

A Scarf

TWO YEARS AGO I WROTE A NOVEL, and my publisher sent me on a three-city book tour: New York, Washington and Baltimore. A very modest bit of promotion, you might say, but Scribano & Lawrence scarcely knew what to do with me. I had never written a novel before. I am a middle-aged woman, not at all remarkable-looking and certainly not media-smart. If I have any reputation at all it is for being an editor and scholar, and not for producing, to everyone's amazement, a "fresh, bright, springtime piece of fiction," or so it was described in *Publishers Weekly*.

My Thyme Is Up baffled everyone with its sparky sales. We had no idea who was buying it; I didn't know, and Mr. Scribano didn't know. "Probably young working girls," he ventured, "gnawed by loneliness and insecurity."

These words hurt my feelings slightly, but then the reviews—good as they were, had subtly injured me too. The reviewers seemed taken aback that my slim novel (two hundred pages exactly) possessed any weight at all. "Oddly appealing," the *New York Times Book Review* said. "Mrs. Winters' book is very much for the moment, though certainly not for the ages," the *New Yorker* said. My husband, Tom, advised me to take this as praise, his position being that all worthy novels get close attention to the time in which they are suspended.

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sometimes, years later, despite themselves, acquire a permanent luster. I wasn't so sure. As a long-time editor of Danielle Westerman's work, I had acquired a near-crippling degree of critical appreciation for the sincerity of her moral stance, and I understood perfectly well that there was something just a little bit *darling* about my own book.

My three daughters, Nancy, Chris and Norah, all teenagers, were happy about the book because they were mentioned by name in a *People* magazine interview. ("Mrs. Winters lives on a farm outside Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is married to a family physician, and is the mother of three handsome daughters, Nancy, Christine and Norah.") That was enough for them. Handsome. Norah, the most literary of the three—both Nancy and Chris are in the advanced science classes at General MacArthur High School—mumbled that it might have been a better book if I'd skipped the happy ending, if Alicia had decided on suicide after all, and if Roman had denied her his affection. There was, my daughters postulated, maybe too much over-the-top sweetness about the thyme seeds Alicia planted in her window box, with Alicia's mood listless but squeaking hope. And no one in her right mind would sing out (as Alicia had done) those words that reached Roman's ears—he was making filtered coffee in the kitchen—and bound him to her forever: "My thyme is up."

It won the Offenden Prize, which, though the money was nice, shackled the book to minor status. Clarence and Dorothy Offenden had established the prize back in the seventies out of a shared exasperation with the opaqueness of the contemporary novel. "The Offenden Prize recognizes literary quality and honors accessibility." These are their criteria. Dorothy and Clarence are a good-hearted couple, and rich, but a little jolly and simple in their judgments, and Dorothy in particular is fond of repeating her recipe for

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enduring fiction. "A beginning, a middle and an ending," she likes to say. "Is that too much to ask!"

At the award ceremony in New York she embraced Tom and the girls, and told them how I shone among my peers, those dabblers in convolution and pretension who wrote without holding the reader in the mind, who played games for their own selfish amusement, and who threw a mask of *noir* over every event, whether it was appropriate or not. "It's heaven," she sang into Tom's ear, "to find that sunniness still exists in the world." (Show me your fatwa, Mrs. Winters.)

I don't consider myself a sunny person. In fact, if I prayed, I would ask every day to be spared from the shame of dumb sunniness. Danielle Westerman has taught me that much, her life, her reflection on that life. Don't hide your dark side from yourself, she always said, it's what keeps us going forward, that pushing away from the unspeakable brilliance. She wrote, of course, amid the shadows of the Holocaust, and no one expected her to struggle free to merriment.

After the New York event, I said goodbye to the family and got on a train and traveled to Washington, staying in a Georgetown hotel that had on its top floor, reserved for me by my publisher, something called the Writer's Suite. A brass plaque on the door announced this astonishing fact. I, the writer in a beige raincoat, Mrs. Reta Winters from Lancaster, entered this doorway with small suitcase in tow and looked around, not daring to imagine what I might find. There was a salon as well as a bedroom, two full baths, a very wide bed, more sofas than I would have time to sit on in my short stay, and a coffee table consisting of a sheet of glass posed on three immense faux books lying on their sides, stacked one on the other. A large bookshelf held the tomes of the authors who had stayed in the suite. "We like to ask our guests to contribute a copy of their work," the desk clerk had told me.

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and I was obliged to explain that I had only a single reading copy with me, but that I would attempt to find a copy in a local store. “That would be most appreciated,” she almost whistled into the sleeve of my raincoat.

The books left behind by previous authors were disappointing, inspiration manifestos or self-help manuals, with a few thrillers thrown in. I’m certainly not a snob—I read the Jackie Onassis biography, for example—but my close association with writers such as Danielle Westerman has conditioned me to hope for a degree of ambiguity or nuance, and there was none here.

In that great, wide bed I had a disturbing but not unfamiliar dream—it is the dream I always have when I am away from Lancaster, away from the family. I am standing in the kitchen at home, producing a complicated meal for guests, but there is not enough food to work with. In the fridge sits a single egg and maybe a tomato. How am I going to feed all these hungry mouths?

I’m quite aware of how this dream might be analyzed by a dream expert, that the scarcity of food stands for a scarcity of love, that no matter how I stretch that egg and tomato, there will never be enough of Reta Winters for everyone who needs her. This is how my friend Gwen, whom I am looking forward to seeing in Baltimore, would be sure to interpret the dream if I were so foolish as to tell her. Gwen is an obsessive keeper of a dream journal—as are quite a number of my friends—and she also records the dreams of others if they are offered and found worthy.

I resist the theory of insufficient love. My dream, I like to think, points only to the abrupt cessation, or interruption, of daily obligation. For twenty years I’ve been responsible for producing three meals a day for the several individuals I live with. I may not be conscious of this obligation, but surely

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I must always, at some level, be calculating the amount of food in the house and the number of bodies to be fed: Tom and the girls, the girls' friends, my mother-in-law next door, passing acquaintances. Away from home, liberated from my responsibility for meals, my unexecuted calculations steal into my dreams and leave me blithering with this diminished store of nourishment and the fact of my unpreparedness. Such a small dream crisis, but I always wake with a sense of terror.

Since *My Thyme Is Up* is a first novel, and since mine is an unknown name, there was very little for me to do in Washington. Mr. Scribano had been afraid this would happen. The television stations weren't interested, and the radio stations avoided novels unless they had a "topic" like cancer or child abuse.

I managed to fulfill all my obligations in a mere two hours the morning after my arrival, taking a cab to a bookstore called Politics & Prose, where I signed books for three rather baffled-looking customers and then a few more stock copies that the staff was kind enough to produce. I handled the whole thing badly, was overly ebullient with the book buyers, too chatty, wanting them to love me as much as they said they loved my book, wanting them for best friends, you would think. ("Please just call me Reta, everyone does.") My impulse was to apologize for not being younger and more fetching, like Alicia in my novel, and for not having her bright ingenue voice and manner. I was ashamed of my red pantsuit, catalog-issue, and wondered if I'd remembered, waking up in the Writer's Suite, to apply deodorant.

From Politics & Prose I took a cab to a store called Pages, where there were no buying customers at all, but where the two young proprietors took me for a splendid lunch at an

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Italian bistro and also insisted on giving me a free copy of my book to leave in the Writer's Suite. Then it was afternoon, a whole afternoon, and I had nothing to do until the next morning, when I was to take my train to Baltimore. Mr. Scribano had warned me I might find touring lonely.

I returned to the hotel, freshened up and placed my book on the bookshelf. But why had I returned to the hotel? What homing instinct had brought me here when I might be out visiting museums or perhaps taking a tour through the Senate chambers? There was a wide springtime afternoon to fill, and an evening too, since no one had suggested taking me to dinner.

I decided to go shopping in the Georgetown area, having spotted from the taxi a number of tiny boutiques. My daughter Norah's birthday was coming up in a week's time, and she longed to have a beautiful and serious scarf. She had never had a scarf in all her seventeen years, not unless you count the woolen mufflers she wears on the school bus, but since her senior class trip to Paris, she had been talking about the scarves that every chic Frenchwoman wears as part of her wardrobe. These scarves, so artfully draped, were silk, nothing else would do, and their colors shocked and awakened the dreariest of clothes, the wilted navy blazers that Frenchwomen wear or those cheap black cardigans they try to get away with.

I never have time to shop in Lancaster, and, in fact, there would be little available there. But today I had time, plenty of time, and so I put on my low-heeled walking shoes and started out.

Georgetown's boutiques are set amid tiny fronted houses, impeccably gentrified with shuttered bay windows and framed by minuscule gardens, enchanting to the eye. My own sprawling, untidy house outside Lancaster, if dropped into

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this landscape, would destroy half a dozen or more of these meticulous brick facades. The placement of flowerpots was so ardently pursued here, so caring, so solemn, and the clay pots themselves had been rubbed, I could tell, with sandpaper, to give them a country look.

These boutiques held such a minimum of stock that I wondered how they were able to compete with one another. There might be six or seven blouses on a rod, a few cashmere pullovers, a table casually strewn with shells or stones or Art Nouveau picture frames or racks of antique postcards. A squadron of very slender saleswomen presided over this spare merchandise, which they fingered in such a loving way that I suddenly wanted to buy everything in sight. The scarves—every shop had a good half-dozen—were knotted on dowels, and there was not one that was not pure silk with hand-rolled edges.

I took my time. I realized I would be able, given enough shopping time, to buy Norah the perfect scarf, not the near-perfect and certainly not the impulse purchase we usually settled for at home. She had mentioned wanting something in a bright blue with perhaps some yellow dashes. I would find that very scarf in one of these many boutiques. The thought of myself as a careful and deliberate shopper brought me a bolt of happiness. I took a deep breath and smiled genuinely at the anorexic saleswomen, who seemed to sense and respond to my new consumer eagerness. "That's not quite her," I quickly learned to say, and they nodded with sympathy. Most of them wore scarves themselves around their angular necks, and I admired, to myself, the intricate knotting and colors of these scarves. I admired, too, the women's forthcoming involvement in my mission. "Oh, the scarf absolutely must be suited to the person," they said, or words to that effect—as though they knew Norah

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personally and understood that she was a young woman of highly defined tastes and requirements that they were anxious to satisfy.

She isn't really. She is, Tom and I always think, too easily satisfied and someone who too seldom considers herself deserving. When she was a very small child, two or three, eating lunch in her high chair, she heard an airplane go overhead and looked up at me and said, "The pilot doesn't know I'm eating an egg." She seemed shocked at this perception, but willing to register the shock calmly so as not to alarm me. She would be grateful for any scarf I brought her, pleased I had taken the time, but for once I wanted, and had an opportunity to procure, a scarf that would gladden her heart.

As I moved from one boutique to the next, I began to form a very definite idea of the scarf I wanted for Norah, and began, too, to see how impossible it might be to accomplish this task. The scarf became an idea; it must be brilliant and subdued at the same time, finely made, but with a secure sense of its own shape. A wisp was not what I wanted, not for Norah. Solidity, presence, was what I wanted, but in sinuous, ephemeral form. This was what Norah at seventeen, almost eighteen, was owed. She had always been a bravely undemanding child. Once, when she was four or five, she told me how she controlled her bad dreams at night. "I just turn my head around on the pillow," she said matter-of-factly, "and that changes the channel." She performed this act instead of calling out to us or crying; she solved her own nightmares and candidly exposed her original solution—which Tom and I took some comfort in but also, I confess, some amusement. I remember, with shame now, telling this story to friends, over coffee, over dinner, my brave little soldier daughter, shaping her soldierly life.

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I seldom wear scarves myself; I can't be bothered, and besides, whatever I put around my neck takes on the configuration of a Girl Scout kerchief, the knot working its way straight to the throat, and the points sticking out rather than draping gracefully downward. I was not clever with accessories, I knew that about myself, and I was most definitely not a shopper. I had never understood, in fact, what it is that drives other women to feats of shopping perfection, but now I had a suspicion. It was the desire to please someone fully, even oneself. It seemed to me that my daughter Norah's future happiness now balanced not on acceptance at Smith or the acquisition of a handsome new boyfriend, but on the simple ownership of a particular article of apparel, which only I could supply. I had no power over Smith or the boyfriend or, in fact, any real part of her happiness, but I could provide something temporary and necessary: this dream of transformation, this scrap of silk.

And there it was, relaxed over a fat silver hook in what must have been the twentieth shop I entered. The little bell rang; the updraft of potpourri rose to my nostrils, and the sight of Norah's scarf flowed into view. It was patterned from end to end with rectangles, each subtly out of alignment: blue, yellow, green, a kind of pleasing violet. And each of these shapes was outlined by a band of black, colored in roughly as though with an artist's brush. I found its shimmer dazzling and its touch icy and sensuous. Sixty dollars. Was that all? I whipped out my Visa card without a thought. My day had been well spent. I felt full of intoxicating power.

In the morning I took the train to Baltimore. I couldn't read on the train because of the jolting between one urban landscape and the next. Two men seated in front of me were talking loudly about Christianity, its sad decline, and they ran the words *Jesus Christ* together as though they were some

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person's first and second names—Mr. Christ, Jesus to the in-group.

In Baltimore, once again, there was little for me to do, but since I was going to see Gwen at lunch, I didn't mind. A young male radio host wearing a black T-shirt and gold chains around his neck asked me how I was going to spend the Offenden prize money. He also asked what my husband thought of the fact that I'd written a novel. (This is a question I've been asked before and for which I really must find an answer.) Then I visited the Book Plate (combination café and bookstore) and signed six books, and then, at not quite eleven in the morning, there was nothing more for me to do until it was time to meet Gwen.

Gwen and I had been in the same women's writing group back in Lancaster. In fact, she had been the informal but acknowledged leader for those of us who met weekly to share and "workshop" our writing. Poetry, memoirs, fiction; we brought photocopies of our work to these morning sessions, where over coffee and muffins—this was the age of muffins, the last days of the seventies—we kindly encouraged each other and offered tentative suggestions, such as "I think you're one draft from being finished" or "Doesn't character X enter the scene a little too late?" These critical crumbs were taken for what they were, the fumbleings of amateurs. But when Gwen spoke, we listened. Once she thrilled me by saying of something I'd written, "That's a fantastic image, that thing about the whalebone. I wish I'd thought of it myself." Her short fiction had actually been published in a number of literary quarterlies, and there had even been one near-mythical sale, years earlier, to *Harper's*. When she moved to Baltimore five years ago to become writer-in-residence for a small women's college, our writers' group first fell into irregularity, and then slowly died away.

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We'd kept in touch, though, the two of us. I wrote ecstatically when I happened to come across a piece of hers in *Three Spoons* that was advertised as being part of a novel-in-progress. She'd used my whalebone metaphor; I couldn't help noticing and, in fact, felt flattered. I knew about that novel of Gwen's—she'd been working on it for years—trying to bring a feminist structure to what was really a straightforward account of an early failed marriage. Gwen had made sacrifices for her young student husband, and he had betrayed her with his infidelities. In the early seventies, in the throes of love and anxious to satisfy his every demand, she had had her navel closed by a plastic surgeon because her husband complained that it smelled "off." The complaint, apparently, had been made only once, a sour, momentary whim, but out of some need to please or punish she became a woman without a navel, left with a flattish indentation in the middle of her belly, and this navel-less state, more than anything, became her symbol of regret and anger. She spoke of erasure, how her relationship to her mother—with whom she was on bad terms anyway—had been erased along with the primal mark of connection. She was looking into a navel reconstruction, she'd said in her last letter, but the cost was criminal. In the meantime, she'd retaken her unmarried name, Reidman, and had gone back to her full name, Gwendolyn.

She'd changed her style of dress too. I noticed that right away when I saw her seated at the Café Pierre. Her jeans and sweater had been traded in for what looked like large folds of unstitched, unstructured cloth, skirts and overskirts and capes and shawls; it was hard to tell precisely what they were. This cloth wrapping, in a salmon color, extended to her head, completely covering her hair, and I wondered for an awful moment if she'd been ill, undergoing chemotherapy and suffering hair loss. But no, there was a fresh, healthy, rich

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face. Instead of a purse she had only a lumpy plastic bag with a supermarket logo; that did worry me, especially because she put it on the table instead of setting it on the floor as I would have expected. It bounced slightly on the sticky wooden surface, and I remembered that she always carried an apple with her, a paperback or two and her small bottle of cold-sore medication.

Of course I'd written to her when *My Thyme Is Up* was accepted for publication, and she'd sent back a postcard saying, "Well done, it sounds like a hoot."

I was a little surprised that she hadn't brought a copy for me to sign, and wondered at some point, halfway through my oyster soup, if she'd even read it. The college pays her shamefully, of course, and I know she doesn't have money for new books. Why hadn't I had Mr. Scribano send her a complimentary copy?

It wasn't until we'd finished our salads and ordered our coffee that I noticed she hadn't mentioned the book at all, nor had she congratulated me on the Offenden Prize. But perhaps she didn't know. The notice in the *New York Times* had been tiny. Anyone could have missed it.

It became suddenly important that I let her know about the prize. It was as strong as the need to urinate or swallow. How could I work it into the conversation?—maybe say something about Tom and how he was thinking of putting a new roof on our barn, and that the Offenden money would come in handy. Drop it in casually. Easily done.

"Right!" she said heartily, letting me know she already knew. "Beginning, middle, end." She grinned then.

She talked about her "stuff," by which she meant her writing. She made it sound like a sack of kapok. A magazine editor had commented on how much he liked her "stuff," and

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how her kind of “stuff” contained the rub of authenticity. There were always little linguistic surprises in her work, but more interesting to me were the bits of the world she brought to what she wrote, observations or incongruities or some sideways conjecture. She understood their value. “He likes the fact that my stuff is off-center and steers a random course,” she said of a fellow writer.

“No beginnings, middles and ends,” I supplied.

“Right,” she said. “Right.” She regarded me fondly, as though I were a prize pupil. Her eyes looked slightly pink at the corners, but it may have been a reflection from the cloth that cut a sharp line across her forehead.

I admire her writing. She claimed she had little imagination, that she wrote out of the material of her own life, but that she was forever on the lookout for what she called “putty.” By this she meant the arbitrary, the odd, the ordinary, the mucilage of daily life that cements our genuine moments of being. I’ve seen her do wonderful riffs on buttonholes, for instance, the way they shred over time, especially on cheap clothes. And a brilliant piece on bevelled mirrors, and another on the smell of a certain set of wooden stairs from her childhood, wax and wood and reassuring cleanliness accumulating at the side of the story but not claiming any importance for itself.

She looked sad over her coffee, older than I’d remembered—but weren’t we all?—and I could tell she was disappointed in me for some reason. It occurred to me I might offer her a piece of putty by telling her about the discovery I had made the day before, that shopping was not what I’d thought, that it could become a mission, even an art if one persevered. I had had a shopping item in mind; I had been presented with an unasked-for block of time; it might be possible not only to imagine this artifact, but to realize it.

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"How many boutiques did you say you went into?" she asked, and I knew I had interested her at last.

"Twenty," I said. "Or thereabouts."

"Incredible."

"But it was worth it. It wasn't when I started out, but it became more and more worth it as the afternoon went on."

"Why?" she asked slowly. I could tell she was trying to twinkle a gram of gratitude at me, but she was closer to crying.

"To see if it existed, this thing I had in mind."

"And it did."

"Yes."

To prove my point I reached into my tote bag and pulled out the pale, puffy boutique bag. I unrolled the pink tissue paper on the table and showed her the scarf.

She lifted it against her face. Tears glinted in her eyes. "It's just that it's so beautiful," she said. And then she said, "Finding it, it's almost like you made it. You invented it, created it out of your imagination."

I almost cried myself. I hadn't expected anyone to understand how I felt.

I watched her roll the scarf back into the fragile paper. She took her time, tucking in the edges with her fingertips. Then she slipped the parcel into her plastic bag, tears spilling more freely now. "Thank you, darling Reta, thank you. You don't know what you've given me today."

But I did, I did.

But what does it amount to? A scarf, half an ounce of silk, maybe less, floating free in the world. I looked at Gwen/Gwendolyn, my old friend, and then down at my hands, my wedding band, my engagement ring, a little diamond thingamajig from the sixties. I thought of my three daughters and my mother-in-law and my own dead mother

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with her slack charms and the need she had to relax by painting china. Not one of us was going to get what we wanted. Imagine someone writing a play called *Death of a Saleswoman*. What a joke. We're so transparently in need of shoring up our little preciousities and our lisping pronouns, her, she. We ask ourselves questions, endlessly, but not nearly sternly enough. The world isn't ready for us yet; it hurts me to say that. We're too soft in our tissues, even you, Danielle Westerman, Holocaust survivor, cynic and genius. Even you, Mrs. Winters, with your new, old useless knowledge. We are too kind, too willing, too unwilling too, reaching out blindly with a grasping hand, but not knowing how to ask for what we don't even know we want.

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