

# The Good-Girl House

Erin Flanagan

We show up for Rush Week in droves with our jeans rolled at the ankle for casual night, our scrawny teen busts covered by polos and neon prints. We've come from towns sprouted on the shores of the ten thousand lakes, from suburbs with houses like chains of paper dolls, and we carry our below-average pasts like scales of sludge. Few of us even know what name brands are beyond the Pepe jeans they sell at the mall. We've saved all summer to wear our crossbody Liz Claiborne purses with the two-toned khaki and navy triangles, with our preference cards and dorm keys and new student IDs.

We've set our sights on the good-girl house. We want to be the girls men want to marry. We want to be in the house next door. Not the smart house that wins GPA at Greek Week every year, or the rich house with girls from Summit Hill and Lake Harriett, or the slutty house too much like high school. Not the sorority the Black women join, where they make it clear we don't belong. Sure, the majority of us are white, but there's one Latina, and we all joke we're jealous of her tan.

When Rush Week is over, we're brought to the house and given our letters in a ceremony so sweet our teeth ache. Once accepted, initiated, we're allowed to wear those letters to our classes on oversized sweatshirts with stirrup pants. To the gym where we run laps but never lift weights. We never wear them to the bars, a rule that's not stated but understood like so many other rules we have yet to learn.

As the months march on, we learn how to college. We oversleep classes and drink too much; we fall down fraternity steps. Some of us are the first in our families to make it past high school, and it hardly seems possible this is what they want us to do, but every holiday break when we're home they tell us how proud they are. Classes feel like a sec-

ondary thought as we paint our nails in the common room, drink Old Mill in the afternoon on a frat-house porch as our professors lecture to half-full rooms. It feels like these are the real reasons we're in college, to make lifelong friends, even though we scoff at the outdated notion of the MRS. degree.

One by one we find boyfriends, shedding our high school lovers like a first skin. They were boys and now we date men. Some of us go steady and even get pinned in candle-light vigils on the house lawn, but it is understood the men are not faithful. They go after our little sisters, the independents, and slum it with the lesser houses. But we are okay with this. We are! Because we are the girlfriends.

We are matched with a fraternity house and they're our big brothers, but they do not act brotherly. They make snide comments about our weight, our hair, our skin. When we see them in classes, they are different people, raising their hands, answering questions, furrowing their brows as they bend over blue books. But at their frat house or Bullwinkles or the Kollege Klub, they put their hands on us, an ownership, and we are flattered by the attention. When the hands turn rough, there might be a flash-pulse of panic, but we push it down. We don't know if this is what we want but we do know it's what we're supposed to want: to be the objects of their affections. To be objects.

We are to be both virginal and sweet yet fulfill their desires. We don't know how to be both at once, but we're learning. Men force us into closed-in spaces and demand things we don't understand: hummers and bee-jays. Later we will realize these are blow jobs, and much later, in peals of dark, drunk laughter, one of us will admit that when he unzipped his pants and took it out, she literally blew on it. This is another one of those things we're supposed to innately know how to do: to put a cock in our mouths, to let hands hold down our heads. To learn how to breathe underwater and pretend not only that we're not drowning, but that we're enjoying it.

We tell each other stories: how we woke up without our clothes on in a room with three men; how we found a naked

picture of ourselves we didn't know had been taken taped to a frat-house bathroom wall, and that our first thought wasn't one of violation but embarrassment. Our stomach wasn't as flat as it should be, mouth agape and eyes rolled back, the cellulite visible on our thighs. These are not assaults or rapes or hazing because we know deep down these men care for us. They have to.

We're groped in bars, on lawns, in togas, at lakes, in hallways, in bedrooms, in front of fish tanks they keep in their frat rooms. We drink overly sweet red drinks, and keg beer, and clear liquor now blue with Curacao. They joke to our faces about the weak ones in the herd, and we laugh, because now it's like we're buddies, one of the gang, and we've proven our worth. Freshmen arrive on campus with baby-fat cheeks and prescription glasses and acne medication and we point them out to the brothers.

Over the next four years, we'll amass dozens upon dozens of items with our letters on them: keychains from our Big/Little initiation, beer steins from Casino night, t-shirts celebrating the booze cruise formal on the Mississippi, where at least half the house threw up in the water. This is what we have to show from college, as well as degrees we barely earned and GPAs we leave off our resumes. The few who studied in secret, the really smart ones, will go on to law school or become CPAs or historians.

Senior year we'll plan our weddings, and after graduation, many of us will marry these same men who stood on our lawn with gold pins and candles. For a few years we'll have jobs but not careers: we'll climb the ladders to management at retail stores, or move from teller to loan officer at nation-wide banks.

As we settle into married life, a stack of hopeful pregnancy tests in the linen closet, we'll do our best to lose those same ten pounds, stepping on the scale every morning naked, willing ourselves to be stronger. We'll look back fondly at those years when we were in control—the sewer system at the sorority house always backed up from buckets and buckets of vomit, the knuckles on our dominant hands yellowed

from the acid, the sheer will it took to eat only an apple and black coffee and an ounce of cheddar cheese each day during the week, so on the weekends we could gorge ourselves on pizza, cheese bread, cheese curds, beer.

Eventually we'll get the two pink lines on our stockpiled tests—finally, a passing grade!—and nine months later give birth to the most perfect babies you'll ever see. We'll quit our jobs and make our husbands' dinners, all the while remembering those college years fondly despite those flash-pulses of panic, those threads of unease. Even as we dream of those claustrophobic run ins, the ones where the men held us down, shame clawing at the edge of our nightmares. We should have been better; we should have been thinner; we should have stayed sober. Over and over: the guilt that we should have stayed sober.

And then more weight to lose, another ten pounds to stay. We'll buy the luxury strollers our own parents couldn't afford, move to tri-level houses with three bedrooms and two baths. We'll do our best to give these kids everything we never had with so many toys strewn across the manicured lawn they'll never have to fight for what's theirs. We'll watch our girls with that tickle of unease, passing on the rules we were taught about how to stay safe: don't tease, smile, watch your behavior. We'll teach the boys they can have anything they want, hoping the lessons they take are to be generous and kind. In our front minds we want them to be like their fathers; in our lizard brains we don't want that at all.

Our children will enter grade school then middle school. Each spring we'll clean our attics, tossing more of the t-shirts and keychains that were so important to us. We'll throw them away rather than giving them to Goodwill, ruled by that still unspoken law that no one but a sister can wear our letters.

And over those years—between kids one, two, and three—many of us will divorce those first husbands, those ones from the lawn ceremony where they asked us to commit to their shit. They were twenty-two years old when we

married them, but we didn't realize they'd remain that age. We'll divorce them over their affairs, their lack of communication, their snide remarks about our natural aging. Not all of us will consider these divorces a good thing, but the smart ones will. These man-boys will go on to marry younger women, and we'll go on to marry their older counterparts. We all laugh about our starter marriages. We were all just stupid kids.

As our own children enter high school, we're still fighting those twenty pounds, sometimes thirty, the weakest among us even more. We cover our gray at the salons and take Zumba classes and Pilates and flirt briefly with the idea of running a half-marathon, which we do, but never again.

Before it seems possible – weren't they just in kindergarten? – we're crossing the Target parking lot in the summer humidity to buy Twin XL sheets to the dorm's specifications. We are so, so excited for our kids! All the good times ahead. We drop them at the same university with our hazards on, obeying their demands we stay in the car and not hug them in the parking lot. When our sons come home for Thanksgiving, leaving full water cups on the oak table and expecting their laundry to be done, we'll wonder when they decided we were their maids. Our daughters spend the long weekend in their rooms on their phones, and when we walk past the bathroom where she's leaned over the counter applying lipstick, something like a ghost will pass through us.

Second semester they'll call home less and less, and by junior year, it's like we don't even exist. Our children gone, our futures stretching, our nests empty except for the gnawing anxiety that's never quite left since the best years of our lives.

And then one day we'll see the mug shot of the white, Midwestern, curly-haired boy in the white hoodie with the blood-shot eyes. He will look so much like the men we knew, only younger. Certainly he must be younger. There's no way men were really that young when we were in college! Just babies themselves as they pushed us down on beds, held hands over our mouths, forced open our legs with

their knees. This boy, the curly-haired one, raped an unconscious woman behind a dumpster and people were saying it wasn't her fault. Was that true? But what about all those years of shame we've endured for our drinking, our culpable behavior? We tell ourselves it was a different time as we follow the case—the character witnesses who say he was a good kid, the father who laments he can no longer enjoy steak. We are surprised to realize our sympathy extends to him more than the girl. We wonder about our sons who no longer call. We pray for his mother.

And then one day we'll start to hear the whispers from the coasts, the accusations of the things other men have done. In Hollywood, at comedy clubs, in restaurant kitchens and in hotels. These whispers will get their own hashtag and each of us will migrate from Facebook to Twitter to see what all the fuss is about. We'll be as outraged as everyone else is, but still won't make the connection back to our own shadowy pasts. Those were just college days, everyone drunk, what did we expect would happen?

In bed with our second husbands, we'll slowly, inch by inch, block off what they're allowed to touch. We're in our forties and then in our fifties. Shouldn't we be over this by now, this groping and grabbing? Even though we know these aren't the men we knew before, rape and assault statistics ring in our brains. Are our second husbands any better? We count backward from a hundred. We watch the ceiling fan revolve. We ignore our thundering hearts as a finger trails up our thighs. Walls will go up against the men we love, constructed by the men before. Everyone will pay a price.

Eventually we will name what we're feeling—rage—and other words will follow. Mansplaining, gaslighting, entitlement, misogyny. The rage will continue to grow as our husbands explain how to best load the dishwasher they never load themselves. As we see a group of white boys steal a drink from a girl at Starbucks. We watch our old favorite comfort movies, the rage growing bigger. How badly we wanted Jake Ryan to sell his girlfriend for a pair of our used

underpants! How did we believe these were the good guys? We're furious these were the men who were fed to us, and furious we were dumb enough to fall from them.

There comes a time when we're embarrassed to tell people we were in a sorority, that we realize how privileged we are, even as we roll our eyes at ourselves and wonder, how else were we supposed to meet guys?

And as our anger is cresting, a reality star runs for president. He's always given us the willies, but people say we need to abandon big government. Has it really been that bad, these lives we've had? Our now four-bedroom, four-bath houses and the SUVs? All the volunteering we do? (Okay, maybe not as much as we could, but we're trying.) Our husbands assure us this president will be the one to make big changes, to get this country on course, and while we question whether he's the most ethical, they swear if government can get ironed out, the ethics will follow. We cast our votes, sick to our stomachs, but we just hate that shrew with her pant suits so much. And her emails!

The day after his inauguration, we watch the march on TV. So many pink hats. So much activism in exactly our names. We talk about the march and everyone knows a friend of a friend who went. Have we made a mistake by casting our votes and not going? But it's so hard to get away, especially for those with kids still at home. Daughters have recitals and basketball games; sons have STEM clubs and theatre. Husbands can't cook the food from the freezer, even when we write on the tinfoiled casserole with a sharpie: 375/40 min. Or maybe they can and we won't let them, too invested in the one job we have.

And then one day, a man will be considered for a job that will determine whether women will be able to stay in charge of their own bodies. This man, unlike the curly-haired one, will be one we recognize as our own. He's our age, fighting the same twenty pounds, gray hair at his temples. He will be every man we knew in college – the privilege leaking from his large pores, his sense of entitlement and outrage like a second skin. A woman so much like us will tell her story:

how he held her down, how they all did, and she barely got away, and now, finally, in this story, we'll begin to see ourselves. As he snivels on television, yelling that he likes beer and pointing at his calendars, we'll want to burn our own lives down.

And in that anger we'll know this is it, really, the rage that will finally mobilize us. Sure, we voted for the reality star, but we see now that was a mistake. We should have gone to the march, and probably would have if it had been any other weekend. If it hadn't been in January, the coldest month. At least some of us must have been celebrating a birthday, or a husband's birthday, or had tickets to a play. Wasn't it enough that we had to put up with the patriarchy all those years, now we have to march about it too?

And then the Chinese flu hits, we hear all about it on Fox News, and it just seems like everyone is out to get the middle-class, like we're the bad guys. No one's standing up for our rights or what happened to us; no one's keeping people out of our country but the reality star.

And then in our own backyard, that awful business with the knee on the neck over a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, even though that man had done plenty of other bad things. People are chanting abolish the police, for pete's sake. Who do they think will keep us safe? Who will protect our four-bedroom homes? And everyone is marching again, but not us. No sir. Aren't they always taking about cultural appropriation? Plus by now the marches just seem sad, for people who can't let go.

When the next election comes around we cast our votes again. We make our beds. The devil you know, isn't that right? And that rage we've felt? It's not healthy to hold on. We've had good lives overall. Better than most. Maybe we'd been right all along, that what happened to us wasn't a crime or assault or rape, but these men doing their best to express that they loved us. Maybe it was all in our heads.

And who knows. Maybe something will happen that will galvanize us and make us stand up. When that next march hits, the big one, the right one, the one we know will make a



difference, we'll come from the comforts of our second-marriage couches, from our mortgaged houses a few years from paid off. We'll pack our snacks in our Yeti coolers and arrive in our SUVs, six to a vehicle, telling anyone who will listen why we ultimately decided against buying the Prius. Because really, if climate change was that bad, wouldn't somebody be doing something about it by now?