

## Girl Hate

*Jenifer Fennell*

In 1976, I had an abortion. I was 14 and pregnant by a boy who had, a couple months earlier, written a vicious letter to me with help from another boy who was our mutual friend. The letter accused me of being a “slut” and talked about the “puppies” I’d one day give birth to. I had spent the previous evening driving around with another group of boys and I could only guess that this behavior was what I was being punished for. My new boyfriend, Al, and our friend, Kenny, dropped the letter in my mailbox. I was on my way to meet the school bus when I found it, and I was so excited. “A love letter,” I thought. “My first!” I didn’t make it to my bus. Crying and throwing up, I ran home to find my mother.

Here’s the context: at 14, I had spent three years living with relatives and family friends before entering the foster care system. My mother was widowed, bi-polar and dying of cancer, so my 13-year-old brother, Stan, and I lived with anyone who’d have us. At the time of the abortion, Stan and I were briefly living with our mother again. It would be the last time before she died.

Like so many girls who find themselves pregnant at a young age, I lacked safety nets. Scared and insecure because my life was so unpredictable, I tried to create family connections that might prove stable. But what tools did I have to work with? According to the culture I lived in, not a whole lot more than what boys thought of my looks. Though I was a child, I’d been fending for myself in basic ways for years. I’d long since learned I couldn’t depend on adults. So, losing my family, I tried desperately to create one of my own. I thought sex might bind a boy to me. When that didn’t work, I got pregnant again. Three months after I turned 17 and 18 months after my mother died, my daughter, Naomi, was born.

When Naomi was 16 and a boy said something truly hateful to her, I was astonished and grateful to see her cut ties with him immediately. At 14, I had fought like crazy to reestablish a connection with the boy who hurt me. Instead of challenging his behavior, I explained and apologized for my own. Decades later I can name my reaction to that girl-hating letter and can trace the links between my own overriding fear of abandonment and my willingness to accept any fault in that budding relationship as mine. His letter laid the blame for his fear and jealousy at my feet, where, because I believed I was worthless, I thought it belonged. And since I was blameworthy, I reasoned, I was lucky that he would forgive me and later have sex with me.

My mother arranged for me to have the abortion, a two-day process that began with a pelvic exam that was anything but routine for me. Some years earlier, I was at summer camp with girls who called me a boy when they saw my naked body in the dormitory shower. I still have no idea what they thought they saw, but on that day I decided that I must be deformed, and, with a young child’s circular logic and limited information, figured that I must have gotten that way by masturbating. Like so many other girls, I had absorbed the idea that touching my body was deathly wrong. That day in the doctor’s office, I was sure the doctor would look at me and know what I’d been doing. I was panicked and literally sick with humiliation. The nurse never left my side. She stroked my sweaty hand and murmured as tears rolled down my face.

Naturally, the aging male doctor did not comment on any deformity as there was none. Instead, at the end of the exam he leaned around the sheet draped over my knees and said, "You know, you can do something for the smell. Just dab a little perfume in your pubic hair."

In a piece on the necessity of reproductive freedom, why tell this sad but ordinary story of a confused, lonely, pregnant teenager? Because pregnancy and the decision to raise a child or have an abortion happen to real people and real people are never as simple as statistics. Because this sort of everyday misogyny is the national backdrop for any conversation about abortion. Because girl-hating figures so prominently in this story and without girl-hatred, this pregnancy and this abortion never would have happened. For those who anguish over the unborn, the never-to-be-born, if you want to prevent abortion, start by working to create a world where girls feel valued. Valuing girls means raising them to feel so good about themselves, their bodies, their sexuality, and the futures awaiting them that they recognize abuse for what it reveals about the abuser, not for what they secretly think it means about them. Equally importantly, valuing girls means countering the messages no one actually says, but that get communicated anyway, like the one I got about masturbation. This layered message alienated me from my body and from the pleasure I got from it, adding to my sense that my body was something for others to use and keep or discard. *Tell* girls what you want them to know. Say, "You're brilliant and capable and beautiful exactly as you are. Your body is yours and there's nothing wrong with feeling good." And if you've swallowed the poison, tell yourself these things, too.

If you're a woman, ask yourself this: how many implicit and explicit messages have you gotten over the years that tell you nothing matters more than how you look? Maybe you got them from your mother, who was always on a diet, or from friends who commented on your outfit or from TV or the covers of magazines or from boys and men who paid more attention to your cleavage than your words. Repeatedly told their worth lies in their sexual attractiveness, how can it be surprising when young girls who want attention or love try to get it by having sex?

If you've grown up with abstinence-only "sex education," you've been told that your worth lies nestled between your legs and you better guard it with your life, save it for the boy who will marry you. On the surface, this message seems to encourage girls to assert themselves, to give them the right to say "No." But the underlying message depends on the same self-negating logic: you've got only one asset, and you better protect it.

At the heart of the controversy over reproductive freedom is the issue of who has the right to control *your* body. Keeping abortion safe and legal is just one of the ways we can, as a culture, ensure that girls have the absolute right to define and control their lives. Providing access to safe and effective birth control and clear, non-judgmental information about how to use it tells girls that we trust them to decide when and with whom to start having sex. And informative, sex-positive sex education teaches girls to say yes because *they* want to, and to otherwise feel absolutely free to say no.

At 14, I felt no freedom to say no. I was scared, lonely, and largely on my own. Fortunately for me, before she died my mother told me over and over again how smart I was. She said I could do anything I wanted. It took me a while, but in the end I believed her.