

## 4. The Shell of Masculinity

**CALL ME NAIVE, BUT I BELIEVE ALL HUMANS ARE** born good. Goodness is surely evolutionary: we want the human race to survive and the best way to do it is together. Evil is the behavior of people who have been really fucked up.

Gender runs deep, but another aspect of our identity runs deeper: our personhood, our membership in the human race.

I also believe that all humans, males and females, are born with the same deck of emotions. Male and female brains are pretty much the same. We have the same hardware, it's the software—the way we are wired by experience—that is different. Males have the potential to be just as soppy and soft, tender and sweet as females, it's just that males build up this brittle crust that masks and contains those feelings. They are encouraged to build up this crust from birth.

What are little boys made of?

What are little boys made of?

Snips and snails

And puppy dogs' tails

That's what little boys are made of

GRAYSON PERRY

What are little girls made of?  
What are little girls made of?  
Sugar and spice  
And all things nice  
That's what little girls are made of

Boys grow up steeped in a culture that says that their feelings are somehow different from girls'. Boys have fewer feelings and theirs are simpler than girls'; boys are more robust, they don't care about things so much. But this downplaying of their emotional complexity is, I think, the aspect of masculinity that we most urgently need to change. Men need to transform their relationship with violence, performance and power. That change must begin with their emotions, by allowing boys and men more emotional space. A positive change in masculinity would be a massive positive change for the world. Emotional illiteracy is difficult for boys to deal with, yet they are brought up to accept this as readily as their beards growing and voices breaking.

People seem to like the idea that gender is somehow deeply influenced by our genes, no matter how little scientific evidence there is that they play much of a role. There may be biological differences in male and female brains that shape women's attitudes to empathy, social cohesion and avoidance of danger, all things that help in leaving more descendants; and in men cause a bias toward systems, a more rigidly organized view of the world and an attraction to taking risks. But these differences have a tiny effect on gender roles compared to conditioning. We love to think that boys are "naturally"

## THE DESCENT OF MAN

more physical, less well behaved, more stoic. I think we like the idea that gender is in our genes because it is convenient; it lets us off the hook. It lets parents off the hook for the gendered ways we treat our children, consciously or unconsciously. It lets society off the hook for how we encourage gender stereotypes, and it lets us all off the hook for acting them out every minute of every day. One thing humans have definitely genetically evolved to like is convenience.

People trying to refute the idea of conditioned gender always cite the fact that research shows gender differences as fairly consistent across all cultures. However, gender roles are *not* the same across all cultures. The idea of what makes male and female behavior is pretty fluid, as anthropologist Margaret Mead found in three primitive societies in Papua New Guinea in 1935, and wrote about in her book *Sex and Temperament*. In one tribe, the Arapesh, both men and women were peaceful and did not make war, while in the Mundugumor tribe both men and women were warlike. Unsurprisingly, the child-rearing styles of the tribes reflected their temperaments, so handing down the love or the violence. Curiously the Mundugumor built very good huts while the Arapesh were quite slapdash. I have always thought perfectionism unlovable!

From birth, boys are taught to act like men, the gendered inflections in how society treats children gradually becoming more pronounced as the child grows, from "oh, look at him kick, he's going to be a soccer player when he grows up" to "suck it up, be tough, boys don't cry." At this point, the parents of Islington rise up as one and refute my claim. "We bring up our boys as free, loving, tender, empathetic, gentle

souls," they say. I'm sure they do, and the young men in question are probably delightful, and a tiny, privileged minority, and I'm pretty sure their mothers still do most of the child care and housework or employ other women to do it.

We have a lot of work to do: tougher parts of the country and most of the rest of the world are producing old-school men. At this point, I ask those Islington parents if they would rather have a tomboy or a sissy and their gender-neutral parenting policy crumbles slightly. Would Dad rather walk down the high street with his six-year-old son in a tutu waving a pink fairy wand or with his daughter in dungarees waving a plastic sword? They give me a guilty look, as if to say, "You're right, the male role is more heavily policed, even by us." But it is an unfair, biased question. In our society, "sissy" is a derogatory, humiliating term for a feminine boy, and "tomboy," a term for a masculine girl, has overtones of rough-hewn cool. If I phrased the question as "What would you rather have: a feminine boy or a masculine girl?" the response might be more even-handed. But I suspect the preference would be for neither. This is not wholly the parents wanting a nice, neatly gendered child, but also a fear that society is often unkind to children who do not fit into "man" and "woman" effortlessly.

Unless a young man's schooling in the ways of masculinity is very alternative, most boys hold a fairly cartoon vision of manhood in their psyches, their gender boiled down to cliché and cypher. Most boys will hopefully gain a more sophisticated and subtle understanding of being a man, but it takes courage to challenge group norms. It is an enlightened young man who notices his mates' sexist behavior or is aware of a wider emotional vocabulary, let alone talk about it in the

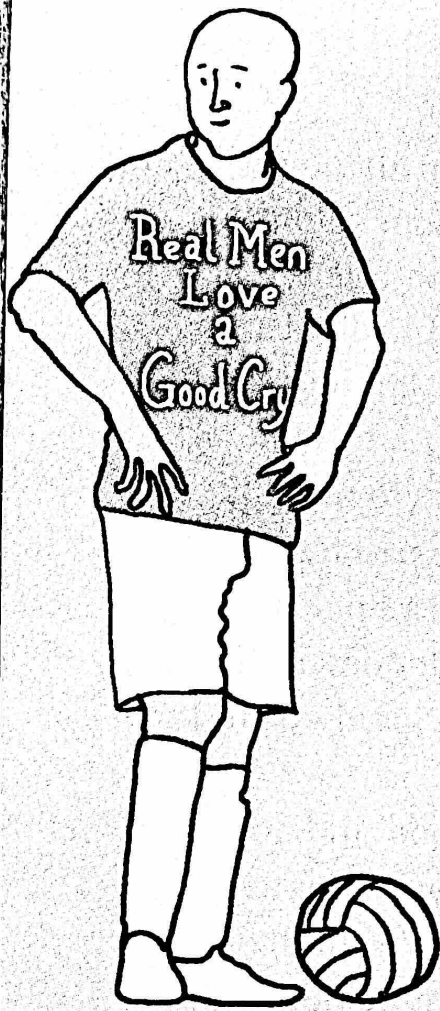
## THE DESCENT OF MAN

group. In my experience, all-male company can all too easily descend into bonds of the lowest common denominator.

Out of curiosity I went to a school reunion a few years ago. I met up with a couple dozen classmates I had not seen in thirty-five years. Most of the faces looked familiar, and when names were exchanged I could put stories to some of them. What struck me most was their responses to me. They had all followed my very public career over the past ten years with interest, but not one of them could tell me a single thing about how I was at school. Even a terse character description was beyond them. I had been a cypher. I had closed down. I had been numb.

I think I went through most of my boyhood and youth numb. Numb to the fear and anxiety I felt at home. It is a survival mechanism, an emotional bunker. When we numb ourselves like that, we don't just numb the bad stuff, we numb all the emotions. It's a crude remedy. I once employed an electrician to work on my house who would arrive at six a.m. "Why do you start so early?" I asked. "To avoid all those angry road-ragers," he replied—angrily. We may try to numb anger, but when we do we numb joy and pleasure in the world too. This numbing does not mean we stop having the feelings, it just stops us from being aware that we are having them. Those feelings are still churning away, tensing our bodies, writing unconscious scripts for us, storing up stuff to unload onto the world, onto our kids, but preferably onto our therapists. This numbness also inhibits the ability to have good relationships as well, hence the low impact I had on my classmates.

When I take myself back to that place of retreat, I imagine it as a heightened version of masculinity, as if I were a wary warrior cutting himself off from the world in preparation for



battle. This was my retreat to the bedroom, into fantasy. Real flesh-and-blood humans were too frightening and unpredictable. Girls were unbelievably desirable but also frightening. I think all men have this instinct to retreat into oneself to a greater or lesser degree. It is the self-sufficient hero but also the lonely suicide.

I take risks. I am very competitive. I love throwing myself and my bike at speed down bumpy, muddy hillsides, yet when I return I am filled with anxiety about confronting my next-door neighbor about his infuriatingly yappy dog. I encourage students to design dresses for me that make me look daft and attention-seeking, but I burn with shame for an age after a bad review of my work. Qualities that I might easily assign to masculinity are often inconsistent: physical bravery does not translate into social courage; confidence to dress how I desire does not extend to confidence about what I make.

Boys are taught to be brave but in quite a specific way, mainly when facing physical danger on the sports field or the playground. But what about emotional danger? When asking a girl out on a date, having that tricky conversation with a colleague or revealing some very personal information to a friend, all the bluster and machismo that is so easy when climbing a tree or tackling a bigger player is of no use. A typical boy's skill set can let him down when he is given a chance to grow emotionally. Bluff boys often muddle through: they invariably "work things out" between themselves by avoiding the issue, capitulating through fear of conflict. Boys are not brought up to be sensitive to their own feelings, so how are they meant to voice them in a disagreement or declaration of affection?

As a twelve-year-old I was once struggling to assemble a