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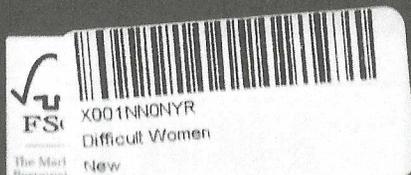
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SHEILA HETI



# DIFFICULT WOMEN



# ROXANE GAY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



## La Negra Blanca

At the club, Sarah goes by Sierra. The manager gave her the name the day she was hired four years earlier. He asked if she had a preference but she shrugged, took a sip of warm soda, told him to knock himself out. He looked her up and down and up again. "Sierra," he said. "So you'll turn your head when your name is called."

Sometimes, when she's opening the refrigerator, or reaching into a drawer for a pair of shorts, Sarah will catch herself swiveling her hips and arching her back. Even when she's not on the pole, she's dancing around it. She takes a lot of Advil because even at home she's always hearing the *thump thump thump* of the bass line.

Candy, her best friend at work, took one look at Sarah on her first day and told Sarah to dance to black girl booty-shaking music because guys love to see white girls with juicy asses shake their

stuff. Sarah blushed, and pivoted to get a better look at her ass. She said, "My ass is juicy?"

Candy laughed and grabbed a handful of Sarah's ass, but Sarah already knew she had a juicy ass and where it came from. Her mother is black and her father is white but for years people have assumed she's a white girl because she has green eyes and straight blond hair. She's not ashamed of who she is but in Baltimore it's easier to be a white girl with a black girl's ass than to be a black girl who looks white or any other kind of black girl for that matter.

Her signature move is to grip the pole with both hands, arch her back, and slide lower until her long hair brushes the stage while she frantically rocks her pelvis up and down. She hates the pole, how it is always warm and sticky to the touch, coated in human oils, and also how when she's leaning back or wrapping her leg around the pole or hanging upside down while shaking her tits, she's not doing anything special, not really.

Sarah hates the smell of ones and fives but can live with the stink of bigger bills. She tans three days a week, naked, so there are no lines. She sees an aesthetician for a full body waxing once or twice a month, enhances her hairstyle with blond extensions replaced every two months. She works out for two hours a day, seven days a week, eats fourteen hundred calories a day. It is an exhausting regimen but an occupational hazard. She attends Johns Hopkins during the week, where tuition costs almost forty thousand dollars, and financial aid covers only two-thirds of that cost. Sarah pays for the rest out of her own pocket. She has one year remaining before she graduates with degrees in international studies and Romance languages, plus coursework in Arabic. It is 2004. She plans on working for the CIA because she has become quite efficient at passing.

At first, Sarah was a mess of a stripper. She couldn't dance. She didn't like being watched. She didn't *want* to be touched. She hated the pretense of the gowns that quickly hit the floor when she was onstage or giving a lap dance. She hated the improbable heels and the G-string panties riding up her ass and the way she stank of smoke after a long night and how she always had to look over her shoulder as she walked to her car at the end of a shift. Still, she didn't relish wearing a polyester uniform and visor cap, either, and she couldn't live on what those jobs paid. Sarah took Candy's advice and started watching BET for the necessary instruction. In the privacy of her apartment in Towson, she tried to clap her ass and bounce and shake her body like the girls in the videos and the girls she grew up with in West Baltimore who moved so fast and with such elegant precision.

William Livingston III mostly lives to watch Sierra dance to Lil Jon's "Get Low," because the song is still very popular in such establishments. He's willing to pay for the privilege of watching Sierra dance. He likes Sierra's routine—how she points to the window, to the wall, and mimics the sweat dripping down her proverbial balls. He visits her at the club three times a week, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. He stays for two hours. He tips her anywhere between one hundred and five hundred dollars. After she dances to "Get Low," Sierra gives him a lap dance, shimmying out of her skimpy gown, draping it over William's shoulder. She straddles his lap and sexily removes her bra, wrapping it around his balding head and then looping it around his neck like a leash. She squeezes her breasts together, flicks her tongue across her nipples, feels William's cock stiffen between

the spread of her thighs. She leans in to his chest, but pulls away before she gets too close.

The more money he slides beneath the narrow waistband of her G-string, the lower and harder she grinds her hips. If Sierra looks down and sees a crown of bills wrapping her waist, she'll let William hold her ass even though he always leaves little bruises. He propositions Sierra regularly. He wants to fuck her in a restaurant bathroom. He wants to take her to a fine hotel and sip champagne from her body, feed her cold grapes. He wants to tongue her navel and shower her with bling and ride her doggy-style. William hasn't yet figured out her price. He was making progress toward being able to see Sierra outside the club—she didn't scowl as much when she saw him—until one day he said, "I want to fuck you filthy because my wife is a goddamned prude." Sierra pushed William away, said, "I can't believe what you just said."

Her scowl returned, seemed deeper even, so he started coming to the club four nights a week, told his wife he found a new bridge group.

Sierra tries to leave Sarah at home but often fails. She is racked with guilt when she thinks about all the married men who leer from the tip rail and sit in the darkened booths with their legs wide open lamenting all the dirty things their wives won't do. Sarah finds such conversations impolite and having seen so much too much of these men, she bears not a small amount of sympathy for their women.

After her shift, Sarah goes to the diner a few doors down from the club, her face scrubbed clean. She wears a T-shirt and jeans, her hair swept up in a neat ponytail. She sits at an empty table and carefully smooths out the bills she's accumulated, separating

them into piles by denomination. Sometimes a waiter named Alvarez will sit with her counting out his own tips. She is desperately in love with Alvarez because he doesn't ask her out, because his hands are gentle and clean, because he doesn't say anything unkind about her profession even though he smells it on her. He keeps her coffee fresh and brings her big salads with dressing on the side, then gives her foil-wrapped Handi Wipes to clean her hands with after she's done calculating her worth for that night.

Alvarez loves Sarah with equal fervor but he's illegal, *sin papeles*, and worries what would happen if one thing led to another. Alvarez is a worrier. When he was a baby in Honduras, his mother would find her beautiful boy in his crib, not crying but fretting, chewing on the slender wisps of his baby fingernails. On nights when he's too tired or foolish to worry, he'll sit on the same side of the booth as Sarah and hold her hand. He'll whisper to her in Spanish. Sometimes he'll sing his favorite song, "Volver" by Estrella Morente. As Alvarez sings, he taps the table in a steady beat and Sarah sways from side to side and sometimes she sings along, too. He loves the song because he loves the name Estrella, which means star. He has named their imaginary daughter Estrella. When he walks Sarah to her car, he'll point up to the night sky and say, "Mira las estrellas," and Sarah will look up and her heart will beat fiercely, tenderly.

William loves black women but he's wealthy and his wealth has history. He doesn't have what it takes to go there. Men like him can't go there. His father, William Livingston II, once told him the Livingstons had long been touched by a spot of jungle fever but that men of their class did not give in to such petty demands. As William and his father watched their black housekeepers in

their tight gray-and-white uniforms bending over to dust and arrange the objects in their lives, father and son would ogle and grin. William II would grab William III by the shoulder and say, "You can look, boy, but you cannot touch. The family can't afford the scandal." William sublimates his desires by listening to rap music. When the urge becomes unbearable, when his tongue is wet with the desire to taste a black woman's skin, he drives slowly through West Baltimore openly staring at the young black girls in Apple Bottoms jeans, with their hair gelled to their scalps and their bouncing hoop earrings, their brightly painted lips. He stares until they flash him dirty looks and call him a dirty old man or worse. In those moments when these girls are looking right at him with their righteous anger, his cock swells and strains against his fine wool slacks. He whispers, "Look but don't touch," until his mouth is dry and full.

He lives in Guilford with his wife and teenage son, in an old but stately brick mansion left to him by his father along with a significant trust fund. When William first brought his wife, Estelle, a pale blond sliver of Connecticut, she clutched the pearls around her neck and said, "It's like we're nowhere near Baltimore. Thank goodness for that." She had heard things about Baltimore all the way up in Greenwich. Her friends told her moving to Baltimore would be like moving to the jungle. Estelle is unaware of William's penchant for the blacker berry though she finds his taste in music curious. At night, before bed, he stands in his media room between his state-of-the-art speakers, blasting DMX and Method Man and Soulja Boy. He watches rap videos, enjoying the lurid images of televised vixens sliding down poles and crawling across floors and allowing rappers to swipe credit cards between their ample ass cheeks. He indulges in the fantasy of fucking one of

these ebony women right there, between the speakers, the bass so heavy it presses down on them like a holy spirit.

Carmen, a young black woman, is William and Estelle's housekeeper. She lives in the maid's quarters over the garage. She has dark mahogany skin, full lips, big breasts, narrow waist, a perfect black ass. When William described the young woman to his friends at the country club, he said, "She has the kind of ass they carry babies on back in Africa," and then laughed and enjoyed a sip of brandy. Carmen speaks softly, with a southern lilt. She smells like cocoa butter. When she showed up at the Livingston manse, she was hired on the spot. William promptly installed a series of surveillance cameras and microphones throughout her apartment that recorded to a hard drive he could access anywhere. He used to think his wealth was a burden but quickly realized what he could get away with.

William rents office space so he has a reason to leave the house. Other than monitoring his investments online, he doesn't work. He watches video of Carmen sleeping and showering, talking to her mother in South Carolina, watching TV, reading.

He almost fucked the maid once. It was late at night and he went to her room, his bathrobe cinched tightly around his waist. When Carmen answered her door, it was clear he had woken her up. She crossed her arms across her chest, shifted nervously.

William gripped her shoulders, breathing heavily through his nose. "I own everything in this house," he said, then laughed the same laugh he laughed at his father's deathbed when he realized just how wealthy he was about to become.

Carmen wore only a thin white nightgown with thin straps and flowers embroidered along the neckline. He reached between her thighs and looked right in her eyes. Carmen didn't look away.

She grabbed hold of his wrist, pushed it away. She said, "I need this job." William smiled, looked to the floor. Carmen never spoke much, but she was a smart girl.

When she slowly sank to her knees, William placed a meaty hand on the top of her head, traced her hairline with his thumb. "Are you familiar with that Twista song, 'Wetter'?" He didn't wait for an answer. "In that song, the girl says she needs a daddy. Do you need a daddy, Carmen?"

Carmen loosened the belt holding his bathrobe closed, sighed, leaned forward. As his housekeeper gave him a blowjob, William Livingston III reassured himself that this wasn't the same as fucking a black girl. He was getting his dick wet, something men of his ilk had been doing for more than a hundred years. He closed his eyes, tightened his grip on Carmen's bobbing head, and imagined fucking her on a beach in Ibiza or over his desk in his office. Just before he came he ordered her to remove her nightgown. She acquiesced. He ejaculated on her breasts, ordered her to rub him into her skin. He left just as quickly as he came, then watched the video of Carmen scrubbing herself clean from the quiet comfort of his study. He never bothered her again. He had gotten what he wanted.

When he's not watching his housekeeper, William listens to his music and repeats the lyrics about skeeting and Beckys and backing that ass up and living the gangsta life. His office has a small closet where he keeps urban clothing he sends his assistant to West Baltimore to purchase—Sean John jeans and Phat Farm hoodies and Timberland boots. His understanding of what the kids are wearing is dated. Sometimes he poses in front of the full-length mirror, grabbing handful of denim-clad crotch, and sets his chin to the side and tries to re-create gang signs with his

fingers. After a busy day of woolgathering, William retires to the country club for dinner with his wife and son or attends a charity gala or goes to visit Sierra, the white girl with a black girl's ass.

William is becoming more possessive, getting angry if he sees her laughing with or dancing for other customers. His hands are greedier and grabbier than ever. Sierra doesn't like it, doesn't like how he interrogates her about the lap dance she was giving to two college guys when he entered the club. She tells him his jealousy bores her. He frowns. A Ying Yang Twins song is pounding out of the speakers, "The Whisper Song." It is one of William's favorite songs.

She frowns. "You are only paying for my time when you're in here, William. I thought you knew that."

He licks his lips, tries to grab her breasts before settling on holding her ass, enjoying how the ample flesh peeks into the spaces between his fingers. Sierra allows the affection because there is a wreath of at least three hundred dollars around her waist.

"I'd prefer to buy all your time. Why don't you become my private dancer?"

Sierra laughs. "Like the song?"

William's cock throbs. He loves Tina Turner. Those legs. That voice. Those lips. He grins. "Exactly like the song."

Sierra turns so her ass is facing William. She wiggles coquettishly so her cheeks bounce and jiggle in his face. She turns to look at him over her shoulder, tossing her long hair to the side. She licks her lips slowly. William groans, slides lower in his seat, pulls Sierra against him, so they are touching. He closes his eyes and thinks about West Baltimore girls. He listens to the lyrics. He believes in the lyrics. He wants a bitch to see his dick. He wants

to beat that pussy up. He comes in his pants, a damp stain slowly inching toward his inseam. When Sierra tries to stand, he holds her tight. She tries to pry his fingers loose, but he is stronger. She glares at the bouncer watching the scene, throws her hands up. The bouncer shrugs, continues to watch. William always tips generously so the bouncer won't intervene when William breaks club rules, which he does, regularly. Sierra gives the bouncer the finger, her slow angry burn spreading.

After work, Sarah is in a foul mood. She goes to the diner and stands near the entrance, pacing back and forth. Alvarez is refilling salt and pepper shakers. He looks up and smiles, then frowns as he observes her rigid posture, the rage rolling off her in waves. He wipes his hands on his apron, tells his boss he has to leave early. Alvarez drives Sarah home in her car. He asks her what's wrong but she is silent. Neither song nor stars will console her. At her apartment, Alvarez follows her inside and sits nervously on her couch. Sarah takes a picture from a bookshelf against one wall and hands it to Alvarez. She points to a tall, attractive woman with caramel skin and a sad smile. She sits. "That's my mother," she says.

Alvarez's eyes widen but he inches closer to Sarah. He says, "Tu madre es bonita. Eres mi negra blanca." He removes his apron, rolls up his sleeves, and runs a bath for Sarah. She disrobes in front of him but does not worry. She steps into the warmth, one foot at a time, and sighs as she settles into the water. Alvarez reaches for the washcloth, neatly folded on a towel rack, and washes her gently, wiping away the human oils and the fingerprints and the stale cigarette smoke and the inappropriate behaviors. Sarah tells Alvarez about her horrible night at work. She tells him about men who can't take no for an answer and other men who allow that sort

of thing to happen. She is tired, so very tired. "Voy a matarlos," he mutters. Sarah places her damp hand against his cheek. She says, "No es necesario. It's an occupational hazard." Alvarez nods, but while Sarah lies in her tub, her skin clean and pink, her eyes closed, humming a strange little tune, he clenches his fists until his knuckles turn white. Then he kisses her forehead.

William Livingston III sits in his BMW sedan outside Sierra's apartment. He is irate. He doesn't understand what the stripper is doing with a spic waiter when she could be with a man like him. He's listening to an angry DMX track, smoking a cheap sweet cigar he stole from his son's room. He stares at himself in the rearview mirror and tries to bark fiercely like the rapper. He calls his wife, Estelle, tells her he's going to be late. He can hear the gin in his wife's voice, knows it doesn't matter when he gets home.

When the waiter leaves, William flicks the cigar butt onto the street, tries to smooth his hair over his bald spot. He's followed Sierra home several times now. He knocks on her door, traces the number seven. Sarah answers, wearing only a towel wrapped around her slender torso. She is laughing, but gasps when she recognizes William from the strip club. She tries to shut the door but he wedges his foot against the doorjamb.

Sarah has often reviewed the worst-case scenarios requisite to her occupational hazards but a customer showing up at her apartment, north of the city, never crossed her mind. She tries to close the door again, but this time William pushes past her and into the apartment.

Sarah swallows the chill winding itself around her spine. She thinks about the poli sci paper she has to finish, the Sartre text she needs to read, the excerpt she has to translate, the appointment

with her trainer, all this and more before her next shift at the club. She thinks about Alvarez, who has named their daughter Estrella. She thinks about the food he had gone to pick up and his sweet voice when he serenades her with "Volver." She doesn't have time for this.

She says, "If you don't leave, I'm going to call the police. And if my boyfriend finds you here, he'll kill you."

William is undeterred by her anger. He pulls off his tie and shoves Sarah to the floor. She hits her head against the coffee table as she falls. She finds her voice and screams so loudly the windows shake, but all William hears is a loud ringing.

William's fist connects with Sarah's jaw and a sharp pain sinks through the bone. Hot tears stream down her face but she tries to hold it together. She tries to focus past William's pudgy body looming over her. She tries not to pass out so she might bear witness.

William kneels between Sarah's thighs. He uses a condom. He doesn't know where the stripper has been. He practices some of the lingo he has learned from years of listening to rap music. "I've wanted to get all up in that since the day I first saw you, Sierra. I love your phat ass." Sarah moans and heaves, reaches for her cell phone on the coffee table. It is just beyond her reach. William flips her onto her stomach, and then he's inside her breathing hotly into her ear, telling her that fucking her is just like fucking a black girl without having to fuck a black girl. He smacks her thigh and tells her to do as Lil Jon instructs and bounce, bounce, bounce that ass.

Sarah focuses on her fury. She lets it bind her chest and her heart. She lets it cover her skin. She feels it in her blood. Her fury coats her mouth.

He doesn't take long. With a final thrust, William groans into her ear. He presses his thin lips against her shoulder, a small token of affection. Sarah cringes. He lies on top of her, his sweaty weight pressing her farther into the floor. She tries to crawl away but he is too heavy with liquor and food and fat. Eventually he stands, admires Sarah's perfect ass again. He dresses and sits on her couch. He sets ten crisp hundreds on her coffee table and says, "We could have done this the easy way, Sierra." As he's about to take his leave, he looks down at the picture of Sarah's mother and pauses. "This black woman looks just like you," he remarks.

Sarah reaches for her towel, shields herself. She steadies, inhales deeply. "You should leave now," she says, willing her voice strong.

William holds the picture up, pointing angrily. "Why does this woman look like you?"

At the door, Alvarez hears the tension in Sarah's voice, pushes into the apartment. He eyes William, surveys the disarray, understands. He carefully puts his coat around Sarah's shoulders and stands in front of her. She rests her cheek against his back. She wraps one arm around his waist. She breathes.

William's face is flushed through bright red as the picture falls from his hands. He backs out of Sarah's apartment, shaking his head. Alvarez moves to follow but Sarah tightens her grip around his waist.

"We have to go to the police," he says, but Sarah shakes her head.

"Occupational hazard," she whispers, forcing her lips into a semblance of a smile. "I'm too tired." She is beyond tired, really. She is empty and she wants quiet. She wants quiet.

Alvarez turns to look at her, at the bruises on her face, her arms. He worries about the bruises he can't see. He runs her another bath. She sits in the tub, her arms wrapped around her knees. Sarah is silent as he tries to wash her clean again. Later, they will lie in bed together, breathing softly, perfectly still. They won't touch but Alvarez will keep watch. He will forgo his worries and tell Sarah he loves her. He will remind her of Estrella and in the darkness, she will finally smile. Sarah will want to tell Alvarez she loves him, too, but won't, not with her body still bearing the weight of William Livingston III. Instead, she'll reach across the short distance between them.

Instead, she'll hold his hand and hope it's enough.

William settles into the leather of his BMW and is instantly comforted by German engineering. He speeds away but pulls over as soon as he puts distance between himself and the stripper's apartment. He leans out of his car and vomits, the acids burning his throat and mouth. There is whiskey in the glove compartment. He takes a long draw from the bottle, wipes his lips with the back of his hand. He pours some whiskey down his pants. Tries to clean himself. His skin burns. Penance, he thinks. And absolution.

As he drives, he ignores the sour coating on his lips, teeth, tongue. He is horrified. He is gleeful. He catches his reflection in the rearview mirror, ignores his father's disapproval staring back.

William sits in his driveway, his forehead pressed against the leather-wrapped steering wheel for a long while. He tries to make peace with the fact that he has done something generations of Livingstons have had the discipline to avoid.

He hears footsteps and looks up. William Livingston IV is whistling to himself as he walks back toward the main house from the garage. The older Livingston feels a huge weight being lifted as he watches his carefree boy. He gets out of the car and waves. The younger Livingston stops, smiles, waits for his father. "It's a brave new world," William tells his son, clapping the boy's back with his greedy, grabby hands before wrapping his arm around his son's shoulders and leading him inside.