



**SEX
OBJECT**

A MEMOIR

**JESSICA
VALENTI**

INTRODUCTION

All women live in objectification the way fish live in water.

—Catharine A. MacKinnon

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I HAD REOCCURRING NIGHTMARES ABOUT wolves—tall beasts the size of skyscrapers that walked on their hind legs around New York City blocks, chasing and eventually devouring me. My mother says she made the mistake of bringing me to see a live performance of *Little Red Riding Hood* when I was a toddler, and that the man dressed as the wolf terrified me. I started having the dreams almost immediately after the play and they lasted well into high school; I don't remember when they stopped.

Over the last few years, as I've dug deeper into my feminism, become an author and a mother, I've found myself thinking about those dreams a lot. It was just a play, just a man in a scary costume—yet my young brain was impacted indelibly.

Given all that women are expected to live with—the leers that start when we’ve barely begun puberty, the harassment, the violence we survive or are constantly on guard for—I can’t help but wonder what it all has done to us. Not just to how women experience the world, but how we experience ourselves.

I started to ask myself: *Who would I be if I didn’t live in a world that hated women?* I’ve been unable to come up with a satisfactory answer, but I did realize that I’ve long been mourning this version of myself that never existed.

This book is called *Sex Object* not because I relish the idea of identifying as such: I don’t do it coyly or to flatter myself. I don’t use the term because I think I’m particularly sexy or desirable, though I’ve been called those things before at opportune moments.

For a long time, I couldn’t bear to call myself an author. I’ve written books, yet the word still felt false rolling off my tongue. The same thing happened when I got married—“wife” seemed alien, but that’s what I was, someone’s wife. Unlike “author” or “wife,” “sex object” was not an identity I chose for myself as much as it was one pushed upon me from twelve years old on; I admit my use of the term is more resignation than reclamation. Still, we are who we are.

I have girded myself for the inevitable response about my being too unattractive to warrant this label, but those who will say so don’t realize that being called a thing, rather than a person, is not a compliment. That we might think of it that way is part of the problem.

Being a sex object is not special. This particular experience of sexism—the way women are treated like objects, the way we sometimes make ourselves into objects, and how the daily sloughing away of our humanity impacts not just our lives and experiences but our very sense of self—is not an unusual one. This object status is what ties me to so many others. This is not to say that women all experience objectification in the same way; we do not. For some, those at the margins, especially, it's a more violent and literal experience than I could imagine or explain.

What I know is that despite my years of writing about feminism, I've never had the appropriate language to describe what it has meant to live with these things: The teacher who asked me on a date just a few days after I graduated high school. The college ex-boyfriend who taped a used condom to my dorm room door, scrawling “whore” across my dry-erase board. The Politico reporter who wrote an article about my breasts.

The individual experiences are easy enough to name, but their cumulative impact feels slippery.

A high school teacher once told me that identity is half what we tell ourselves and half what we tell other people about ourselves. But the missing piece he didn't mention—the piece that holds so much weight, especially in the minds of young women and girls—is the stories that *other people tell us about ourselves*. Those narratives become the ones we shape ourselves into. They're who we are, even if so much of it is a performance.

This book is about more than the ways in which I grew up feeling sexually objectified, though—exploring as much would

be too pat. The feminism that's popular right now is largely grounded in using optimism and humor to undo the damage that sexism has wrought. We laugh with Amy Schumer, listen to Beyoncé tell us that girls run the world or Sheryl Sandberg when she tells us to *lean in*.

Despite the well-worn myth that feminists are obsessed with victimhood, feminism today feels like an unstoppable force of female agency and independence. Of positivity and possibility.

Even our sad stories, of which there are many, have their takeaway moral lessons or silver lining that allows us to buck up, move on, keep working.

This is not just a survival technique but an evangelizing strategy, and a good one at that. But maybe we're doing ourselves a disservice by working so hard to move past what sexism has done to us rather than observe it for a while.

Maybe it's okay if we don't want to be inspirational just this once.

My daughter, Layla, is shy but fierce. I don't know if it was the circumstances of her birth—born too early and too small, sick for so long—but she is a master in the art of survival and making herself known.

This year, in kindergarten, her class was told they were going to put on a performance of *The Three Little Pigs*. Parts would be given out by teachers, who told the children, *You get what you get and you don't get upset*. And so Layla got her part—the first little pig with the straw house. She was unhappy, and when I reiterated the teacher's rule about fairness and accepting

the roles we are cast in she told me clearly: *The only ones I want to be are the pig with the brick house or the wolf.* When I asked her why her answer was simple.

Because I want to be one of the ones who doesn't get eaten.

Now, her answer may have come from a place of fear—fairy tales feel real at this age—but still I was proud. My timid girl will not accept a role in which she will be devoured. She wants to live, to be the one doing the eating. I don't know that I can hope for much more.

I wrote this book because I want her to feel that way always.