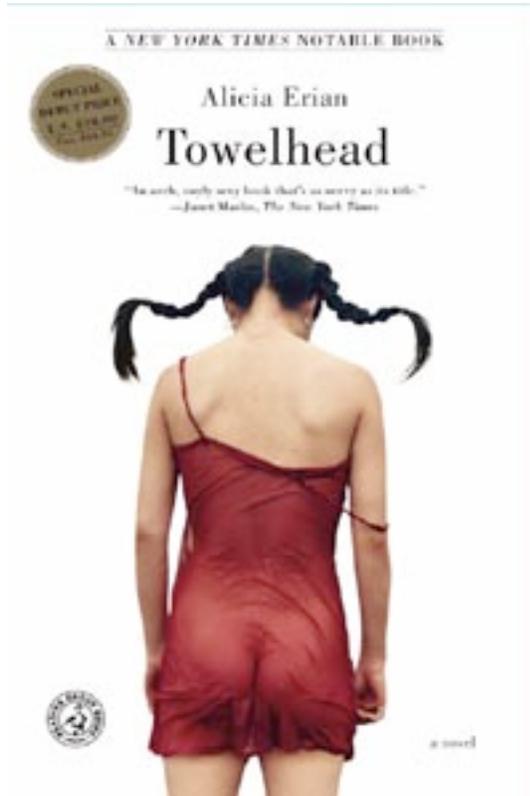


“Alicia Erian Takes Off the Towel”

Continued from *Susie Bright’s Journal*.

An interview with Alicia Erian and excerpt from her novel, [Towelhead](#).



...He said okay, even though he seemed kind of bothered.

When I met Denise at her locker later and told her about my deal with Thomas, she said, “No way! He’s using you!”

“No, he’s not,” I said.

“He’s totally using you. You can’t have sex with him in exchange for not being a racist. That’s ridiculous.”

“But I want to have sex with him.”

She looked at me. “You never told me that. You told me you were in love with that guy next door.”

“I am,” I said, “but I want to have sex with Thomas, too.”

“Then you won’t be a virgin anymore.”

“So?” I said.

“So?” she said. “It’s important that the first person you have sex with is someone special. Not someone who’s using you.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m probably going to do it.”

“I can’t believe you,” she said, and she closed her locker and walked away. I thought about chasing after her and telling her not to worry, that I already wasn’t a virgin, that the person I had done it with was special, even if he had only become that way later on. But I didn’t, of course. Besides the fact that I didn’t want to get Mr. Vuoso in trouble,

I didn't think Denise would understand. If I couldn't explain to her why Daddy was bad, then I probably couldn't explain why Mr. Vuoso was good.

All the way home, I thought about having sex with Thomas. I disagreed with Denise. I didn't think he was using me. I thought he was making a fair trade. Plus, I missed him. I wanted to be his girlfriend again.

After getting off the bus, I went to Melina's house. "Can I read my book for a while?" I asked.

"Sure," she said.

I followed her inside, noticing how skinny she always looked from behind. It was nice because for a couple of seconds, I could pretend she wasn't pregnant.

In the living room, Melina sat down on the couch beside a ball of yellow yarn and a tiny sweater, stuck on knitting needles. "That looks like doll clothes," I said.

"Yup," she said.

"Maybe when your baby gets older, you could give her those clothes for her dolls."

Melina shrugged. "If she plays with them."

My book was on the coffee table, where I'd left it last time. I wondered if Melina and Gil ever had company over, and if they ever wondered what it was doing there. "Shouldn't you keep this someplace else?" I asked, reaching for it.

Melina looked up from her knitting. "Why?"

"I don't know."

"There's nothing wrong with that book," she said. "I'm happy for anyone who comes into my house to see it."

She went back to her knitting, and I looked around for a place to sit.

There was a chair, but I decided to take the floor. I wanted to be far enough away from Melina that she couldn't see what I was reading.

Plus, I liked being lower than her. It made me feel young.

The book said that if I decided to have sex, I could get a lot of diseases, and that I needed to use a condom. It said that the part of me where the orgasms came from would feel a vibration when Thomas's penis was inside me. There was a section, too,

where it said that virginity was seen as something that made a girl pure, but that really, a girl could do whatever she wanted and that she wasn't anyone's property. In a way

I liked that, but in a way I thought it seemed very sad. Most of the time, I really wanted to belong to somebody.

"Jasira," Melina said.

I looked up. "Yes?"

"I have something for you."

"What?"

"Hold on a sec." She set her knitting down on the couch and went into the kitchen. When she came back, she handed me a key.

"Here."

"What's it for?" I asked.

"My house. This way, if you ever needed to come over here, at any time, for any reason, you can just let yourself in."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes. And you don't even have to tell me why. You can just come over, watch TV, read your book—whatever."

"What if you're not home and it's just Gil?" I asked. "It doesn't matter," she said. "He knows I'm giving you a key and that you might use it."

I thought about walking into Melina's house with only Gil there and how I wouldn't know what to say. It would be embarrassing. "Well," I said, "thank you."

"You're welcome," she said, sitting back down on the couch. "I probably won't need it," I said.

She picked up her knitting. "You never know."

I tried to start reading again, but I couldn't pay attention. I kept thinking about coming into Melina's house and never leaving.

That night before bed, I told Daddy I was taking a shower, but really I shaved my pubic hair. I used one of the razors Thomas had given me, and I did it just like he liked, with the thin strip down the middle.

When I was finished, I collected all the black hairs from the drain, wrapped them in a piece of toilet paper, and threw them away.

In the morning when I woke up, I dressed in my nicest bra and underwear. For the first time, I noticed that they didn't match. The bra was one of the gray ones Daddy had bought me, and the underwear was white cotton. I put my jeans and sweater on, then took my backpack in the bathroom and slipped Mr. Vuoso's condom in the small zip pocket.

When I got to school, Denise was waiting for me at my locker.

"You're not going to do it, are you?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "I am."

"But why?"

"Virginity doesn't make me pure," I said.

"What?"

"I'm not anyone's property."

"I never said you were," she said. "I just don't think it's fair for Thomas to make you trade your virginity for his forgiveness."

"It's not like that," I said.

"Then what's it like?"

"I already told you," I said. "I want to have sex with Thomas. If it also helps him to forgive me, then that's good, not bad."

"This is stupid," Denise said. "I hate that I know anything about this." She walked away, and I watched the back of her hair bounce from how heavy she was stepping.

At lunch, Thomas wanted to know if I had remembered the condom, and I said I had.

"Just one?" he asked, and I nodded.

After school, I walked past my bus and met Thomas in front of his. We got on together and took a seat toward the back. He held my hand all the way, like he used to in the halls at school. Every once in a while he would lean over and whisper in my ear, "I'm going to have sex with you." I wasn't sure what to say back to him, so I just nodded.

When we got to Thomas's house, he reached inside his shirt for a key he wore on a chain around his neck. He didn't take the chain off, just lowered his neck to the level of the doorknob and leaned forward a little until the key reached the lock.

The first thing I noticed when we got inside was how much bigger the living room looked without the Christmas tree. There was still a pine smell in the air, though. Thomas set the mail he'd collected from outside on a table beside the door. "Do you want something to eat first?" he asked.

"Okay," I said. I was a little nervous.

I followed him into the kitchen, with its clean counters and dirty breakfast dishes in the sink. Daddy always said we could never, ever leave dishes in the sink or the roaches would come, but I didn't see any bugs at Thomas's.

"What do you want?" he asked, opening the fridge and leaning slightly into it.

I pulled out a chair at the table and sat down. "What are you going to have?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I'm not really hungry." Then he knelt down and opened the crisper. "How about an apple?"

"Sure."

He got two of them and bit into his without washing it. I did the same, even though Daddy had always warned me about pesticides on fruits and vegetables.

"I'm getting really turned on," Thomas said after a few bites.

"You are?"

He got up from his chair and came and stood in front of me. He took my hand and put it on his pants. "See?"

I nodded, feeling his erection.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Can't I finish my apple?"

“Sure,” he said, and he went back to his seat.

Thomas finished his apple first and ate the core and the seeds, too. It was like Daddy with his chicken bones. “Why do you eat the core?” I asked.

“It’s just roughage.”

“You want mine?” I said, offering it to him. Daddy liked me to pass him my chicken bones when I was done so he could crunch on the cartilage.

“No thanks,” Thomas said, but he did take my core and toss it in the trash under the sink. Then he came back and said, “Let’s go to my room.”

We walked up the stairs. I went first, and Thomas squeezed my butt while I climbed. On the way to his room, he stopped at a hall closet, opened it, and took out a towel. “We’ll probably need this,” he told me. “There’s going to be blood.”

When we got to his room, he said, “I’m taking my clothes off,” and in a few seconds he was naked. He had nice broad shoulders, from swimming, I guessed, and his stomach had a couple of ripples in it. His penis stuck straight up, nearly hugging his stomach. He unfolded the towel and laid it out on the bed. Then he lay down on top of it. “Now you take your clothes off,” he said.

It took me longer than it had taken Thomas. I had never played strip poker before, but I undressed as if that was what we were doing now. Where you only took off your bra and underwear at the very, very end.

“You shaved.” Thomas said when I was finally naked.

I nodded.

“That looks good,” he said. “C’mere.”

I walked over to the side of the bed where he lay. He reached out and put a hand on the little bit of hair I had left. “Lie down,” he said, scooting over to make room for me.

I lay down on the towel on my back. I was worried about how there wasn’t going to be any blood at all, and what Thomas would think about it.

He rolled onto his side, then reached out and ran a hand over my stomach. “Your skin is soft,” he said.

“Thank you.”

He moved his hand up to my breasts and pinched one of my nipples.

“Ow,” I said.

“Really?” he said. “That doesn’t feel good?”

“No.”

He looked confused. “It’s supposed to feel good.”

“It doesn’t,” I told him.

He touched my nipple in a softer way and said, “How’s that?”

“Better.”

I wasn’t sure what to do with my legs—whether I should open them or keep them closed. Soon, though, Thomas was moving in front of me, opening them himself. I thought we were going to do it then, but instead, he bent my legs at the knees then pushed them apart as wide as they would go. After he did that, he just stared. He stared and stared and stared. He wouldn’t stop. Even though he wasn’t touching me, it was exciting. It was like the girls in *Playboy*, having their picture taken by men photographers who wouldn’t hurt them.

Soon, he put his head between my legs. He started to lick me there, or kiss me—I couldn’t tell. It felt good, though. Warm. He did it for a long time before he finally pulled his head up and said, “I think you’re ready.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Where’s the rubber?”

“In my pocket.”

He reached for my jeans, which I had hung over his desk chair, and took the foil packet out. I watched him tear it open and roll the condom on. It looked a little tight. “These are for guys with little dicks,” Thomas said.

I wondered about Mr. Vuoso then, if he had a little dick. “Does it hurt?” I asked Thomas.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

I had closed my legs while he put the condom on, and now he opened them again. He lay down between them, this time with his face up by mine. I could smell myself around his mouth. The smell that was on my hands every time I had an orgasm alone.

"Listen," Thomas said, "I promise to be careful. I won't hurt you."

"I know," I said.

"Just tell me if you want me to stop and I will."

"But then you'll think I'm still a racist."

"What?" he said.

"You said if I had sex with you, I would impress you and you wouldn't think I was a racist anymore."

This seemed to bother him. "Forget about that, would you?"

"All right," I said.

He reached for his penis then and started to put it inside me. "Just try to relax," he said.

"Okay."

He pushed a little harder now. "It'll only hurt for a few seconds."

I nodded. It was true. It did hurt. Not from anything tearing, like with Mr. Vuoso, but from the feeling that there wasn't enough room.

But Thomas kept pushing anyway. "Oh my God," he whispered.

"What?" I whispered back.

"Nothing," he said. "It just feels so good."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry if it hurts," he said.

"It's okay."

"The first time is always painful for girls."

"Yes," I said.

He had an orgasm pretty quickly after that. I wasn't exactly sure what I was supposed to do to have one myself, so I just lay there. When he was finished, he rolled off of me and onto his side of the bed. We lay there for a long time, not talking. Finally he looked over at me and said, "Is there a lot of blood?"

I rolled to one side of the towel so he could see. There was no blood.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe some girls don't have it."

He was quiet for a minute, then said, "It was painful, right?"

"Yes," I said.

"You just didn't look like it was bothering you that much."

"It was."

"I mean, it's not like I have a small dick or anything."

"No," I said, "you don't."

"Huh."

"Maybe you were just really careful," I said.

"I guess."

"Anyway," I said, "I'm glad it wasn't that bad."

"Yeah," Thomas said, "that's good."

"So you don't think I'm a racist now?" I asked him.

"Stop saying that," he said. "I already told you to forget about that."

"Sorry."

"It definitely should've hurt more," he said.

I didn't say anything.

"Why didn't it?" he asked. He rolled onto his side and looked at me.

"Who'd you do it with before me?"

"No one."

"You never did it with anyone?"

"No."

"But what about the blood?"

"I don't know, Thomas." I got up off the bed and started to get dressed.

"I'm not going to be mad if you had sex with someone else," he said. "I'm just curious."

"I didn't," I said, pulling on my underwear.

"Was it back in Syracuse?"

"It was nowhere."

"Nothing popped," he said. "It's supposed to pop."

"Can you please call me a taxi?"

He sighed and went in the bathroom, the rubber hanging loosely off the end of his penis. When he came back, it was gone. After putting his clothes on, he walked out of the bedroom and thumped down the stairs.

I followed him shortly afterward. He was standing at the kitchen counter, opening a jar of peanut butter. "The cab'll be here in fifteen minutes," he told me.

"Thanks," I said.

"Do you feel like a woman?"

"Uh-huh."

"I feel like a man," he said, spooning peanut butter into his mouth.

When the cab beeped, Thomas walked me outside and opened the car door. He gave the driver ten dollars and told him my address. After he shut the door, the driver kept looking back at me through his rearview mirror. He did this all the way home. He had dark brown eyes and hair the same color. I thought he was probably Mexican.

At first I tried to stare back at him, but then I started to feel bad and looked away. It seemed like he was mad at me even though he didn't know me. When we got to my house and I opened the door to get out, he said something in Spanish. I didn't know what it meant, except for one word: *negro*.

Excerpt from the novel [Towelhead](#), by Alicia Erian, © 2005, all rights reserved.