



*When I was a girl* by Jennifer Jackson Berry

# WHEN I WAS A GIRL

by Jennifer Jackson Berry

SUNDRESS PUBLICATIONS

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thank you to the editors who have supported my work.

Excerpts have appeared in the following journals, in earlier versions:  
*5AM, Amethyst Arsenic, Chiron Review, Jet Fuel Review, The Main Street Rag, Nerve Cowboy, Revolution House, and Stone Highway Review.*

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sleepovers were: socks stuffed in bras we wouldn't  
have needed otherwise & nothing on bottoms but undies,  
performing burlesque to a rotating group of judges who

would soon take their turn with feather boas, who  
would use the same socks, the attached garage not  
a gossipy backstage, but a collaboration, not under

the guise of anything but friendship. show stoppers, underrated  
dance moves from chubby girls who knew how to move, who  
were still years from hiding our bodies, then not

caring who saw flesh, not understanding it would ever change

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doctor visit was: pride during my pre-6th grade physical when  
she parted my lips & apologized for pulling some hairs.  
i was soon for a full bush. hairless was for everywhere but

down there. i pressed the electric razor against my shins, but  
no reason to press so hard it cut me. i shaved my arms when  
the wisps were like so many question marks, *why so much hair?*

*why aren't you normal normal normal?* i hated (not pubic) hair  
with the same heat i loved my new body (breasts!) but  
when the doctor frowned, then suggested a 1,200 calorie diet, when

she didn't want to celebrate my hair, but instead reduce  
my body, that was when  
everything started to change

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trust tests were: not to be trusted, too little strength in too many little  
girl hands on a girl scout camping trip, a get-to-know-  
you-sunday-school event, a birthday party with the helicopter hands

of an overzealous mother coaxing the exercise, her hands  
not supporting the fall. this wasn't a universal worry, only a little  
girl's with too much on her little frame. i knew

i'd become a little bit older girl with a woman's body, i'd know  
how to fall without getting hurt, i'd always remember the failing, flailing hands  
of a mother remembering too late it isn't just her daughter's little

hands she needed to hold, but all little girls'                      she needed to know  
which ones were most likely to fall & reach for them

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swimming was: making diane mad at her birthday party  
when i only went down the water slide once. i didn't know  
how to keep from going under. at heather's pool,

i couldn't plant my feet in the four foot deep pool  
& flailed, thinking i was drowning. i looked like i was playing the part  
of a much older girl in my misses swimsuit, high legs. no

others fit. swimming was: trying not make a splash, fat girls are not  
encouraged to cannonball like the fat boys are. at private pool  
lessons, i could only sit on the concrete edge & fall, not dive in, part

water with hands in a perfect triangle, not overhead  
but pointing at the pool floor, parting my knees

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sleepovers became: dirty dancing & stand by me  
so many times we knew every word but still cringed each  
time lennie briscoe (before he was lennie briscoe) examined penny

or ray brower flashed on the screen, dead eyes round & flat as pennies,  
belinda carlisle impersonations on vhs tape wearing felt fedoras, my  
hands flying in choreographed routines with each

ooh baby (back & forth like a sling) wondering do we know what each  
of us is worth (thumb & two fingers, cash) ooh heaven (more than pennies)  
(we hope) is a place on earth (circle circle circle) she & she & she & me

planning futures (mansions-attics-shacks-houses) spending  
each penny on our respective me-s

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treasure was: bop, teen beat, tiger beat, posters of the two  
coreys before drugs & death, kirk cameron, ralph macchio, school  
books wrapped in brown grocery bags with penciled graffiti & bubble

letters 2 good 2 be 4 gotten from best friends, bubble  
gum shared piece by piece, split heart necklaces worn on two  
necks, id bracelets with a boy's name for the lucky ones, school

field trips to the aviary & plays & museums, back-to-school  
shopping for erasers stickers scented markers bubble-  
wrapped trapper keepers & pop-a-point pencils. no more trips to

the back of the school-room to sharpen, to imagine the word bubbles  
above the heads of the bullies: *fatso!*

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fashion was: anything slimming, vertical stripes, black, but  
nothing exactly like a skinny girl's because of the inevitable  
comparisons. puffy paint, jackets laced with novelty pins,

pegged jeans, jeans pegged tight with a safety pin  
so no bending over to fix the cuffs & showing my butt,  
then sports team shirts, british knights, bugle boy & inevitable

androgyny of same. baggy & boyish inevitably  
hid what everyone else showed. the anti-pin-  
-up. & just in case, sweaters long enough to cover my butt.

fashion makes the woman, but inevitably girls like me are pinned,  
stuck between butch & a soft place

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even church camp was about appearances: when I got  
bitten on the neck, right where a hickey would be,  
i didn't correct anyone who thought it was from a co-camper's lips.

we had sex in the pines, flashlight-lit talk deep in the woods, lip  
service for secondary virginity. the other cabin of girls got  
caught talking about blow jobs & what campers were hot & had to be

without makeup & showers one morning, had to be  
reminded jesus was always watching what they did with their lips.  
the punishing counselors didn't understand, only half got

it: the bigger sin should have been getting caught  
taunting those who didn't use their lips yet

★

i focused on my eye of god, two twigs, like twin sets of legs  
caught spread-eagle, spun & bound with yarn

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all day                    i dream   about sex  
i dream   about all day sex all day  
i day dream                    about sex all

day i dream sex                    about all  
all about day i dream sex  
all day i dream    about sex all day

i dream about sex all day  
all day                    i dream all about sex all  
about sex                                    all day i dream

dream day                    i                    all about sex

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fear was: bleeding through the pad, being picked last,  
taking off my shoes, weigh in with a clueless nurse, repeat  
of the dodge ball to the gut or running

the mile, president's physical fitness tests, boobs so big running  
gave black eyes & back aches, removing summer's last  
sun-in streaks mid-october with hair dye too dark, repeat

of english teacher asking if anything's wrong, repeat  
of the visit to the therapist's office, running  
through the list of reasons why black hair isn't a last

cry for help: last line repeated to anyone who listened:  
*I'm always running*

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literature was: summer of my german soldier,  
lurlene mcdaniels' girls with cancer & sex,  
the house on mango street after a review in sassy,

r. l. stine & christopher pike, their ghosts's sparks & sass,  
catcher in the rye, to kill a mockingbird, soldiering  
through the great gatsby, norma klein taught me sex,

faint first orgasm reading her sex  
scene with leslie & peter & their family secrets, sassy  
feminist ms. finney creates a soldier

in marcy lewis & in me, sassy & sexy soldier with a bookmark

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ballsy were: boys who spoke their minds. sociology teacher posed the question "when it is ok to have sex?" to 12th graders. if it's *right*, if it's *loving*. stupid were: girls who believed adjectives.

nick taught truth to his buddies who caved & attached the adjectives. he answered *anytime*; i said *never unless married*, always the teacher's pet. did i really think admitting desire would affect my grade?

girls aren't taught to be ballsy. bruce said jeans could be sexy in 6th grade as teacher wrote J E A N S, then filled the board with adjectives. girls giggled, his sexy was not what our mothers taught.

truth: by graduation, any boy could have taught me how to verb his adjective noun

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x = feathers, y = boards  
english: light as a feather, stiff  
as a board, she is a feather,

he is a board. logic proof: if light as a feather,  
then stiff as a board.  
what are the conditions of stiffness?

the boy will be stiff if & only stiff  
if the girl is light as a feather & not bored.  
chemistry & sex ed: if the girl is light as a feather,

as air, as feathery as air, then the boy will be  
stiff as a board.

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sexy was: wallet chains, underarm hair, hands,  
thick & veined, him leaning against a locker, against anything,  
chapstick application with his fingertip,

slick-lipped talk about the exchange student, fingertip  
in her mouth, then down her pants both hands  
in math class, slick-tongued boasts about anything,

especially about dropping trough, matching her right now, anything  
in the pages of cosmo, or passages of v. c. andrews, tips  
of the pages folded down, at a red light in mall traffic, hands.

hands, up my shirt, touching the tips of anything that would touch back

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wished for: self esteem & self-assuredness,  
somewhere to go when there was nowhere,  
virginity lost to ac/dc you shook me, it made clear

i really did know johnny in the summers, clear-  
skied days of baseball & his dad in the bleachers, sure  
that i'd stand in as a good girlfriend, where

so many others failed, a prom date so i could wear  
the purple velvet dress i bought on clearance  
at the deb shop in january because surely

he'd exist by may. he didn't.

i was worn out, cleared out, never sure.

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got: giving first blow job to john cougar mellencamp's hurts  
so good, then an empty bedroom for the second  
& third tracks, prom night in street clothes with bff's dumped

bf watching the grand march of couples, the un-dumped  
announced by the social studies teacher, hurt  
feelings fed with dq cones & second

helpings & delilah after dark love songs, seconds  
minutes hours alone in my bedroom dump  
site of mismatched socks & candy wrappers & hurt.

dump site of what would have to be second chances  
& (probably still) hurt

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phone sex was: supposed wrong number move-in week  
at the dorms, which led to compliments on my sexy voice, which led  
to asking about my boyfriend, *no*, which led to *don't you get horny?*

*yes, but i'm a virgin & what do you think you'd like, kiddo? are you horny  
now?* fantasies, reading from penthouse letters, weeks  
of near daily contact until his kid came into the room, which led

to *daddy?* the phone rang stalker-like during our lapse, which led  
to giving in, picking up, but not agreeing to meet in person. he was still horny  
for me & asked *why? are you really that fat?* for weeks

& weeks, i beat myself up for the answer that dropped like lead: yes

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surprise was: midnight phone call invitation  
to a formal frat party by josh, pledge boy in freshman comp,  
i balked, saying all of my prom dresses were at home,

as if it was so far away, my closet in my hometown,  
as if this wasn't my very first invitation,  
but fear college really was a sit-com won out & i composed

myself, said no, he lost his composure  
& whined he'd even begun calling fat girls, homely  
girls. so this wasn't a pig party invitation:

he was a comparable loser, just trying not to invite the biggest girl home

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drunk was: not until college & through the vodka bottle,  
the deep blue glass, i wanted to see denim, the one  
thick seam between back packets to my hand

on the bulge of a button fly, my hand  
searching the last drop, i licked the bottle,  
neck in & out of my mouth, acting the one

sex i knew. i wanted my first real sex to be one  
body slipping like liquor over the other, his hands  
undoing my every maneuver to keep it all bottled

up: the summer sky, heaven's pink streaks, being handed  
every answer, even one answer,  
in my tingling pink flesh

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Sundress Publications • Knoxville, TN

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ISBN: 978-1-939675-09-5

Published by Sundress Publications

Editor: Erin Elizabeth Smith

[erin@sundresspublications.com](mailto:erin@sundresspublications.com)

<http://www.sundresspublications.com>

Book and Cover Design by Greg Frank

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