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# Prologue: What About Men?

‘Errrr . . .’

It’s July 2014, and I’ve just been asked a question I can’t answer.

Normally, I would like to think there are no questions I cannot answer. I am on a speaking tour for *How to Be a Woman*, and all the questions the audience ask are about women, and girls.

As someone with, at the time, 38 years of experience of being either a woman, or a girl, I’ve some chat about pretty much All The Women Things: bloodied pants; comfort-eating; the pay gap; abortion; Beyoncé. When it comes to the vag-based problems, I have the bantz.

Right now, however, I’m onstage in front of 1,198 people, and the silence after the question is getting longer, and more uncomfortable. Because while the first two questions were

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‘Can feminists wear pink?’ (‘Yes!’) and ‘What do you think of Paris trying to ban the burka?’ (‘Obviously, women should be allowed to wear whatever they *want* to wear. However, until there is a burka for *men*, we can see the *fundamental* idea is sexist bullshit’), the third question has stumped me.

The woman in the audience, holding the microphone, has just asked: ‘So – do you have any advice for *men*?’

This is the first time I have ever been asked this question. I’ll be honest: I feel a bit annoyed by it. Why *this* topic? I’m a feminist! My specialist subject is women! I don’t do . . . the other guys. You might as well ask e.g. Sir David Attenborough a question about the Swindon gyratory system! That’s not his patch! Men aren’t mine!

I decide I’ll make a joke about it. I’ll play to the crowd. This room is dominated by women – earlier, I’d asked all the ‘brave men’ in the room to raise their hands, so we could see them; so I know there are 1,152 women here, and 46 men. I’ll just play to a cheap yet effective stereotype, and move this question on.

‘My advice to men? I guess, a) please, if you can possibly avoid it, don’t rape us, and b) put the bowls in the dishwasher – rather than *next* to the dishwasher?’

It gets a laugh – the kind of bittersweet laugh you get from a room full of women who are familiar with the idea of spending 20 minutes discussing both the complete collapse in rape convictions in the UK, *and* housework.

I add a cheerful ‘Hashtag #notallmen’ – to let the men in the audience know this isn’t an attack on them. Just the Bad Men out there. The small number of Bad Men. Then we move the conversation on.

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I'm still a bit peeved. Men, though? Ugh. Why were we talking about men? I've spent the last ten years researching how shit things are for women around the world. Honestly, by comparison, the men are *fine*.

Two nights later, and I'm in a similar jam. I'm now in Edinburgh, still doing an hour of chat about women, and girls – but, yet again, when the audience start asking questions, the second question I get asked is: 'What advice would you give to the mothers of teenage boys?'

Urgh. Come now! I'm the Woman Woman! Why are you asking me this? Are people purposely trying to ask me difficult questions?

Now I know how Paul McCartney felt when I interviewed him, and asked him what he'd do if he were in a car crash that totally destroyed his face. 'So, Sir Paul – would you use plastic surgery to build back the face of Paul McCartney? Or would you choose *another* face? So you could live the rest of your life in pleasant anonymity?'

I thought I was honouring him with a tricky, yet clever, inquiry. Instead, he treated it like a joke – 'I'd get the face of David Cameron, instead' – indicated that this had been my final question, and terminated the interview.

Unfortunately, this is not my final question.

'It's just, I have a teenage girl, and there seems to be loads of advice for mothering a girl,' the woman in the audience continues. 'That's why I read your book. But I also have a son, and for him – I can find nothing. I just wondered if you had any advice for women trying to

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raise . . .’ and here her voice falters for a minute, ‘. . . *good*, happy boys, and men?’

‘Well, obviously, I have no experience of raising boys – I have two girls,’ I start. ‘But I guess my question – and it’s to all of us here – is: why should this be the women’s problem? Interestingly, this is the second time this week I’ve been asked about men – and both times, it was a *woman* asking me. But why is this a question for feminism? Feminism is the only socio-political invention dedicated solely to helping women. It would be ironic, would it not, if women – having spent the last hundred years knackered themselves trying to solve the problems of women – now had to go and solve all the problems of men, as well?’

It’s getting some laughs, so I keep going: ‘They need to solve their own problems! They’re the best-qualified people to do so! Why are men not asking other *men* this question? Your husband should be asking, I don’t know, *Gary Lineker* this. Not me!’

For the rest of the tour, whenever I get asked about men – which I am, almost every night – this is basically the reply I give. It always gets a laugh. And I believe it. It wouldn’t be *fair* to make women solve the problems of men. Particularly *this* woman. I believe most men are good, lovely, kind, fun, decent, awesome human beings. I’m violently opposed to the branches of feminism that are permanently angry with men, or who just hate men on principle, or think men can’t be feminists. Of course they can! There are as many decent men as there are decent women! Men are awesome! I married one! All four Beatles were men! Men invented John Frieda Frizz Ease Serum! I am an absolute fan of men!

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But, ultimately, if forced to pick a team, I'm Team Tits. Up the women! God bless them – but let the men sort *themselves* out.

For the next three years or so, this very much continues to be my stance. Indeed, in this, I am bolstered by being on Twitter, every March, on International Women's Day.

For, regular as clockwork, as soon as thousands of women start excitedly Tweeting about events, feminist heroes, feminist initiatives, charities and arts events, they are met by thousands of men Tweeting in return, peevishly, 'But when is International *Men's* Day? Huh? What about the *men*? No one cares about *men*. This is *sexist*.'

Year after year, in vain, the comedian Richard Herring would spend International Women's Day replying to each of these Tweets, patiently, with a simple fact: 'International Men's Day is 19 November. Maybe put on an event? Tweet about it then?'

But the effect is always the same: I become massively irritated about men stomping all over a women's thing, shouting, 'WHAT ABOUT US?'

What about you? Honestly? I don't *care*. Make your own things – don't piggyback on ours.

It's 2019 and I have changed. I am starting to care very much. Because now, it's not me that's being asked these questions about men.

It's my teenage daughters.

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I am currently on a Zoom call with one of my daughters, two of her girlfriends, and four of their male classmates. International Women's Day has rolled round, and we're supposed to be having a conversation about feminism – this is what I have been drafted in to chat about. My presumption was that Gen Z boys were the most liberal and feminist generation so far. I thought ideas about equality, and feminism, were so accepted among their teenage friends as to be almost passé. I thought this was going to be a straightforward bit of 'Up the women!'

That's not what I'm hearing on this Zoom call.

'It's harder to be a boy than a girl now,' Milo says, right at the beginning, blinking. 'Everything is stacked against boys.'

While the girls look outraged, all the boys nod.

'Feminism has gone too far,' George says. His certainty in saying this is . . . unexpected. This is a sentence I expect to hear from some angry, 50-something hard-right Republican on the campaign trail in the Midwest – not a middle-class 18-year-old boy at an arts college, wearing a Sonic Youth T-shirt.

I've told everyone that for the first half of this Zoom call, I only want the boys to speak. I want the boys to tell me what *their* problems are – what *they're* scared of. Before we start a conversation about feminism – the problems of girls – I wanted to let the boys talk first; so that they would be more prepared to listen. I wanted to engineer a friendly communal chat! Bring the sexes together! However, it is *not* going the way I thought it would.

'The girls talk about how scared they are of sexual

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violence – but boys are *much* more likely to be attacked,’ Milo says. ‘That’s just a fact. Every day, I’m scared I’m going to be stabbed.’

‘Me too!’

‘Constantly.’

‘Like, we just expect it’s going to happen.’

‘Girls don’t have to worry about being stabbed, or getting into a fight,’ George says.

‘So you’re worried about violence from other boys, or men,’ I say, trying to find some common ground. ‘Well, you have that in common with the girls. They fear violent boys, and men, too.’

‘Yeah – but then we *also* have to be scared of the girls,’ Milo says.

The girls look outraged, but I gesture for them to just listen, for now.

‘Why are you scared of *girls*?’ I ask.

‘Well, there’s a *lot* of “he said, she said” stuff,’ George says, looking uncomfortable. ‘Rumours and gossip going around schools that such-and-such a boy has raped a girl – then it turns out they did have sex, but she just changed her mind, after, or wanted to get back at him. It gets nasty. Boys’ lives get ruined by it. A lot of boys are too scared to even talk to girls now – you don’t know how it’s going to be portrayed later. That’s what I mean when I say feminism has gone too far.’

‘Men are just seen as bad, or toxic. It’s always like, “What have the boys done now?” We’re blamed for everything. People just automatically presume we’re all rapists.’

‘We’re always the *wrong* ones.’

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‘And we’re told to talk about our problems or feelings, but when we do it’s like, “You’re whining,” or “You’re mansplaining, shut up,” or “Men don’t have problems, they’re *fine*. They’re always the winners” – but we’re not. It *is* easier to be a woman than a man now.’

‘That’s what Jordan B. Peterson says – that we talk about men like just actually being a man, just actually existing as a man, is wrong. That straight white men get blamed for everything. And then you look at how many young men are killing themselves, and you think: this is all fucked up. Who cares about the men?’

By this point in the conversation, I was starting to feel very uneasy. I could see how angry and misunderstood these boys felt – how much pent-up emotion they had.

I thanked everyone for being so honest. The boys seemed startled: ‘It’s been *amazing* to talk about this stuff. I haven’t really done it before.’

‘I’ve literally never had someone say, “What are the problems that boys have?” You only ever hear that asked about girls.’

They all, very politely but genuinely, thanked me, and said they really looked forward to the next chat.

After I stopped the Zoom, the girls immediately started texting me.

‘They were just being *polite* with you.’

‘On WhatsApp, they call feminism a “cancer”, and feminists “Feminazis”.’

‘They make rape jokes – they say it’s all banter, but it’s clearly never occurred to them that we know women who *have* been raped.’

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‘Why didn’t you talk to them about all that? You don’t *know* how boys talk when you’re not around. *Why aren’t the mums talking about that?*’

After the Zoom call, I go outside for a ciggie, feeling very unhappy.

*Why aren’t the mums talking about that?*

This last, anguished question has reminded me of something I’ve been noticing for a while, but hadn’t joined the dots on until today. For, in my social circle, I have started to notice a big divide – a divide between those women who are Mothers of Sons, and those women who are Mothers of Daughters.

The Mothers of Daughters report that their teenage girls are coming home and bursting into huge, long, impassioned speeches about what’s been happening at school: febrile relationships, complex friendship circles and power dynamics. The info-download is vast, and almost daily.

But the most recurrent and important information they download is on what that Zoom call just touched on – which boys are becoming ‘problematic’.

‘Joshua slept over at a girl’s house after a party – and she woke up with him on top of her.’

‘Charlie broke up with a girl – then showed all his friends her nudes.’

‘Piotr tried strangle-sex with his girlfriend – and she passed out. Now she just keeps crying in class.’

To be a mother of a teenage daughter is to engage in frequent anxious phone calls with other mothers, discussing

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these kinds of incidents. Mothers of Daughters talk to each other *endlessly* about what's going on with their children: half the wine I've drunk in the last four years has been with other Mothers of Daughters, sharing our war stories, and various incidents and outrages that have occurred. Giving advice. Counselling the girls. Mothering feminism is all about these mini-conferences, late into the night.

But my conversations with the Mothers of Sons are very, very different.

'How's your boy doing?' you'll ask – a leading question, for which you are braced, as you would be with the Mother of Daughters, for an hour of hair-raising tales of horror, anxiety and repelling unwelcome sexual attention.

'He's . . . fine?' the Mothers of Sons will say, shrugging. 'Seems pretty happy. Exams are a bugger, right – I think they get him down – but he doesn't say much, to be honest. Just comes back, kicks a football around, then goes to his room.'

'He doesn't talk to you about friends, or . . . girls?' you ask, trying to see if the boys are conveying anything of the constant ticker tape and headlines of the frequent, ruinous incidents that consume the World of Girls.

'Nah – you know what boys are like. They're private. They don't really talk about that stuff.'

Or:

'I don't think boys get embroiled in all those complex situations girls do. You know? Boys are quite simple, aren't they? They're like dogs. They live in the moment. So long as they've got their mates, and their PlayStation, they're fine.'

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Or:

‘Yeah – he seems a bit down, to be honest. I try to talk, but he just shuts it down. Being a teenager is shit, right? I can’t wait until this phase ends.’

There are exceptions, of course – I’ve had deep conversations with Mothers of Sons about their neurodiversity, OCD or, in the case of Noah, his worry that his bum is ‘too small’. But, by and large, the gulf between the Mothers of Daughters and the Mothers of Sons is so large as to make it seem like they inhabit two different worlds – and this reaches its apogee in the fact that there are two teenage boys I know who have *terrible* reputations among the girls, to the point of borderline criminal behaviour, and yet their mothers *seem not to know*.

Worse than that: I *know* these mothers – and I literally do not know how to tell them. Even more basic than that: I don’t even know if I’m *allowed*. Can you ring a fellow mother and say, ‘Are you going to yoga on Tuesday? Also, quick sidebar, there are very strong rumours going around school that your son sexually assaulted a girl when she was passed out from drinking too much?’

What *is* the etiquette, in these matters? What are the *rules*? When they were six, and poking a cat with a stick, in the playground, I knew it was the Mother’s Code to report on them, with a conspiratorial, ‘Coh, kids!’ look. But now? With this? When the 18-year-old girls – technically adults, now – concerned *beg* you not to get involved? ‘It will cause a whole incident! You can’t report on him to *his mum!*’

I like to think I’m not a bad communicator. I like to think I am good at talking about things that are difficult, awkward or taboo. But when it comes to this – to honestly

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discussing the trouble that boys and men are both causing, and are in? I don't know any template for it. I don't know what tone I would use. I have never seen women talk about boys, or men, like this with each other. I don't know how to do it. And one final, further point: I don't know any *fathers* who have ever even raised the question. The fathers don't seem to feature in these problems at all.

And, as I smoked that miserable cigarette, I started to realise something very uncomfortable about myself.

I had, let's face it, spent the last five years humorously refusing to even countenance the problems of boys, and men. I had told the mothers of teenage boys that women shouldn't engage with the unhappinesses, and fears, of boys. That boys, and men, should simply talk to other men about their problems, instead. I'd kind of . . . *teased* men for saying they were troubled. For wanting the same kind of space for their conversations about themselves that women have. For being hurt that International Women's Day is such a big deal – but no one even knew when International Men's Day is. I think I might even have used the word 'butt-hurt'.

'Let the men sort themselves out!'

Well – they *had*. Clearly. In the absence of appealing, relatable, sound advice coming from the good liberal progressive men of my generation, boys had found the only men who *were* talking about it: men in chatrooms, influencers on YouTube and TikTok. Places where phrases like 'feminism has gone too far', and 'Feminazi', and 'feminism is a cancer' are just day-to-day chat. A world of 'ironic' sexism,

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the ‘Manosphere’, Jordan B. Peterson, Men’s Rights Activists and Incels.

But that advice doesn’t seem to be making boys, or men, happier. Instead, it seems to be stoking their anger. It seems to be stopping them from having conversations with their parents. It seems to be sending them to their rooms to spend hours, alone. It seems to be connecting them with a worldwide group of similarly unhappy, angry, paranoid young men. And it all seems to make them feel like there was only one ultimate cause of their unhappiness – girls.

‘Tell the boys what they *should* be reading,’ one of the girls had pleaded, earlier. ‘Tell them some websites, or facts, or a TV show or . . . *something*. Something that is about the problems of boys and men – but that’s positive, and, like, good, and which will make them understand it’s not all *our* fault.’

And I couldn’t think of anything.

I couldn’t think of any book, play, TV show or movie that basically tells the story of how boy-children become men. What ‘being a man’ is, in its ostensibly mundane but actually momentous detail: how to shed your child-body and become an adult; how to negotiate the white-water rapids of sexual desire; how to self-soothe your sadness and anger; how to cope with defeat and loss; how to be a father; how to love; how to age. How to understand how and why the world responds to you, simply because you are a boy, or a man. How to gain the kind of confidence and happiness that not only make *you* confident and happy, but everyone that you love, too. In short, how to be a well-adjusted, average, content boy, who grows up into a well-adjusted, content

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man – able to talk about his problems without shame or fear. Or, indeed, able to even know what his problems *are*. Or, as those mums put it, when asking for parenting advice: how to end up a good, happy man.

Women’s stories – from *Jane Eyre* and *Little Women* to *Broad City* and *Bridgerton* – are all about this. Women and girls are bombarded with information and advice, from day one, on how to grow up, be themselves, be happy, be excellent. Be *proud*. And, obviously, there are dozens and dozens of non-fiction, self-help books about women adulting. I know – I’ve written two of them myself. So: why isn’t there anything like this for men?

And so now, at the age of 48, I have, finally, taken absolutely seriously something that some boys, and men, have been saying for a while now – the biggest complaint of Men’s Rights Activists and the Manosphere. Which is, in our culture, ‘It’s easier to be a woman than a man, now.’

If boys, and men, really feel this – if they observe that there is more discussion, support, cheerleading and belief in girls, and women – then *I believe them*. You have to believe people when they keep saying the same thing, over and over, more despairingly each time. Surely that is one thing social progress has taught us.

And what’s more: *I think it’s true*. Straight white men are not encouraged to celebrate what they are. There *are* no big events on International Men’s Day. ‘This is all the problem of straight white men’ has become a default statement on social media – applied to absolutely everything, despite the

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fact that ‘straight white men’ also includes utterly powerless, depressed 13-year-old boys, sitting in their beds, starting to wonder if there’s any point in getting up in the morning.

If I were to Tweet ‘I am proud to be a woman’, I’d probably get a bunch of ‘YAYS!’ and ‘ME TOO – and in the good way, not the rapey way!’ and a half-dozen hand-claps and dancing-girl emojis in reply.

If a man typed ‘I’m proud to be a man’, however, the reaction would be more . . . suspicious? I mean, even *I* would be suspicious. I don’t think there’d be any dancing-girl emojis there. I mean, is there even a male equivalent of the dancing-girl emoji? That ‘women having good times – rejoice!’ symbol? I don’t think there is. And all of this is not a good sign. If there is no acknowledgement of the group you are in, if you cannot be proud of how you are born, then I would suggest – to wheel out one of the lines from *How to Be a Woman* in a new, unexpected role – that there might be some sexist bullshit afoot.

So this book is me leaving the World of Girls and Women – where I have spent my whole life, sharing tights’n’giggles – and traversing over to the unfamiliar World of Boys and Men, to ask: ‘Hey, literal dudes – what’s going on here? What are you anxious about? What are you angry about? What aren’t you talking about? And, while I’m here, could you open this jar of pickles for me – my hands are too small and ladylike?’

There are some things I’ve observed about men I want to share with them. There are some aspects of men I want to find out about. And there’s also a lot of jokes about dicks and balls because, let’s face it, they are funny. Just as funny as vaginas – and I don’t say that lightly.

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But mainly, I just want to try to start talking about boys and men, as we have recently come to about girls and women: talking about the minutiae of their lives. Taking their concerns seriously. Trying to unpick just how ideas of what a boy, or man, ‘should’ be like came about, and whether it’s time to change them. And talking – a lot – about the funny, ridiculous stuff. I often think it’s the funny, ridiculous stuff that’s the most important. That’s usually where everything – good and bad – starts.

And so it is, primarily, a book about straight white men.

It’s not *not* about all men – but it’s *mainly* about straight white men.

Partly about the kind of men who will say, in their angry moments, ‘No one’s talking about *us*.’

But mainly about the kind of straight white man who would murmur, mortified, ‘Well, there’s nothing really to talk about. I mean, I don’t want to make a *fuss*. I’ll just crack on. There’s nothing really to *say* about us.’

As it turned out, I found a *lot* to say about straight white men in the twenty-first century. There is *plenty* to make a fuss about. Or joke about – as it pleases you.

And, finally, I’d like to say, to all those women, at all those events: I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I tried to deflect your questions, or make a joke out of it. You were right to say, ‘Is there any advice for the mothers of boys?’

You were right to think there is a problem. You were right to say, ‘What about men?’

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# Chapter One

## How to Be a Boy

Of course, I am not a man. I do not know what it's like to be a man, or a boy. Not a clue.

When I was young, the gender segregation at school was pretty rigid. At playtime, the girls plaited each other's hair, played skipping or clapping games, and casually psychologically manipulated, and occasionally destroyed, each other, via sly comments about hair, pencils or socks.

The boys, meanwhile, sporadically had fights – ‘BUNDLE! BUNDLE!’ – and once, there was a fairly hearty attempt by one boy to stab another boy in the eye with an icicle. But although this boys' world seemed more brutal – ‘BUNDLE! BUNDLE!’ ‘MY EYE!’ – it also seemed much simpler, emotionally.

Towards the end of my last year at junior school, I was temporarily rejected by my female peer group, for reasons I

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cannot now remember – probably ‘lesbian’ socks – and the boys wordlessly but cheerfully beckoned me over, to play football with them. Even though I was terrible at it.

‘Just stand by the goal, and the balls will bounce off you,’ Simon Rowley said, wholly without malice.

When a tennis ball hit my left breast, and I doubled over in pain, Philip Bostock said – with touching thoughtfulness – ‘Are girls’ tits like balls for men?’, and gave me a sympathetic arm-punch.

After a week of football, the girls let me back into their gang – again, I cannot remember why: presumably my new socks were more ‘hetero’ – and I returned to the World of Girls, accompanied by another cheerful, no-hard-feelings shrug from the boys.

While I would talk to boys during class, or in the corridor, we never *did* anything together again. When I wrote a (terrible) play and put it on, no boys turned up to the casting – all the male roles had to be played by girls. Eager girls. Because rehearsals happened in breaktime. And break-time was for football. Hence Emily Perry heroically playing a now-problematic young Chinese fisherboy called ‘Han’.

At the time, it was so obvious that boys and girls lived in totally different worlds that it wasn’t really noticed. It’s only now, as a middle-aged woman – starting to ask the question ‘What about men?’ – that I realise: this means that 90 per cent of all my information on what it’s like to be a normal, average boy actually comes from *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*. Which was written by a middle-aged woman. Whenever my male friends mention their childhoods, I basically imagine they lived in Leicester,

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anxiously measured their willies with a ruler, and admired Nigel's better, cooler racing bike.

I realise I have never asked any man, ever: what is it actually *like*, being a boy? What was happening, over there, on the other side of the playground? What is your species like? I know every single thing about being a girl. I know *nothing* about being a boy.

And so I set out to remedy this and began asking men, essentially, just one question, over and over again: what's it like, in the World of Boys?

'Before we were old enough to go to school?' Stephen considers. 'Before school, it's not a World of Boys. All the kids would play together. Boys and girls.'

'I had an older sister, so I'd tag along with her – play with her friends,' says James.

'I had sisters, who had Sindys – the off-brand Barbie – and I had Action Men,' says Alex. 'And we would just have parties in the Sindy house, where Action Man would turn up – in uniform, obviously – and just, like, have a little dance, and help himself to the hostess trolley.'

'Female cousins, the girls in the street – you just play with whoever's *around*,' says Pete, my husband, nodding. 'When you're a very young kid, your whole world is just what's near, right? You never really make any choices. You don't even know you can *make* choices.'

All of them, between the ages of 40 and 55 now, had the same story – before Proper School began, it was generally a carefree, proto-Elysian, multi-gender world of

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worm-collecting, mud-poking, trike-riding and blithe socialisation with whoever was around, and vaguely nice. Or simply related to you, and therefore unable to avoid.

Once proper school began, however, the World of Boys and the World of Girls started, slowly but inexorably, to come into being. Why? When I asked, the men replied with the same word – and the one thing I did already know about boys:

‘Football.’

For my generation – despite *Gregory’s Girl* – football was for Boys Only. We were 40 years away from the Lionesses. No girls played football. Or if they did, like me, it was only for a week. And badly. For the boys, however: it was simply what boys *did*.

However, the way the men said ‘football’ greatly varied – which surprised me. My impression had been that *all* boys loved football with a passion that was equalled only by their love of their own legs, and *Star Wars*. This, however, turns out to not universally be the case.

‘Even if you weren’t into it, you just had to *pretend*,’ James says, sighing. ‘I mean, I could get into it in a spectator way, when everyone else was – because it’s the culture. But I just wasn’t physically very good at it, and I didn’t really *care*, to be honest. But I *pretended*.’

‘I wasn’t any good at any sports – or anything that involved hand–eye co-ordination,’ Alex says, still wincing. ‘I was not sporty. And PE lessons seemed to be different to all other lessons – if you weren’t any good in history, or maths, and got a question wrong, you wouldn’t have the whole room turn around and go “Oh! You idiot! You

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messed up!” And yet in PE, and in sport – that was totally the thing. You were encouraged to be furious at the person who’d fumbled the pass or catch. Which was often me. And it was horrible.’

‘The only currency was football,’ Stephen agrees. ‘My father never supported a team. He just liked watching it. But in Ayrshire in the 1970s, if you got stopped by big boys in the playground, the first thing they would ask you is, “Are you Celtic or Rangers, wee man?” And I would have to reply, truthfully, like a ponce, “Neither.” And then you’d get the shit beaten out of you, for being a ponce.’

For others, football – playing it, talking about it – provided their first rung into finding friends and settling into school. Happiness.

David: ‘When I started playing football, there’s a thing that happens that has never happened in any other part of my life – apart from, later, in sex – which is: I forget myself. My body leads the way. I don’t think about what I’m doing – my body takes over. And there’s a joy in finding your body can do that – because in all other aspects of my life, my mind leads the way. It’s a . . . release. It’s like dancing. Except I’m shit at dancing.’

‘Even though I was rubbish at football, you needed kids like me to make up the numbers,’ Pete says. ‘And I wanted to play so much that, even though I was so bad at it my nickname was “Peter Pathetic”, I could still spend every playtime “in defence”, passing to the good players. Which was a definite improvement on my previous playtime tactic of dealing with having no friends – running backwards and forwards in the playground, really fast, pretending I was

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playing Chase with someone. Even though I was absolutely alone.'

David, again: 'However much I loved football, I did have one problem, which is very specific: I didn't learn how to tie my shoelaces until I was 13. And in the only game I ever played for the school team, my shoelaces kept coming undone, and I had to keep asking the ref – who was also a rabbi – to tie them for me. The third time I asked him, he told me to go away, which meant I did not play very well for the rest of that match.'

Has that left emotional scars?

'Well, I learned how to tie my shoelaces.'

## Who Are the Alphas?

So, if you weren't good at sport, what were the other ways to get status, and friends? Who were the alpha boys?

'Not the clever ones. Not in Ayrshire,' Stephen says. 'Being clever was a mocking offence. I know some guys would deliberately dumb-down on purpose, and pretend not to know anything, so they wouldn't look like . . . a nerd. If you used a long word, you'd get called "Dictionary Cornflakes".'

'Dictionary Cornflakes?'

'Yeah. Like, in the morning, you ate a bowl of words, instead of cornflakes. Big insult in Scotland in the 1970s. And Wales, I believe,' he adds, anthropologically.

'At my school, it was kind of irrelevant to be clever,' says James, who is also Scottish, disagreeing slightly. 'I was

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always towards the top of my class, but there was no status in that – in either direction. You didn’t get bullied for it. But it just wasn’t interesting.’

So what *did* give you status?

‘The kind of shit my brother did,’ Stephen says. ‘Fearlessness, cheek, not caring about the consequences. Mild vandalism. The kind of analogue in movies would be like Kenickie in *Grease* – the kind of guy who gets busted and goes, “Fuck, *whatever*.” James Dean. Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*, getting sentenced to the cooler, or the belt, and not caring.’

And who *didn’t* have status? Who would get bullied, or teased?

James: ‘Weird, geeky kids. Kids with funny faces, kids who were physically awkward. Quiet kids. Nerdy kids. Although I should point out a lot of kids did get bullied because they were genuinely annoying – to the point where you look back and go, “How come he got all that shit, and *still* didn’t learn how not to be a prick?” I think boys are very conservative, and they don’t like people who stand out for the wrong reasons, and they try . . . it’s like an organism, repelling an invader. That’s what a lot of bullying is, at that age.’

Trying to establish ‘the right kind of boy to be’?

‘Yeah.’

This is very different from the World of Girls. When girls are rejected by other girls, or fall out with them, the remedy is almost always the same: you basically have to go around kissing their arses, sharing crisps, complimenting their hair-slides and agreeing to play the games *they* want.

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