I remember her fondly enough, mostly because she offered Chessmen cookies and orange juice before we set to work on my math assignment. When I arrive this time, she doesn't offer any cookies, but she looks just as I left her: wavy red bob, creatively draped black dress, and witch boots. More like my mother than like Lisa, but with an Australian accent.

Her office is a museum of pleasing curiosities: framed seashells, dried pussy willows extending from asymmetrical vases, a coffee table decorated with feathers and stray tiles used as coasters. For a few weeks, we sit at her desk and focus on organizing my backpack, which somehow resembles, in all its dark chaos, a crack den (albeit one full of Hello Kitty erasers). She shows me how to keep a datebook and label the sections of a binder and check assignments off when I've finished them. Margaret is a psychoanalyst as well, and I often see sad children or mismatched couples waiting for her after our session, but this isn't the place to talk about my feelings. We are all about efficiency, neat edges, prioritizing.

But one day I come in melted down by a recurrence of obsessive thoughts and by the milky, sickening feeling my medication is giving me. I don't have the will to clean out my binder. I had got such satisfaction out of the systems she introduced, the sharp pencils and crisp manila folders. But, in an apt metaphor for my worsening state, I have doodled nonsense on all the once pristine pages. I lay my head on the desk.

“Do you want to sit on the couch?” Margaret asks.

Margaret won't tell me anything about her life. From the start, she makes it clear that we're here to talk about me. When I ask a question about herself, she tends to ignore it. She isn't mean about it. Rather, she looks at me with a blank smile that implies I've spoken to her in a language she doesn't understand.

“Just curious, do you have children?” I ask.

“What do you think knowing the answer to that would mean to you?” she asks me, just like shrinks do in movies.

As a result of her professional reticence, I develop my own theories about Margaret. One is that she's a measured and reasonable eater, unable to understand my personal battle with gluttony. I have seen a goat's-milk yogurt in her garbage before, the lid placed neatly back on the empty carton. Another of my theories is that she loves a warm bath. I am sure she loves wildflowers, trains, and heart-to-hearts with wise old women. One day, she tells me that as a schoolgirl she was forced to wear a boater hat on field trips. I cling to this image, imagining a tiny Margaret marching to and fro in a long line of girls in hats.

Then there is the autumn day I come in to find her with a shiny black eye. Before I can even register my shock, she points to it and laughs: “A bit of a gardening accident.” I believe her. Margaret would never let anyone hit her. She would never let anyone wear shoes indoors. She would always protect herself, her floors, her flowers.

My father says that his friend Burt came across Margaret in the eighties, when she had been “around for a minute” in the art world. I imagine her having a dalliance with a video artist. On their dates, he slides into the booth across from her and asks her how her day was. She just smiles and nods, smiles and nods.

That Audrey and I wind up at college together is one of the strangest things that has happened, maybe ever, but definitely to me. On the surface, it makes perfect sense: two New York City girls with similar S.A.T. scores and similar authority problems being directed toward the same attainable liberal education by uncreative administrators. But spiritually I can't believe it. After all these years of being separate, we are together.

We bond immediately, more over what we hate than what we love. We both hate lox. We both hate boys in cargo pants. We're both sick of kids from Long Island saying they're from New York. We spend the first few weeks of the school year riding our new red bicycles around town in impractical shoes and too much lipstick, unwilling to let go of the idea that city girls do it differently. We can barely hold in our peals of laughter when a boy named Zenith arrives at a party in a shirt that says “P is for Playa.” We set our sights on senior boys who run ironic literary magazines and we try to avoid using the bathroom next to anybody but each other.

Audrey is an intellectual, likes to talk about Fellini and read thick books about tainted Presidencies. But she also uses slang more confidently than I ever could and holds her denim miniskirt together with patches from hardcore shows. She cuts her own hair, applies her own liquid eyeliner, and appears to be able to eat as many cookies as she wants without breaking a hundred pounds. We make up funny names for each other: Squeedlydoo, Looty, Boober.

We have our first fight three weeks in, when I decide she's holding me back socially with her misanthropy. “I came here to grow,” I tell her. “And you don't want that.”

She runs into the woods of the arboretum, sobbing, falls, and scrapes her knee. When I try to help, she cries, “Why would you want to?”

I call my mother, who is on Ambien and cheerfully tells me to “buy a ticket home!” I feel certain and terrified that Audrey is in her room talking to her mother, and that Lisa is mad at me.

We make up a few days later, when, at a brunch potluck, I realize that I do, in fact, hate everybody. Even my new friend Alison, who hosts a show on the radio station, and even Hannah, who makes vegan muffins and has a quilt composed of Clash T-shirts. The conversation at college is making me insane: politically correct posturing by people without real politics. Audrey was right: we are all that is good for each other.

Sometimes Audrey and I are eating cereal, or drying off after a shower, and I see a flash of her mother. Lisa is here: young and naked, my friend.

Margaret is on vacation, and it’s an emergency. My mother and I are in the worst fight we’ve ever had, one that tests the concept of unconditional love, not to mention basic human decency. And the thing is, no one is right, exactly. We both followed our hearts and had no choice but to hurt each other deeply.

I try Margaret, but, as this is not technically a life-threatening emergency, I don’t leave a message. Next, I call my aunt, who I hope will at least tell me I am not a sack of rancid garbage shaped like a human.

“Your mom isn’t easy, and neither are you,” she says. “I don’t know how you’ll fix it. I just know that you have to.” She suggests I call her friend Dr. Judith Sills, a “relationship expert” and clinical psychologist. “Judith will have thoughts,” she promises. “And she is great with giving fast and efficient advice.”

Advice? My therapist has never given me advice. She’s all about making me give myself advice.

So, about to commit my second major betrayal since the one my mother can tell you all about, I call someone else’s therapist.

Relationship Expert Dr. Judith Sills is on a trip to Washington, D.C., with friends from college, so she calls me back from a bench outside the Smithsonian. It turns out we’ve met—years ago, at a bat mitzvah—and I vaguely remember her cap of honey hair. “So, what’s going on?” she asks, with the warm but solution-oriented tone of a high-powered divorce attorney.

I let it all pour out. What I did. What my mother did back. What we’d both done to each other since we did those first things that we did. “Uh-huh, uh-huh,” Judith says, letting me know she’s with me.

Finally, I breathe. “So. Am I terrible?”

For the next twenty minutes, Judith talks. First, she explains some basic “facts” about the mother-daughter relationship. (“You are her possession, but you are also a person.”) Next, she tells me that we’ve both behaved in perfectly understandable, if unpleasant, ways. (“I get it” is a favorite phrase.) “So,” she concludes. “This is actually a chance to reach the next phase of your bond if you will let it be. I know that you can come out of this stronger than before if you can tell her, ‘You’re my mother, and I need you, but in a different way from before. Please let us change, together.’”

I hang up and feel the panic subside for the first time in days: Relationship Expert Dr. Judith Sills has helped me. And fast. It wasn’t like Margaret, where I talk around something and she nods and we discuss a Henry James novel I’ve read only part of and then we meander back to the topic of my grandmother and how I’d kill to be asleep and then I compliment her shoes, which are, as always, fabulous. I asked a question and Dr. Judith Sills gave me an answer. And now I have the tools to fix everything.

I call my mother. “I love you,” I say. “You’re my mother, and I need you, but in a different way from before. Please let us change, together.”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” she says. I can tell she’s in a store.

Audrey has had fifteen sinus infections this winter alone, so, doctor's orders, she is having her septum straightened, tonsils and adenoids removed. Five of us troop uptown to Lisa's apartment, where Audrey is recuperating. Before we ring the doorbell, we put on Groucho glasses with attached noses and hold up our jug of soup.

Lisa answers the door wearing yoga pants. "The patient is this way," she says.

Audrey lies on Lisa's fourposter bed, nose bandaged, looking even tinier than usual. Lisa climbs onto the bed beside her. "How you feeling, sweetie?"

The other girls head to the kitchen to unpack the magazines and cookies we bought from a kiosk in the subway. And, as if we'd done it fifty times before, as if we were a family, I crawl into bed with Audrey and Lisa.

Margaret and I have talked on the phone from just about everywhere. I've called her from beaches, speeding vehicles in Western states, crouched behind a dumpster, in the parking lot of my college dormitory, and from my bedroom ten blocks from her office, when I didn't have the energy to make my way to her couch. From Europe, Japan, and Israel. I've whispered to her about guys who were sleeping next to me. Never has the sound of her voice, that calm but expectant hello, not put me at ease. She answers on the second ring, and all my muscles and veins relax.

On a recent vacation, I call her from the Arizona desert, wearing only my underwear, baking my flesh by a plunge pool. I spend the majority of our session telling her about the furniture shopping my boyfriend and I have done that morning. Our first time making real aesthetic choices as a couple, we successfully selected a coffee table, two bronze deer, and a pair of torn leatherette barstools. Unable to resist, I threw a Cubist ceramic cat into the mix.

"I really feel like we have similar taste!" I gush, ignoring how unsure she sounds about the addition of kitschy metal animals to a living room.

"That's wonderful," she says. "My husband and I have always had similar taste, and it really makes creating a home such a pleasure." With her accent, "pleasure" sounds like "pleeshuh." Such a pleeshuh.

Stunned, I wait a beat.

"It does!" I say. She told me.

Later in the conversation, she mentions a trip to Paris: "For my husband's job we go quite regularly." This is like Christmas. Gift after gift. Not only do I now know she has a husband; I know he is quite possibly French or at the very least employed by French people. This is information I can work with. Next, she is going to tell me about her Black Panther college boyfriend and her miscarriage and her best friend, Joan.

"Huge news!" I tell everyone who will listen. "My therapist has a husband. And he might be French."

Why does Margaret deem me ready now? What test have I passed, what maturity have I displayed? Do therapists have a metric by which they judge our ability to work with information rationally? I wonder if she regretted it when she hung up, frowned, and gathered up her pretty hands, the hands with a gold ring on every finger so as to keep the mystery alive.

Maybe I have properly conveyed the truth and security of my romantic relationship and she is ready to admit me into a club of stable, balanced women with whom she shares her secrets. Maybe she just can't resist gabbing when it comes to mid-century furnishings. Or maybe it was an accident. Maybe she forgot our roles for a moment, and we became just two women, two friends on a long-distance call . . . catching up about our houses, our husbands, our lives. ♦