

GENDER IS A BATTLE GROUND



Reflections From Cardiff Alumni

MARGOT RUBIN ISABELLA WARD

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REFLECTIONS FROM CARDIFF ALUMNI

EDITED BY ISABELLA WARD

PRODUCED BY MARGOT RUBIN AND ISABELLA WARD

WRITTEN BY CARDIFF ALUMNI



ABOUT THIS BOOK

Navigating the Battlefield.

There is a perception that the battle for gender equality has been won and that all genders, gender identities and sexual orientations now enjoy an equity of experience and life choices.

The following diary entries, taken from a final-year Gender, Space, and Place module taught in the Geography and Planning School at Cardiff University, unfortunately disprove that.

Students were asked to “reflect on past and on-going experiences through which you have become an engendered subject, engaging with concepts discussed in class (such as embodiment, rights to space, race, ethnicity and intersectional difference and the gender division of labour). For this assignment, you will mine your own memories as the data source (reflexive auto-ethnography) and reflect on them through ideas covered in the lecture and seminar. What was produced by this class of exceptional young people was eye-opening even to veterans in the field who have seen how gender dynamics play out across three continents. The work submitted cried out for a wider audience, so that others might read and understand some of the gendered experiences of young people in contemporary society. Their struggles, hopes and everyday battles.

This book was born of a collective desire to share these reflections: we have 11 stories from volunteer authors who have presented their work in the way they found best.

It is in these reflections, you will read stories of how and why “gender is a battlefield” of young women who have been victims of violences and abuse, some overt, like kneeling in front of male teachers to test the length of their skirts and some covert such as having to change in cupboards when competing in sports, “familial structures, cultural expectations, and the emotional geographies that bind love to duty” and force young women into roles of care and young people, on to soggy pitches to prove that they are “men”, and sneered at for asking for “Cinderella dresses” for Christmas.

The stories are full of these “small cruelties”, and the daily complexities of moving through a world which is paradoxical around gender, where for many people, it feels that there is no way to “win” and all choices are fraught; forcing young people to perform gender identities that do not resonate or deal with social consequences of rejection, and exclusion. Tugging at hems, contorting in ways that don’t feel natural, where choices are complicated and rebellion and resistance have consequences.

But there are also stories of acceptance, care, and love, and most of all, hope, as young people are navigating older ideas of masculinity, femininity, non-binary and queer identities and finding their own ways to traverse these paths, ways to “carry both worlds with” them. There are stories of parental love, sibling respect, and self-care.

These stories are powerful reminders of the agency, strength and resilience of these young people, who are bravely remaking the world around them, making it fairer, more inclusive and with every word, a wiser and kinder place.

Editors,

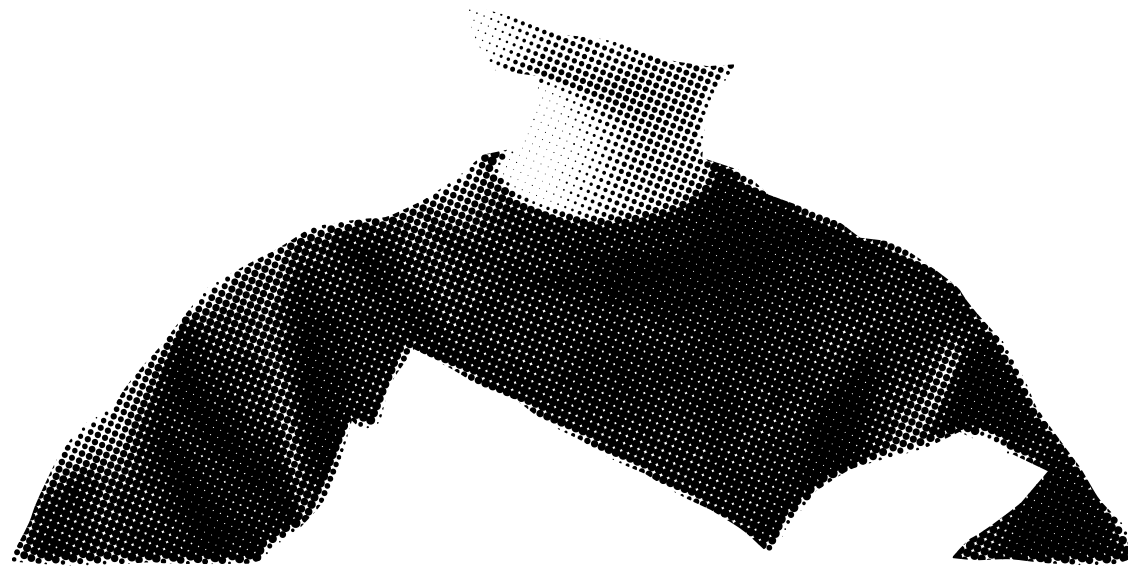
Isabella and Margot

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Acknowledgements

Trigger warning

This zine deals with some difficult subjects. For some readers these may be triggering so please be aware that some of the reflections contain references to homophobia, sexism, sexual assault, harassment, body dysmorphia and eating disorders.



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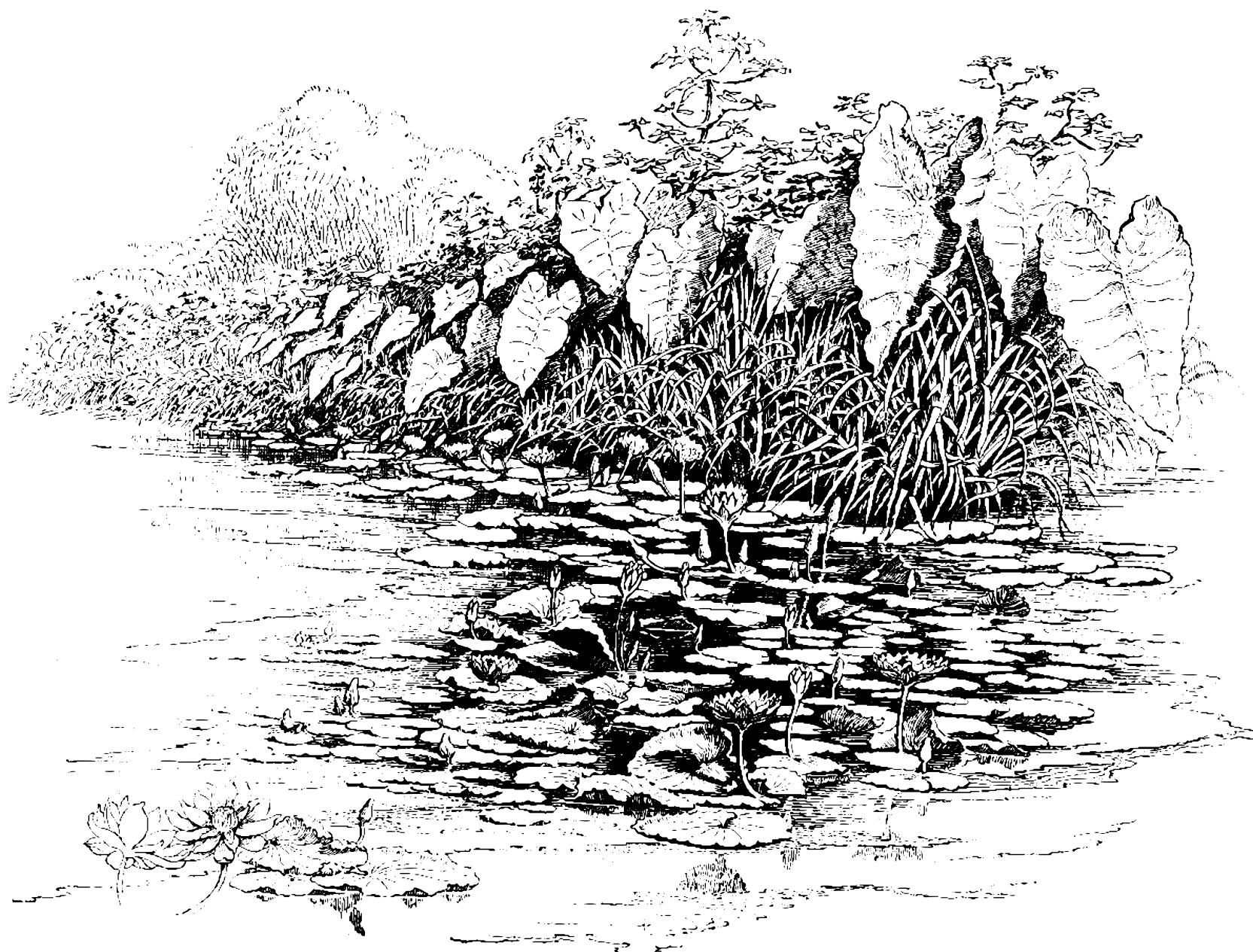
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RESEARCH,
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PERSONAL TESTIMONY
ON GENDERED
EXPERIENCE.





OBJECTIFICATION

Objectification. This is a word that exhausts my conscious almost every waking hour.

It is in the way I am perceived before I am understood, in the way my worth is measured before my voice is heard. It is in the expectations placed upon my body, the assumptions woven into my presence and the silent rules that dictate how I move through the world.

I come from a place of privilege for a woman. Growing up I wasn't often made to feel different or excluded from opportunities. My family are very liberal and have always empowered me to express and be confident in my individuality. I am able to strive for what I am passionate about. When I was younger, gender and physical appearance were never really something I thought about. But when you are stripped from these familiar comforts the world can be a challenging and exposing place. Naturally, it's easy to search for something to blame when you feel as though you've let yourself down. I remember singing in a choir in primary school, when a teacher told me I was too loud. Not long after, a close friend's mother told me I was too bossy and didn't want me playing with her daughter anymore. I found this difficult to understand, as any young girl would, that my words and actions were inappropriate. So, I stopped talking.

I blame these experiences for making my time in secondary school and college feel so isolating. Expressing yourself as a girl is highly conflicted. Confident, but not narcissistic. Excited, but not entitled. Feminine, but not slutty. Passionate, but not angry. Otherwise, people start to look down on you. From a young age, society teaches girls shame. 'Gender' has told me who I should be, rather than allowing me to be who I am. It forces you to feel uncomfortable as yourself.

In secondary school, I began to observe how other people were treated because of their personality and appearance. I would analyse every movement and expression of my classmates and surroundings. How the teacher would sit me next to the naughtiest boy in the hope my quiet nature would somehow tame them. How other girls dressed, behaved, spoke, ate. How they refused to eat in front of the boys so they didn't come across as greedy. In year eleven, my mum told me that if I kept eating like that, I wouldn't fit through the door. So, I decided not to eat at all. And I carefully observed how, like the other girls, I was treated differently.

I internalised the cultural pressures to be thin, to conform to what body shape was 'acceptable'.

My bedroom mirror has since become my best friend and worst enemy. It showed me my imperfections that no one else would admit to me. The less I ate, the more people noticed me, and the more I saw myself as an object in that mirror. My life became a constant battle between body and mind. Always questioning, who do I have to justify myself to? As you get older, that protective barrier your parents force between you and reality starts to degrade. They recognise your autonomy and can no longer control you.

The declining support from my family opened new opportunities for my new body to be seen, and I found attention from new places. I believe that it is in our nature to want to be loved, by any means. What I found was not love.

My mum called me a slut, and her rejection only intensified my desire to rebel against her guidance. Moving away from my family to attend university was one of the hardest transitions I have faced. The culture can be alienating, making integration feel punishing. It was isolating, and it led me into a desperate and exhausting search for validation. The contradiction is exhausting: to crave attention yet despise the gaze it invites. To want to be seen but not reduced. It is a fight between self-worth and societal conditioning.

I started working in a restaurant. It felt comforting that, being away from home, there was someone else that was looking out for me. My boss would shower me with tips, free meals, and compliments. I was finally accepted for everything I was and everything I stood for. I was wanted and it felt so good. Then the tips became bribes, the free meals became free holidays, and the compliments became unsolicited touching. But this is normal, an amazing opportunity! I should be grateful! I was told. Being a young woman without a strong male figure in your life makes you vulnerable. Maybe I was naïve, or maybe the people I looked to for guidance didn't recognise the grooming that sent me spiralling into a trench of guilt, self-hatred and doubt. He knew I relied on him for money, safety, and support, and he used that to his advantage. I started to realise that I was allowing it to happen, but I couldn't accept the scars it would leave on my self-image. It was difficult to confide in people, I couldn't face being told it was my fault. I still blame myself and I question who I am meant to be as a woman. I learnt independence, not because I wanted to, but because I had to, finding power not in protection, but in perseverance.

I have come to believe that, as a woman, trust is fragile—often broken before it is earned. No matter where you go in life and who you meet along the way, you are often seen as an object – if not by other people, then by yourself. The only way you can realise that is by people breaking your trust. I found a friend that I could confide in, and he validated my experience. It is easy to have hope in people when they have hope in you. But last year I woke up to his hand down my pants. He still doesn't know I was awake, and I fear bringing it up as that means coming to the terms that he did not love me, but saw me as something to take. My mind is eternally laced with guilt. In every space I enter as a woman, I must fight to be more than an object, more than a reflection of others' desires and expectations. That experience has made me afraid; I am no longer comfortable with intimacy. It now longer feels like a connection and more like surrender of my vulnerability. A gamble of waiting for the hidden cost, a betrayal disguised as affection. It doesn't seem fair. But this is the reality we have been handed, a system built to diminish us. The choice is either to endure it or to fight against it.

A few months ago, I received a text from someone that heard my younger sister's boyfriend telling his friends that "they can all have a go on her after I'm done". It was a brutal confirmation of everything I feared about the way the world sees us. Typically, if you're a man, a woman is seen as a trophy, another notch on the bedpost. Consumed, then cast aside. As a woman, you are used and discarded. "Sloppy seconds". Who's right is it to claim ownership over our bodies? It's a cruel reality to face, that your body is not yours anymore.

These stereotypes run painfully deep. The truth is, I am scared I will never feel secure in my skin – the skin that has been used and abused by so many men that I once looked up to. I question how anyone can look past my body and love me for me, when I am told I shouldn't even love myself.

I often think back to my younger self. How she was not yet exposed to the pressures and experiences of society that would later haunt her every thought. I feel as if I have done her an injustice. Taken her down a path of self-hatred and depersonalisation. I feel so separate from her.

I wonder what she would say if I met her today. Would she question me? Feel sorry for me? Feel proud of me? My experiences of objectification have stripped me of her self-worth. But how do you unlearn something that the world insists is natural? How do you separate yourself from a gaze that has followed you for as long as you can remember?

Every existence is shaped by the historical and cultural limits of their situation. Women are required to conform at the expense of their individuality. And I undoubtedly will continue to hold up my collection of masks that I have accumulated throughout my experiences. I am caring, I am submissive, I am polite, I am passive.

I am angry. As a woman I can never truly function as myself. Yet as I write, I look into my worst enemy and wonder whether I will ever accept the body that will take me through the rest of my life. Perhaps the real battle is not fighting against the gaze of others - but against the one in the mirror.

Despite the weight of these experiences, I refuse to let them define me. I will reclaim my body, my space, and my voice on my own terms, and I will give that little girl the justice, life and confidence that she deserves.



ANONYMOUS

IT'S JUST
A CHEST.

Image by Victoria from Pixabay

2025

It's a rainy afternoon on the playground of my primary school. Leaves dance in the wind as we line up for class, waiting to go inside for our biology lesson. It's loud. Everyone rustles past, shoving and pushing to get into their place in the alphabet. We do this every day, and yet we always seem to forget: after J comes... K? Behind me, Diago has stolen Manuela's bouncy ball and won't give it back. In front of me, Vero and Ella are laughing at Carol's shoes. Further ahead, on a slightly elevated platform, the teachers attempt to enforce some order. Simone, one of the meanest, holds up a pink cotton bra – my pink cotton bra – with the Little Mermaid imprinted on it. "Whose is this?" Her voice echoes across the suddenly silent courtyard. I hear whispers. "Mine." Before I get the chance to think about how to protect what little social status I have left, my mouth betrays me. I step forward to claim my first lesson in shame. Here's what happened.

I was ten years old, caught in the liminal phase – not quite a child, not yet a teenager – and my body had already started its journey into puberty. But my breasts were not the perky, socially acceptable kind. No, mine looked like the nose of a mouse, the pointy end of a shoe. And worse, I had what the boys in my class so gracefully called salami nipples. Shame crept in the same way my perceived innocence left me: slowly and then all at once. Being the only one in school with breasts, I was painfully aware of them. Yet, like so many before me, I was convinced that if I ignored them, they might simply cease to exist. Maybe that's the thing about breasts: they're never just yours. A girl's body never simply grows; it becomes. Becomes visible. Becomes public. Becomes something to watch, to talk about, to mock.

A woman's breasts are objects of objectification: opinions are allowed.



Photo by Catalin Paterau on Unsplash

Then one day, my mamsi came home from the grocery store with eggs, broccoli, butter – and a training bra. I don't remember how she convinced me to wear it – maybe she said it would stop the bullying – but the next morning, I fastened it under my shirt and wore my policed girlhood to school. With unfamiliar straps digging into my shoulders, I walked into my classroom. If I was lucky, I'd stay invisible – just for today. But luck had never really been on my side. As if the universe had it in for me, there he was: Diago, my friend turned enemy due to my sinking to the bottom of the popularity rank.

"What is that?" His voice rang out. "Why are you wearing that? You don't even have boobs."

I could feel the eyes of my entire class on my bra strap. I was caught between justifying the fact of my growing breasts to a boy who thought they were his to mock and dissolving into a puddle of my own tears. I chose escape. In the bathroom stall, off came the bra. I shoved it into my jacket pocket, as if hiding it might make the whole thing disappear – the bra, the stares, the fact of my body.

Photo by Madison Inouye on pexels

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At recess, rain weeps through tree leaves, slipping cold onto my skin. I can feel the panic in my throat. I've played this game before. I know what happens next. I sprint off. My classmates are playing tag, but somehow, I'm the only one being chased. I run so fast I fear my legs will give out.

I can't remember how the game ended that day. In my dreams, I escape. Finally, recess is over, and we're all lining up for class.

While playing tag, my bra had slipped from my pocket onto the dark grey, unforgiving playground pavement. Someone found it and handed it to the teacher. Sometimes, I wonder who it was, and whether they sensed, even for a second, the small cruelty of it all – how easily children can be cruel without ever meaning to. "Whose bra is this?" "Mine." I am standing before the entire school, evidence in hand. There's no sound but the wind through the trees. Even nature seemed to sense my humiliation, rustling the silence so it wouldn't swallow me whole – although, just for a moment, I wished it would have.

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Thirteen years later, my mother and I are sitting in the waiting room of a doctor’s office. It smells the way medical facilities always do. On the wooden door in front of us, a metal plaque reads Dr. Rossi, Plastic Surgeon. We talk about everything and nothing, as we so often do – solving the world’s problems one conversation at a time – until my name is called. Grateful to finally rise from the uncomfortable chairs, I open the door to Dr. Rossi’s office and glance back to smile at my mother. With a mix of hesitation and anticipation, I greet the grey-haired man: “Hello.” We chat briefly about why I’m here and what I hope to accomplish, and then I take off my shirt to show him my breasts.

“Ah yes, I can see why you want to lift and reduce them.”
I always knew they were slightly saggy, but there’s something unsettling about having that confirmed by a medical professional. We discuss the options, though we both agree they’ll only really become possible once I’ve had the children I’m supposed to want. Many women aren’t able to breastfeed after surgery, and so, for now, my request is deferred to a future I’m not even sure I want.

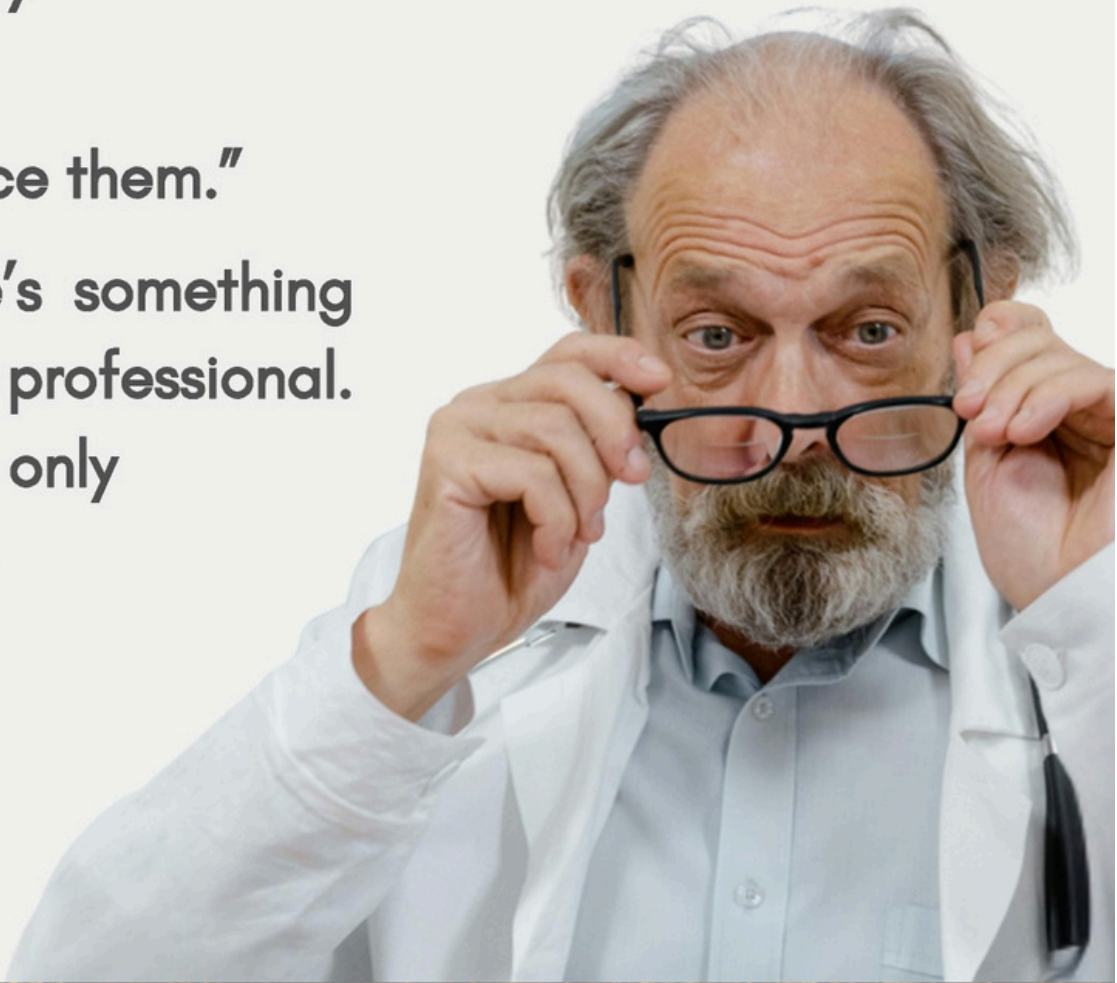


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In hindsight, feminism in a plastic surgeon's office feels complicated. There I am – a feminist who advocates for body positivity and Free the Nipple campaigns – asking for smaller, higher breasts. The gap between what I believe and what I want is impossible to ignore. I try to convince myself it's a personal choice, something private, something that exists outside the gaze of the world. But of course, it doesn't. How could it? There's a strange sensation that sits somewhere between shame and hope when you're torn between resisting the system and quietly complying with it. Between wanting to change the rules and still wanting to be rewarded by them.

RADICAL FEMINISM, WHICH IN MY MIND SIMPLY MEANS RADICAL SELF-LOVE,

is a brave thing to aspire to, and an even braver thing to pull off. It's the act of existing outside the approval of society, outside the approval of how gender 'should' be performed, and for me, a straight woman, outside the approval of men.

Who are we when we peel back the layers of those performances? Who am I when I accept that my purpose in life isn't marriage, children and having perky boobs? Submission is woven into us so early, so quietly, that by the time you realize it's there,

*IT BECOMES HARD TO TELL WHERE THE
PATRIARCHY ENDS, AND YOU BEGIN.*

Even when you try to resist and refuse the rules, you don't really have any choice but to play the game. In a system built to privilege men, any deviation – going braless, breastfeeding in public, asking for smaller, higher breasts – becomes political. A woman choosing not to wear a bra may see it as comfort, as freedom, as self-acceptance, but the world so often sees defiance, provocation and indecency. Autonomy over your body is never entirely personal. It's always filtered through someone else's gaze. Even resistance becomes part of the same machine. The personal is always political. I remind myself of that constantly.

PHOTO BY COTTONBRO STUDIO ON PEXELS
PHOTO BY JANOSCH LINO ON UNSPLASH



Looking back now, I realize how gender was already being handed to me from the very beginning of my life, stitched into my body through shame. I'm still trying to unlearn the lessons I learned that day at the playground of my primary school: that girlhood is something to hide, that breasts are something to fear, that being noticed is dangerous and being invisible is safe. I like to reimagine how it could have gone. In this version, I stand tall in front of the entire school, bra in hand, smiling brightly at all my horrible bullies.

Yes, I wear bras. Yes, my body is changing. And no, you can't shame me for it.

Knowing what I know now, maybe I'd give a speech about how femininity has always been treated like something that needs controlling. I'd talk about how girlhood, from the very start, is built on the expectation that your body exists for public consumption.

And maybe – just maybe – I'd flash the entire school, watch them all squirm in their discomfort, and finally realize for myself:



**IT'S JUST
A CHEST.**

Image by Victoria from Pixabay

Don't let repressed people – or your gender – convince you otherwise.

After all, if a boy had ripped off his shirt that day, no one would have thought about it twice.

Image by [Алена Шерман](#) from [Pixabay](#)

THE BUS STOP

My second year of college was a turning point. I had started feeling pretty, was finally more comfortable in my own skin and had just gotten a boyfriend which may seem shallow, but it was a big thing for me! My confidence was growing, both in my appearance and I was excelling in my studies. After years of struggling, I felt like me. I'd dealt with unwanted male attention before - the odd wink, the disconcerting honk of a horn - but I brushed those moments off as part of life.

While recounting these stories to my younger brother he said these words that have haunted me since:

"You're so vain. They're not honking at you. Why do you think everything's about you?" - (He was young, and I do not blame him now for this comment).

These words were a shock and made me question my reality. I started to believe that my experiences were all in my head and just a symptom of an oversized ego.

That morning, I stood at the bus stop in my favourite striped top and hoodie, college lanyard around my neck. The bus was late. Birmingham's public transport was never great.

A guy stood a couple of meters away, staring.

"Stop being vain, Rose," I thought. *"He's looking at the roadworks."*

But he wasn't.

I kept my music on, eyes down. Then I heard his voice.

"Sorry, what?" I asked, expecting a question about the bus.

"You got a boyfriend?"

"Yeah."

"Do you shave your pussy?"

I could suddenly feel my heartbeat in my temples. What did he just say?

"Do you want to feel my dick inside you?"

He kept talking. Filthy, vile questions, one after another.

I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. My mind screamed to run, but what if he followed? It was the morning but daylight does not always mean safety.

Actions speak louder than words, but these words were echoing around my mind. I felt violated, and yet he was still standing there, the same place, the same stance. I had not been touched but felt so trapped.

I texted my friend, who was on the bus, my fingers clumsy with panic. She thought it was funny. I was nearly crying.

I could not let him see the impact his words were having on me. I was looking away, edging closer to the road hoping he would realise he was not getting a rise out of me and leave. But he continued.

Finally, the bus arrived. As I stepped on, he muttered,

"It was nice fingering you."

There it was. He had done it right? No, but it felt like he had. They are just words, was I overreacting?

I crumpled next to my friend. She realized, too late, how scared I was. She told me he watched me get on the bus, his eyes following me to the top deck and to my seat. Then he walked away. I could not help feeling like he targeted me, he was not there to catch a bus, just to frighten a young girl on her way to class.

At college, I found a trusted staff member. He called the police, my dad, and sent me home.

Back on the sofa, I lay still, my favourite show playing quietly. I could hear my parents whispering, trying to figure out how to help.

Confidence vs Safety.

After that. I avoided that bus stop, taking a longer route instead. My journey became an anxious, stress inducing part of my day. I already lived about an hour away from college on public transport, so this meant leaving around 7:30 a.m. for a 9 a.m. class. Every morning, I was fuming on that walk. Angry that I was the one who had to change my routine. Angry that he had that much power over me, despite never laying a hand on me. I felt ashamed - ashamed for freezing, for not standing up for myself and for feeling so weak when I should have been strong. I was just starting to embrace my confidence in college. I felt pretty for the first time in my life, and suddenly, it all felt like a trap. Dressing up, putting on makeup, feeling good about myself - all of it felt like an invitation for danger. But I was conflicted. I refused to let one experience dictate how I expressed myself. I had already given him the bus stop.

I had a recent conversation with my grandad, my grannie, and my mom. My grandad, after one too many drinks, made a comment:

"Sometimes I see women and they are wearing makeup and dressing provocatively, and I think they must want my attention. Obviously, I don't say anything, but they are wanting attention and for someone to tell them they look good."

I could feel the tension rising in my mom and me. I couldn't stay silent. I told him about the bus stop. I described my ordinary clothes, my college lanyard marking me as a student - a minor - yet still being sexualised. No matter how I have dressed, I have been sexualised - whether in a skimpy skirt, or a tracksuit - men who harass and cat call will do so regardless. The room grew awkward, I was fighting tears. He acknowledged what I said but quickly moved on.

Hearing that from my grandad, someone I love and trust, someone who should be a person of safety and understanding (he has been many times before this), ended up hurting more than I expected. It wasn't just the discomfort in hearing this from a family member, but the realisation that he may have interpreted these supposed subliminal messages from women as a green light to say what he liked, whether it is wanted or not. It was a window into the mindset of this generation where women performing their sexuality and femininity was seen as inherently for the male gaze.

This comment, while small and in passing made me think about how my grandad perceives me and the way I dress, I have always gone for clothes that made me feel good, when I was younger they were on the more revealing side, does this mean my grandad sees me as attention seeking, inviting men to comment and touch. I know my grandad loves me and respects me, but is this lessened by the way I choose to express myself through clothes?

There are so many mixed messages I have had through my life: If I did not wear makeup, I was bullied for being ugly. There was one time where I decided to get a pixie cut, this was a bad decision, it opened me up to a whole torrent of comments calling me a man, a lesbian, ugly. In the end it drove me to grow it out as soon as possible. It was – and still is – confusing for me, how do I find a happy middle ground where I do not receive abuse or attention for either not performing my gender enough or performing it too much that I invite harassment.

I do not have a right answer to the questions of how to embrace my sexuality and gender without being seen as inviting the circumstances that unfold because of it. I have not ended up changing how I dress or how much makeup I wear because of these experiences. I have become more aware, my personal geographies have changed, I know where I can and cannot walk, who to bring with me if I am walking alone in the night. I do feel that no matter how careful I am these experiences will continue happening no matter what.

I often blame myself for not reacting to these situations in the "right" or "strong" way. For years we have been growing in strength and power as a gender. As a feminist, every time something like this happens and I stay silent I feel I have failed my gender. I've replayed that moment in my head countless times. Each time, I imagine myself fighting back - shouting, swearing, hitting him, all of which would have been a completely warranted reaction. But I didn't. I froze. For years, I blamed myself for that.

I've always seen when women react with assertiveness or anger, we are labelled as hysterical, dramatic or overreacting.

But for men, they have been allowed to express their emotions in big, aggressive ways when they are angry. "Boys will be boys," right? So many narratives have been created in the past about how women are not capable of being politicians, having high-stress professional jobs, participating in higher education or being a leader in religions - all because we are too 'emotional'. So, overtime, I learnt to hide those emotions, become small, silent and submissive to earn places in these roles. However, men in power have historically been terrible at controlling their emotions, King Henry VIII killed his wives for not giving him a son.

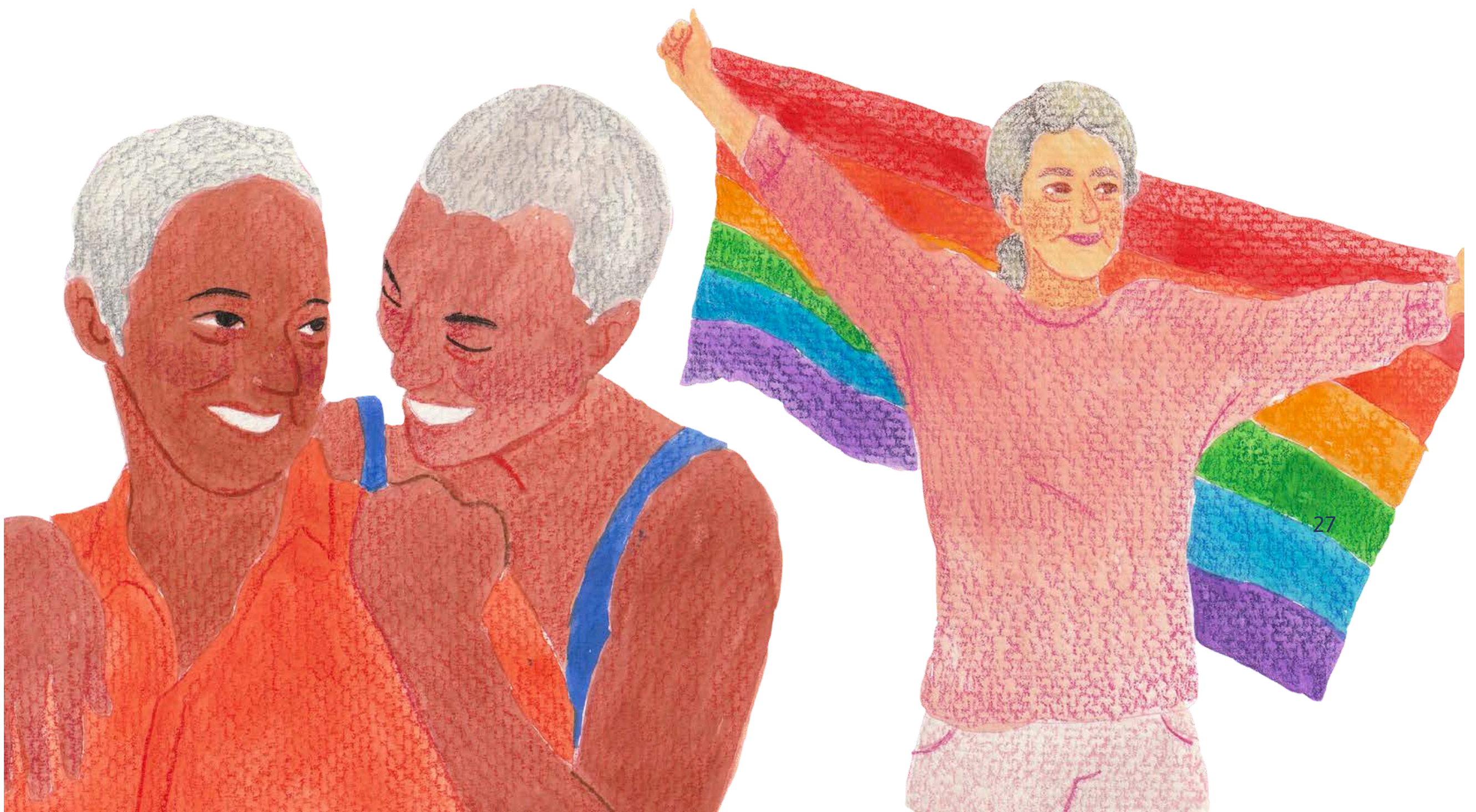
These narratives mean, especially in these moments of vulnerability, when all I want to do is scream, fight or run, I feel silenced, as the men hold the power, our systems have been made and remade for men. I do feel that times are changing, that we are slowly making progress but I also see some regression. There is still so much work to do, I hope for my future children that the world is changing, that my daughter will not have to experience what I have. However, with men like Donald Trump being elected it does not seem like that will happen any time soon.



His Story of Becoming: A Reflection of Gendering



This reflective piece was written to explore my personal journey of growing up within rigid gender and sexual norms, and how these environments shaped and often silenced my sense of self. By looking back on moments of family life, school, and rural upbringing, I aimed to interrogate how hegemonic masculinity and traditional expectations of gender performance left me feeling isolated, misunderstood, and anxious. Writing this reflection allowed me to process how these experiences informed my understanding of identity, sexuality, and resilience, and to reclaim the parts of myself that I once felt pressured to hide. Ultimately, the piece demonstrates not only the pain of growing up constrained by social expectations, but also the power in resisting them, embracing individuality, and finding strength in vulnerability.



Early Years



“What are you wearing?”, “Why are you acting like that?” - these phrases stain my memory as triggers from my childhood. I remember one moment, stood at the top of the stairs in a high school musical cheerleader outfit (iconic if I do say so myself) and my uncle, a quintessential rugby lad, stood at the bottom, staring at me as if I'd just insulted his beloved Saracens rugby team. Why, I wondered, did I always feel like I was doing something wrong, constantly making others feel uncomfortable, even when it felt so natural to me?

I love my family. I was privileged, growing up as a middle-class male in an affluent town surrounded by a large close-knit family, but there were times where I felt completely alone and misunderstood. My positionality growing up in rural Wales only amplified this feeling of isolation and my own understanding of gender. Overtime, I saw gender as a social construct, learned through my family's adherence to dated gender stereotypes. My father, serving in the military, was absent for much of my early life. When he returned, I was thrust into the world of rugby and football – sports at which I was utterly hopeless at. I found myself scripting my behaviour to conform to the rigid and masculine expectations that my father so wanted me to embody.

This performance of gender was starkly apparent from his military background which formed clear hegemonic masculine energy and a laddish culture within my home environment. Our daily lives were dictated by his schedule: dinner upon his return from work, strict bedtimes, and evenings dominated by sports on TV. A sense of place was cultivated by an inescapable dominant embodiment of his masculinity that silenced my ability to express my personality from within. My naturally expressive nature, that is attributed historically to the female performance of gendered behaviour, felt completely foreign to my dad, whose own background demanded a rigid performance of masculinity. This difference in identity and expression was never more apparent than on days when I practiced sport with him.

One Sunday morning, I remember arriving at the local football pitches, and refusing to leave the car as I couldn't face another hour of my life doing something that I hated. It took both my dad and my football coach to physically extract me out of the car that day. Even now, the memory induces so much anxiety. But even more anxiety-inducing were the family gatherings at Christmas and birthdays. My uncles, always in front of everyone, would inevitably ask, "So, how's football and rugby going? Got a girlfriend yet?" These questions, always asked like clockwork, made me long for an invisibility cloak at these gatherings to simply disappear.

For much of my childhood and adolescence, I lived in hiding, my performance of masculinity meticulously calculated by myself. I became a master of disguise, blending into the "lad culture" landscape. Outwardly, I was just one of the guys at school but, inside, I was a whirlwind of questions about my sexuality. The dreaded question in secondary school, "Are you gay?", was always met with an immediate, defensive denial. The hetero construction of gender and sexuality was so regimented at my school, with everyone following it like sheep. If anyone went against the flock, you were seen as outlandish. Reflecting on secondary school now, my time was more fixated on my actions to conform to the strict binaries implemented and cultivated by this cultural environment of young individuals who were all as lost as each other.

My Sexuality



I always knew I was gay but was scared to process and explore this fully as I did not understand what my feelings meant, especially when nobody had ever spoken to me about what being gay meant or that it even existed. Living in such a rural area, seemingly stuck in time, produced great generational disconnect for me that formed a greater sense of isolation. The traditional values of my area towards dominant masculinity permeated into my homelife, reinforcing this gender segregation. Expecting to conform to these ideals of hegemonic masculinity within my family created stubborn binaries that remained constructed and maintained by my father. Complicit masculinities were apparent but at a shallow level in my home with masculine privilege still prevailing, even though feminine traditional roles were seen to be integrated within some aspects of my father's life. At times, my father's dominant masculine presence overshadowed my mother's own identity as such with her adopting traditional gender roles.

Telling my mum, I was gay was one of the hardest things I have ever done. I could not bring myself to look at her, feeling as if I had committed some heinous crime. When telling her, I became intensely focused on the details of our kitchen floor as the words "I can't help being who I am" tumbled out of my mouth. I cannot recall what she said, my mind and body were numb, but I knew she was there for me and that my sexuality didn't change anything between us. It is still striking to me how much shame I carried about aspects of my masculinity and sexuality, even though today I genuinely embrace and love these parts of myself. The fact that I am no longer the person whose body reacts with fear at just saying the word 'gay' feels like a huge step. It's a journey I've had to work hard at, and while it is ongoing, I'm incredibly grateful for the progress I have made.

For years, a string of anxious questions still followed me. But as I grew older, something worse than the questions themselves emerged: the silence. In recent years, the girlfriend inquiries and rugby updates have ceased. This cloud of ignorance from some of my family has grown thicker with age, as if their blindness toward my sexuality and gender performance somehow makes it less real if they don't know the answers. My family members along with school peers' hegemonic masculinity produced a clear lack of support emotionally and an inability for emotional change to recognise the pain I was in.

The Separation



My own understanding of gender has been continually tested and challenged by societal norms. This division of gender, so ingrained in societal views, became even more stark during my parents' separation through the Covid-19 pandemic. Seeing my father, this man who embodied so much of what I was supposed to be, behave in such a way - aggressive, dominant, his voice suddenly constantly deeper, yet also emotionally expressive (though fuelled by anger) - further complicated my own understanding of masculinity. His anger filled the house, and this filled me with constant fear. The fights between my parents, so far from how I imagined men acting and from me ever acting, further confused my already fragile grasp on masculine identity and performance.

My mother, through it all, was a rock. She worked fulltime as a hairdresser, simultaneously pursuing a university degree, determined to provide a brighter future for me and my siblings. She became the provider, the protector - roles traditionally assigned to men defining gender stereotypes, demonstrating that these roles are not fixed within society but fluid.

I believe now that it is in our most vulnerable moments that our true selves emerge. My father, perhaps down to his military background, embraced a stereotypical, controlling, and aggressive masculinity through the separation. My mother, in contrast, demonstrated the strength and resilience often associated with traditional male roles. These experiences illuminated the socially constructed nature of gender and how easily these constructs can crumble when life changes fast.

My parents' divorce especially during the isolating period of a global pandemic and lockdown profoundly further impacted my exploration towards my sense of self and gender understanding. At a time when I was meant to be exploring my identity for the first time being 18, I formed this embodiment of anxiety and depression notably when I could see attributes of my father rubbing off on me. Going to my GP and seeking help for the first time was a crucial but daunting step primarily when my understanding of masculinity was to suppress my emotions, but I was spiralling and acknowledging this looking back now was a great strength rather than a weakness. My anxiety towards my father's aggression and with my own rage in trying to fight through this pain of protecting my mother along with protecting myself cultivated complete anxiety and darkness in my life that felt inescapable. My sense of place and safety had shattered in a short span from moving out and leaving my family home while my father stayed put showcased how masculine dominance was so present from him constructing an environment of anger and dominance. Realising how socially constructed masculine and feminine values are, has allowed me to transcend this binary and produce my own identity against what society may argue I should conform to. Seeking help, I have realised is a sign of strength and seeing traits of my father in myself is not necessarily something to condemn but rather empowers me to choose a different path in life.

Final Reflection

This understanding has allowed me to embrace my own individuality, to express myself without being confined by outdated gender stereotypes. My struggles stemmed from concealing my sexuality, from the fear of others' opinions. This fear has, at times, made me care too much about what others think. While I can't imagine a life where I wasn't gay, I believe that being condemned for simply loving who I love, for performing gender outside society's constructed norms, is something that needs to change. Having my mother as a role model has allowed me to understand and accept my sexuality, to express the attributes I want to express - independence, emotional strength, but also the softer, more expressive parts of myself. Gender is complex, and society has made it unnecessarily more so, turning it into a battleground. But we all deserve the freedom to define ourselves, to create our own binaries, to live authentically outside the boxes that society tries to confine us in. And in that difference, there is not fear, but beauty.

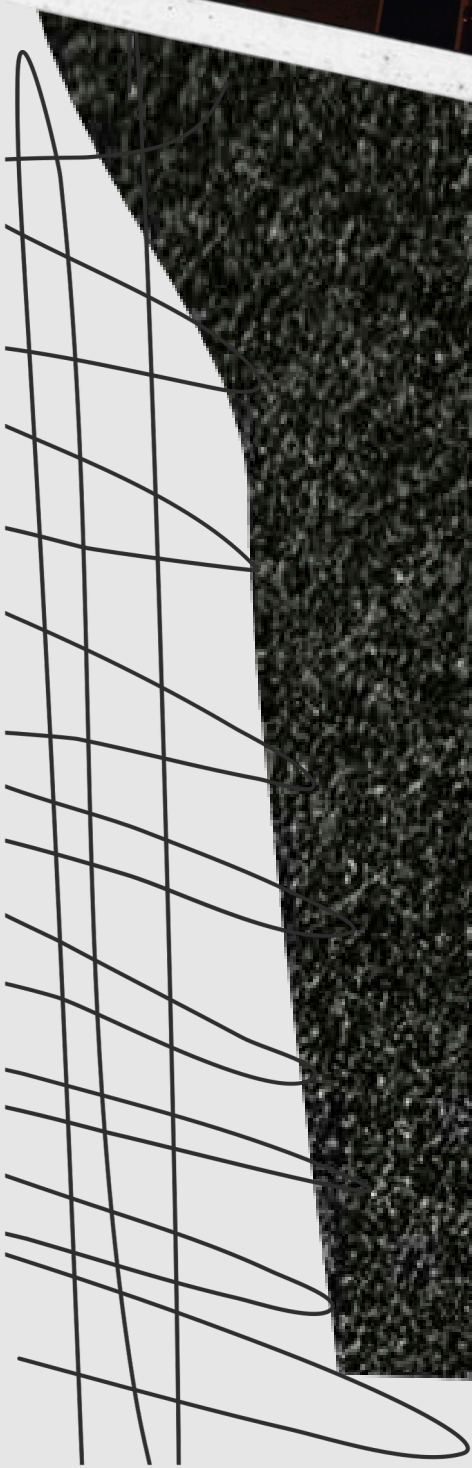


HER STORY OF RECONING: A'S SCHOOLGIRL'S SECRET BOOK

men—feminist adj.: feminizes
should have the same the belief
Fem.i.nis.m /fem.i.niz.ə.ri/ and opp
different concepts, espe
gentle, delicate, tu
to be typical
etc bet. femi
slim, femi

Gender norms have quietly shaped my life from the moment I could understand them, embedding themselves into the fabric of my experiences. This zine reflects on how these expectations played out at home, through caregiving, and at school - exploring intersectionality, the geography of care, the performance of gender, and the panopticon. Each moment shows how public and private spaces blur, forming a map of gendered control.





LESSONS BETWEEN FOUR WALLS

"Close your legs, Francis, it's not lady-like to sit like that." This command from my Mum echoed in childhood, revealing how gender is policed even in intimate spaces. It wasn't just about our living room, it was about how the world might judge my body outside. I learned early that my body was to be contained, folded into a version of femininity that anticipated male gaze and, perhaps worse, female scrutiny.



BETWEEN DUTY AND DAUGHTERHOOD

At 11, when my Mum became disabled, I inherited responsibilities: housework, emotional labour, care. While my Dad and I shared tasks, the emotional burden - the geography of care - rested largely on me. This invisible labour reflects broader societal norms: young girls expected to nurture, to hold space.



Assisting my mum with intimate tasks, helping her dress, taking her to the toilet, exposed me to the deeply affective spaces of dependence, vulnerability, and unspoken responsibility. This was shaped by wider cultural narratives that stigmatise outsourcing care, positioning families, and often daughters, as the rightful bearers of this labour. As a "glass child," I learned to make myself transparent: holding space for another's needs while suppressing my own. Such caregiving is intersectional; it is shaped not only by gender, but also by familial structures, cultural expectations, and the emotional geographies that bind love to duty.



HEMS AND HIERARCHIE

The playground was meant for movement - for running, colliding, breathing in the cold air before the game began. Yet that day, it became a stage. As I

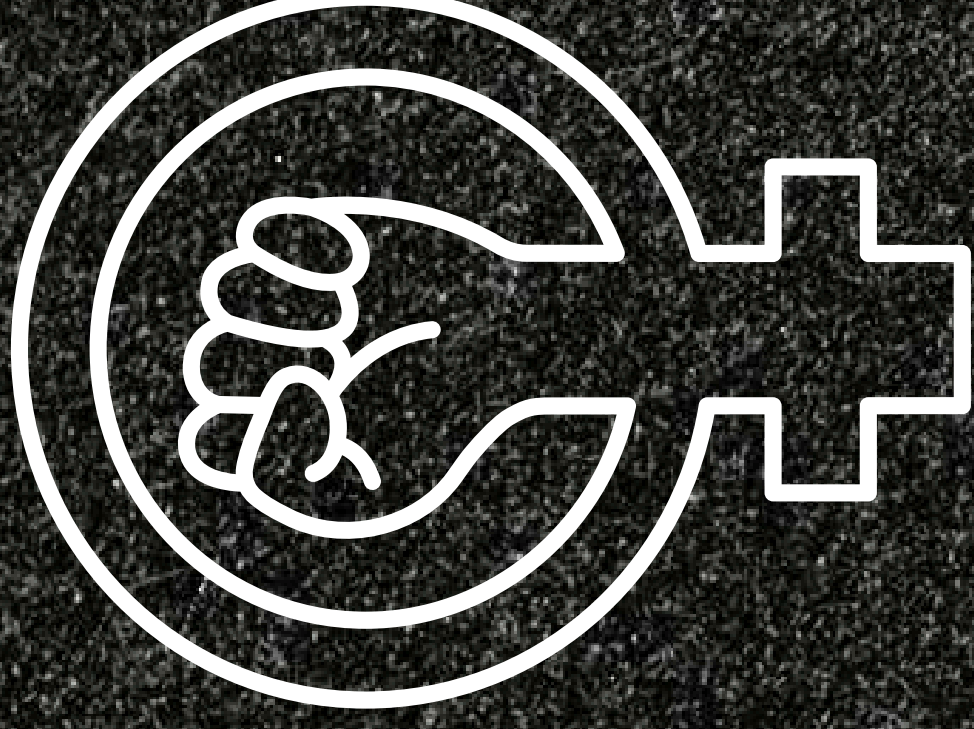
tightened the Velcro on my hockey shoes, Mr Goodman's voice cut through the chatter: "Don't you think it's rather inappropriate to wear your PE skirt that high?"

The boys laughed, and teachers looked still. My friends stood to play, became body, about to play, became a lesson instead - a vessel through which femininity was to be performed and policed.

Inside the halls, the ritual was harsher. Dr Price patrolled with her ruler like a sceptre, summoning us to kneel as the boys looked on. Inch by inch, we were measured, corrected, diminished. Kneeling on the floor became a symbolic act of subordination, a public execution where our agency was the condemned, stripped of life with each measure of fabric. They weren't made to kneel on the floor, no skirts, only shirts that had no need for measure or test. Theirs was a freedom of fabric; ours, a lesson in control.

RESISTANCE

We learned to tug at hems before the ruler appeared, to carry shame in the creases of our uniforms. But that day, we refused to play our part. We sat - skirts crumpled, hockey sticks abandoned - and turned the lesson back on them. Our strike was not a whisper but a refusal: to kneel, to shrink, to be measured into silence. For a moment, the panopticon blinked, and we claimed the ground beneath our knees as our own.



REFLECTION

Yet my story is one of privilege - a white, middle-class body in a private school. For many, this surveillance and control into racialised, classed, and rooted into racial legacies that turn into exclusion, colonial legacies and care and a catalysing criminalisation and care yet pushing is I am both a consequence yet reflection that I am shaped by these forces of reflection that shaped them. Each act of rebellion, a reminder against them. Each small rebellion, a reminder that the personal is always political.

GENDER JOURNAL

If you were to ask my younger brother Nick and me what our childhoods were like, we would describe them in very different ways. When I was growing up, I naturally conformed to all of the typical hegemonic masculinities that would stereotype a young boy. I was a football player, generally too obnoxious and arrogant for my own good and surrounded by ‘lads’ who were the same as me. On the other hand, Nick conformed to complicit and subordinate masculinities by being a more feminine and introverted character; he read and drew, and his few friends were girls. We never questioned these differences until we began to understand how our identities had been influenced by expectations placed upon us by the world we grew up in and how that was going to decide how we were seen and treated.

Despite their twenty years of marriage, my parents are incredibly different people, particularly regarding their parenting styles. Though they were equally supportive, it was clear throughout our childhood that Nick and I gravitated toward our mother or father in ways that reflected broader social expectations of gender.

My mother is a kind and gentle woman from the countryside, who we often say could never say a bad word about anyone. Nick is much like her, embodying traits that are often associated with femininity: gentleness, empathy, and emotional availability. She is soft-spoken and nurturing, never quick to judge, and always ready to listen. She was the person I went to whenever I had problems that required emotional support.

On the contrary, my father represents a socially constructed ideal of hegemonic masculinity: tough, unemotional, and resilient. Growing up in a rough estate in Lille, France as the son of working-class immigrants, he learned to suppress vulnerability and approach hardship by neglecting it. His bluntness and lack of emotional expression shaped our interactions; though I shared many of his mannerisms, I hesitated to seek his comfort when facing personal struggles. He has never really spoken about the challenges, particularly of prejudice, that he had to navigate moving to create the life of privilege that I have been lucky enough to have, but I know he has struggled at times. This is why I think he took a colder and more disregarding approach to who Nick chose to be; he saw people calling him names as an unavoidable part of being different; someone calling Nick a “gay boy” in the school playground was no different to my father being called a “frog” in the local pub.

Being surrounded by young, adrenaline-filled boys meant that there was an unspoken expectation to conform, our interests, hairstyles and clothing choices all had to fit the 'boy' expectation so anything that misaligned from the rigid standard of masculinity that was instilled was a target for scrutiny, especially if it was at someone's expense. This made Nick an easy target, but he was my younger brother, was I not meant to be his role model and protector, especially in the 'lions-den' that is a primary school playground?

My first memory of Nick deciding to divert from gender norms was one Christmas. I had asked for a new pair of football boots, and Nick had asked for a Cinderella dress. "A Cinderella dress?" I asked him with the same demeaning tone I had unknowingly absorbed from those around me, my mother gently reminded me that Nick had not questioned my choice, so I had no right to question his. I now see in hindsight that my reaction was based off the fear of people judging my gender and sexual orientation rather than a direct problem with his request. My father huffed in the same way he always did when Nick asked to plait my mother's hair or paint her nails. Nick sat quietly, his expression heavy with the quiet resignation of someone who had learned that stepping outside of socially enforced gender roles would always be met with resistance.

Being the rude and impressionable boy I was, it is now easy to imagine the dismay that I showed when Nick asked to wear his new Cinderella dress to World Book Day in school. Our school, set in a traditional market town in the Sussex countryside, reflected a society where strict gender norms were upheld, where boys were expected to wear sports tops, not dresses, and where any deviation invited criticism. I still remember the pure joy he felt twirling in that dress, a confidence I had never experienced in my Liverpool football shirt. This did not mean that he was not greeted with a welcome of torment, laughter and name-calling. But to him, these reactions seemed insignificant, as if he had not yet learned that gender expression was something the world sought to police. Reflecting on the judgments I had about Nick's interests, hobbies, and later his sexuality, I see now how much my perceptions were shaped by societal expectations rather than inherent truths and how they personally affected my relationship with sexuality and gender norms. Like my father, I equated Nick's femininity with weakness, not because it was, but because we had been taught to see it that way.

The fear of how others might perceive him weighed on us, making it harder to accept. This mirrors the broader social construction of gender, where masculinity is associated with strength and dominance, while femininity, especially in men, is framed as fragile and inferior. These beliefs are not natural but instilled in us through cultural norms and expectations, shaping how we view gender and reinforcing restrictive ideas about identity.

This, therefore, does not make it hard for me to admit that whilst I was growing up, I struggled to understand homosexuality and the broader LGBTQ community because everyone around me conformed to traditional gender roles and heterosexual norms. Masculinity and femininity were presented as fixed, natural traits rather than socially constructed ideals, shaping my belief that deviating from these norms was unnecessary. The word "gay" was often used as an insult, reflecting how rigid gender expectations were reinforced through language, even when people did not fully understand its meaning. These perceptions were passed down by older generations, embedding outdated ideas about gender and sexuality in children's minds. In primary school, this made life particularly difficult for Nick, as children had not yet developed independent views on gender but instead absorbed societal norms that dictated what was considered acceptable or deviant. I also felt like I had a responsibility, particularly during my time in school, to prove myself to be more of a man to avoid assumptions that I worried people would make of me based off him.

His ability to break free from socially constructed gender norms and define himself on his own terms became a frequent point of reflection for me when I wanted to define the person I was and who I wanted to become, especially during my time in secondary school. I often felt trapped between who I wanted to be and who I was expected to be, particularly because I feared disappointing my father, whose definition of strength left little room for vulnerability. I came to understand that qualities labelled as masculine or feminine are not inherent but shaped by societal expectations. I found beauty in androgyny and realised that the traits that made the women in my life so remarkable were not exclusive to them but rather the result of cultural conditioning. In exploring my own identity, I recognised that embracing these so-called feminine traits, such as emotional openness, did not contradict masculinity but rather expanded its meaning. It also helped me to be more open with the friends that had created a 'lad' culture that resisted emotional openness, and that has subsequently led to deeper and more meaningful connections.

What came as a shock to me many years later, after much time soul searching, was Nick's reluctance to tell me that he was gay. I remember the tears in his eyes when he was telling me, perhaps out of pride or out of fear of how I would react. Looking back, he may have always known, and perhaps I subconsciously ignored the signs, influenced by the belief that masculinity should align with heterosexuality. The more mature young man I had become felt hurt that he had not told me sooner, yet I realised that this was not about me. After that moment, I saw my brother differently, not as someone who needed to conform to traditional masculinity, nor as someone I had to protect, but as a person to support in embracing his identity.

My parents responded well to finding out, but always have their worries on how his sexuality is going to impact his later life and how people will respond to it. I think the intersectionality of homosexuality and traditional masculine and feminine characteristics is still a challenge for many people, especially older generations. In their time, homosexuality was often seen through a lens of prejudice and stereotypes, viewed as inferior, associated with disease, and at odds with conventional gender roles. It is now and will continue in the future to be something that improves the space that it flourishes in.

I am now proud to have a brother like Nick. He is someone who confidently embraces who he is, regardless of societal pressures or expectations of what a man should be. He has given me strength to be honest with myself, particularly in embracing the complicit and subordinate masculinities that every man should now aspire to do, as well as be more emotionally open with my father.



THE FEMININE DICHOTOMY

When I reached my teenage years, I began to face the awkward but seemingly inevitable question from friends and family, have you got a boyfriend? I did not, and so had to reluctantly inform my questioners that I was still single, much to their disappointment. It began to feel as though my lack of relationship was somewhat unusual, even problematic, I was unintentionally failing to comply with the expectations of the heteronormative gaze and so was considered almost subversive. If my dad was present when the question was asked, once I had given my usual slightly apologetic response, he would chime in and say that it was because I was instead focusing on my studies and concentrating on myself, and that he thought that this was really good. I appreciated his moral support, but his comment always felt strange to me because although I was very focused on my academics, I still wanted a relationship, I wasn't actively choosing one over the other. But he seemed to be suggesting that for girls there was this choice; you could either direct yourself towards studying and having hobbies, or you could spend your time chasing after boys, and his expression of pride towards my choice of the former seemed to imply that I was performing a superior version of femininity.

This was confusing because at no point had I consciously chosen academia over boys. It created a dichotomy and a feeling that by being academically focused I was making myself unattractive and undesirable. I could be focused on my goals and hobbies, or I could have a boyfriend, but I seemed to be being told that I couldn't possibly have both. I was being praised for being high-achieving and sporty, but these same traits that were respected and seemed to be conflated with superiority, were ironically the same things that I was also seemingly being told were unattractive. This division began to become visible to me everywhere; in television programmes girls that were very intelligent or athletic were rarely portrayed as also being feminine and attractive, and girls that were desirable were visually hyper-feminine, often self-absorbed, and usually unintelligent or ditsy. Even at school, the girls with boyfriends and who attracted male attention were rarely the ones in the highest achieving classes. Instead, the top academic groups were mostly comprised of girls who had at least on some level been socially rejected and outcast, girls who seemed only able to dream of being even acknowledged by a boy.

This constantly reinforced dichotomy has left me living much of my life attempting to resolve the conflict between these differing personas. I have always played a variety of sports, have prided myself in being high-achieving and goal-oriented, and I have spent time in places often considered to be more masculine. But simultaneously, I invest time and money in my physical appearance and making myself 'attractive', I love to feel pretty, and I do want to have a boyfriend. In an attempt to try and transgress what seems to be such an aggressively defined boundary, I sometimes find myself performing gendered acts in an almost exaggerated manner as a small-scale form of personal activism. When going to the gym, a very masculine space, I perform a kind of hyper-femininity by wearing ribbons in my hair, putting on makeup, and applying lip-gloss. It feels like an act of defiance and an assertion that I can enjoy traditionally masculine activities and spaces without having to compromise on my femininity.

Complex Stereotypes

Sometimes, visually presenting in this hyper-feminine way leads people to assume that I fit into a 'dumb blonde' stereotype. I find myself being patronised or condescended. I worked behind a bar and whilst I was still learning my way around, I would sometimes make errors with people's orders. Male customers would always overlook these mistakes and would often offer up kind, but very oversimplified, advice usually delivered with a wink or a sympathetic comment about how I would get the hang of it eventually. Their patience and understanding were unexpected, especially when I still found myself receiving similar responses to mistakes when I could no longer hide behind the excuse of being new. It was only as I watched my colleagues on the receiving end of mistreatment for making the same mistakes, that I realised I was receiving special treatment. Men seemed to see my behaviour as inevitable and so excusable, they just attributed it to me being a ditsy blonde and so my errors in fact became endearing and 'cute'.

It's reminiscent of the phrase 'it's not what you can do for misogyny, it's what misogyny can do for you'; while I profusely disagree with the sentiment of this, it seems quite applicable to this situation. I was receiving a free pass for my mistakes because of the way I looked and the stereotype that men felt I conformed to. To benefit from misogyny in this way is undoubtedly not a universal experience and emerges not just from my gender but also how this intersects with other aspects of my identity.

Eurocentric beauty standards valorise youthfulness, and frequently attractiveness becomes inseparable from whiteness, and so to conform to these expectations already provides me with an advantage. Coming from a middle-class background also provides an ability for me to financially invest in my appearance and keep up to date with the dynamic nature of beauty expectations. This intersectionality therefore grants me a privilege which many other women do not share.

However, the benefits which their stereotypes may grant me does not detract from their reductive and harmful nature. It's conflicting because I cannot help but take some pleasure from the advantages that their assumptions afford me, especially because I know that I am more than just what they see. Yet at the same time, to have my life, personality, and all of my multiplicities stripped away and be reduced to just a 'pretty face' feels like a violent and careless act, and to be extracting any level of benefit from that feels as if I am exploiting myself. To play along feels not just inauthentic but as if I am eroding part of who I am and disrespecting myself in the process. To remove my jewellery and makeup and tie back my hair would surely allow me to avoid this strange preferential treatment and prevent myself being confined to a caricature, but this too would mean denying an expression of who I am. It seems as though I am forced constantly to play a game that I can never win, I have to choose a side but as soon as I do the walls start closing in and I become trapped in a partial existence. I imagine it as a universal Venn diagram where the two circles represent these two imagined versions of femininity, but there seems to be an unwillingness to acknowledge that the circles overlap and that a region of hybridity exists. It is simpler to deny its presence than to understand the complexity and multiple ways of being a woman, but this grey area is where sits vibrancy and life. Choosing not to recognise this space means a discursive denial of the female experience, a denial that I can exist in the way that I do.

A conclusion?

My dad has always been one of my biggest supporters, firm in his stance that my gender should not hold me back and consistently proud of my transgressions of gendered space. He is open in expressing his approval of my diverse interests and particularly those which diverge from gendered expectations.

His assertion that I had chosen academia over boys definitely did not come from a perspective of female identity being limited, but it shows just how deeply and sub-consciously these ideas have permeated into societal discourse. It is likely that he was entirely unaware of the dichotomy to which he seemed to be alluding, and that many other men do not realise the ideas which their behaviours reinforce. This cognitive dissonance between varying ideas of gender is also not unique to men. People's unawareness of how entrenched gendered ideas are poses the troubling question of how many women and girls must be being unknowingly guided by them and are stripping away parts of themselves in an attempt to fit neatly into one of the provided circles. While I actively try to prevent myself being confined to gendered expectations, even my enjoyment of making myself 'attractive' is not necessarily a natural trait or one inherent to who I am. It has been somewhat conditioned through exposure to societal norms and a learned desire to appeal to the male gaze. Yet I continue to choose to mould myself into the shape of these expectations regardless of the knowledge that this is not entirely something I am doing for my own pleasure. This incongruity adds another layer of complexity to understanding my identity as a female and where the line between person and performance exists, or if the two can even be separated.

Gender, and my female identity, is something that will likely always remain complex. Its intricacies and contours are rooted so deeply within our social and cultural landscapes that any attempt at resolution feels like pulling on a thread that will totally unravel the world around me. There is no easy fix. Even now with my own strong belief that I should not have to change or curtail parts of who I am to fit into an archetypal female identity, these identities still exercise a strong grip on our societal imagination and generate expectations of conformity. And so my gender identity is still something with which I find myself in constant dialogue, negotiating both internally and socially, consciously and sub-consciously; a messy but necessary process of finding my way in the world.

THE TWO FACES OF MY FATHER

A SHORT STORY

RESPECTED BUSINESSMAN. SCHOLAR. STORYTELLER.



The Man He Pretended to Be.

To the world, my father was a man of knowledge, a scholar, a professional. He could awe a room with a booming voice and a knowing smile.

THE HOME TRUTH



The Script.

He believed women existed to serve. Defined by silence, beauty, and obedience.

HIS PUBLIC PERSONA



Cambridge Lies.

Prestige was his costume. Cambridge halls, success stories, a life of illusion; all invented to keep the world believing

GENDERED SCRIPTS



Contradictions.

The contradictions of history felt too familiar; like my father, who sold birth control while condemning the women who used it.

THE MYTH



Behind Closed Doors.

The scholar disappeared. What remained was violence, rage, and a man who silenced women with fear

HISTORICAL PARALLELS



Control, Not Choice.

He admired Trump, clapping when he said women should be punished for abortion. When Roe v. Wade was overturned, he thought justice had been served.

THE TWO FACES OF MY FATHER

A SHORT STORY

CONTROL, NOT CHOICE.



When I found out I was pregnant, I knew I couldn't tell him. His career was built on reproductive health — yet my choice would have enraged him. I carried the truth alone. In his world, my pregnancy wasn't my choice; it was his script waiting to punish me

QUIET RESISTANCE.



Space as Power.

Feminist geography teaches that space is political. Some places are safe. Others are sites of control. He controlled our home like a kingdom. But I learned that claiming my own spaces was an act of resistance.

PREGNANCY & SILENCE



Quiet Revolution.

Choosing silence was survival — but it was also resistance. These moments were turning points. Quiet revolutions.

SILENCE AS SURVIVAL



Power of Silence.

Silence is not always submission; it can be self-preservation. I did not tell him. I let him keep believing his lies. My silence was not weakness. It was armour, a way to survive and build a life beyond his control.

ENDOMETRIOSIS



My Mother's World.

When I was diagnosed with endometriosis, I didn't tell him. Instead, my mother held my hand through the pain; her truth became my refuge. He called her mad. But when illness came, it was her care (not his denial) that kept me alive.

FREEDOM



My Truth.

His script no longer defines me. I choose my story, my body, my future. I am free.

REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

MIA KATE

I was raised in a broken home – I lived with my mum all my life, only seeing my dad when he'd pick me up from school until I was 11, then once every few weeks until 19. My parents raised me very differently, impacting and confusing me as I grew up from a girl to a woman.

“Girly” vs. “Tomboy”

My mum had a very rigid idea of what she wanted me to be like. While she never outright voiced her support for gender roles, everything she taught me had a “girls way” and a “boys way” of doing. Everything was “for girls” or “for boys”. She would enforce stereotypes such as wearing dresses, liking pink, playing with dolls. Even music fell under these characterisations. If I showed a liking towards any heavy music, she'd complain that my dad is raising a boy. She forced this idea of heavy = manly, on to both me and my dad. I couldn't have discovered the music myself – playing into ideas of women as submissive, unable to think for ourselves; it *had* to have been my dad's influence. Clearly, only a man could introduce such interests to a girl!

When it comes to the “girl's way” vs “boy's way”, my mum teaching me to dress myself comes to mind. Girls put on hoodies & jumpers head first, boys do it arms first. My mum would get extremely frustrated with me if I swayed from this – which I did quite frequently out of spite. “Mia, what the hell was your mum teaching you?”, “I didn't know that was a thing” and “that's... strange” are comments from friends that stuck after discussing this. I was always under the impression that this was normal, so these comments came as a surprise. Looking back now, I question where my mum got this from.

There have always been elements of gender roles deeply rooted into society, instilled into my mum from childhood in some ways, but this I still struggle to understand.



My dad's parenting was incredibly different, leading to a lot of confusion about my own identity going into adulthood. While my mum pushed ideas of girls like and do this, boys that – my dad didn't care. He just wanted to see me enjoy things I liked, albeit hoping deep down that those would be the things he also liked.

Sure, if I liked something girly (fairies, mermaids, bright colours...) he'd make constant remarks about how much he couldn't stand that himself, but he didn't resent *me* for these interests. Reflecting now, I recognise this as a performance of masculinity.

Society, as a patriarchy, instils such a sense of divide between masculinity and femininity, pushing people into either box in very similar ways to my mother. My dad felt the need to reassure himself that, just because his daughter was enjoying femininity in his home, expressing herself femininely, doesn't mean that this was reflected on him. He had to reassure himself and those around him – me and my grandad – that this was *not* a reflection of him.

Regardless of my dad's rejection of femininity through his parenting, I picked up hobbies considered "for boys" as well.



Metal music, musical instruments, skateboarding, sports, video games... My dad would encourage these hobbies, whether through pride of having a "tomboy" daughter or for the sake of letting me enjoy whatever I wanted. Being as young as I was, I didn't know how gender roles played into this at the time. I didn't really understand concepts of femininity or masculinity. Now, I realise my dad's joy in my more boyish interests come from a sense of pride. "Look at my daughter, she's not a girly girl!" While I am grateful of having the freedom to enjoy whatever I wanted, this does now quite upset me. Why can't my interests, feminine or masculine, be a reflection of myself, instead of an extension of him?



On one hand, I was someone who loved fairies and dolls, Barbie, Winx Club, etc. On the other – my favourite colour was blue, my clothes were dirty from sports, and I *loved* video games. I wasn't a tomboy like my sister, but I certainly wasn't the girly girl my mum wanted me to be, either. This confused me until I was 19. I knew I didn't have to fit either box, but I was so lost from being raised in such a way that I *had* to fit into one, to figure out who I was – embody one or the other, and to mum there was a correct answer. With dad, there was no *correct* answer, but a preference. He took great pride in having a daughter who he shared interests with – even bragging to his friends. He felt empowered having a boyish daughter. He wouldn't brag about my girly interests.

I only started to learn that it was ok to lean towards both sides of girly and boyish, to be the middle ground, around my second year of university. I didn't hear my mum's narrow beliefs daily or have her questioning my gender for wanting to wear a tie. I also didn't have my dad's pride and masculinity on my shoulders while I was in Cardiff. I, for the first time, had an opportunity to reflect on how I embodied gender and gender norms. I had an opportunity to look at what I enjoyed, who I was, and accept that. I realised I didn't have to fit into either box perfectly and that it's completely fine to be girly or more boyish, simultaneously or not. I can be one or the other, or both.

Masculine and Feminine Attributes

My parents also differed in their teachings of behaviour. My mum continued to instil ideas and traits that society deems as feminine. My mum always raised me to be passive, cautious, and (subtly) submissive. When I was having issues in primary school, I was to shut up and take it until people grew bored. Keep quiet and deal with it. Contrarily, she also taught me to show no emotion. Tears were to be kept private, between me and her. Crying publicly meant I was overly emotional and sensitive. To her, it made me more prone to bullying, which I was to ignore. One thing I question is *why* does emotion and sensitivity make me a target? Looking back now, society has taught us that feminine traits such as these are lesser than masculine traits. Being emotional is considered a weakness. This had been instilled into the other children, and even my teachers who would tell me off for crying.

My dad on the other hand taught me to fight back against bullies. Shout or fight back people verbally/physically harassing me. He wanted me to stand up and protect myself instead of taking the heat until it'd quell. These are traditionally masculine traits – once again showing my dad's want for a child to share his mindset and ideals. Both of my parents had my best interest at heart in their own ways tying into polar opposite gendered ideology. I tried both approaches growing up. Fighting back only got me into trouble – instead of the perpetrators.

I was the problematic child who fought the other children. To my mum, I was a smaller version of my dad. She'd tell me off, reiterating that I need to be passive and ignorant to quell the bullying, and to stop listening to my dad. My dad even saw me as a problem for following his ideas. Looking back, these were most of the times he'd highlight physical dominance as a strong, manly man. If it wasn't play fighting, it was punishments for getting in trouble from his advice. So, I started listening to my mum. I grew fearful of my dad and his ideals – so I stopped listening. My interactions with my dad became related solely to our mutual interests. While I still don't physically fight back as I would in childhood, I do now fight back with words once I reach a breaking point. I still find myself falling into "lesser" feminine attributes, being quite passive and cautious until reaching this point. I then drop these and argue back in a way to become brave – something modernity deems "masculine".

All in all, gender norms and gendered attributes played crucial roles in my upbringing. It took me until adulthood to break the moulds created by my parents and learn how to embrace my own sense of self, to embrace my "girly" and "boyish" interests – regardless of how I am deemed within society. I've learned that being emotional and sensitive is not a weakness. If anything, it's a strength to be able to show emotion. It's a strength to stand up for myself when needed, or to "be the bigger person" otherwise. I have grown from feeling pushed into femininity or masculinity, to embracing both as parts of myself regardless of modernity and societal ideals.



STORY EIGHT

Opening Scene

The first day of university was completed. After the last lecture of the day, me and my new course friend decided to ‘*go for a pint*’ at the student union to get to know each other better.

The pub was quieter than I expected. Back home, ‘*a pint*’ meant a busy, familiar space, filled with people who had known each other for years. Here in Cardiff, the atmosphere felt different, calmer, more detached. As I reached the bar, I instinctively turned to my friend and asked, “*What are you having?*” expecting to order for both of us, ready to start the unspoken ritual of buying rounds. But he hesitated, giving me a confused look before simply saying, “*I’ll just grab my own.*”

For a second, I didn’t know how to react, why wouldn’t he want to do rounds?

Back home, going for ‘*a pint*’ never actually meant just one pint. It meant a cycle, one person buys, then the next, until it’s been more than a few. It was an unspoken agreement, a shared rhythm that no one questioned. But I shrugged it off, ordered my own, and followed him to a table, unsure whether to say anything.

At the time, I just assumed it was a bit odd, maybe he didn’t realise how rounds worked? But looking back, I see now that this wasn’t just about buying drinks. It was a small but revealing difference in the way we had been socialised, how our upbringings shaped even the most ordinary social interactions. It wasn’t just about money or etiquette; it was about what it meant to belong, to participate in a culture where masculinity was reinforced in subtle, everyday ways.

This wasn’t the first time I had felt a slight disconnect since coming to university, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on why.

First Reflection – Farming and Gender Roles

We sat down at a small table in the corner, pints in hand. The conversation started light, where we were from, how we were finding uni so far. It wasn't long before I realised just how different our upbringings were. He grew up in a city, where both his parents worked office jobs, and household chores were evenly split. Back home, things weren't like that. The farm dictated everything. Men worked the land, fixed machinery, herded livestock. Women handled everything else, the house, the children, the meals. It wasn't something that was ever questioned; it was just *the way things were*. I'd never really thought about it before. My mum could be up before dawn feeding lambs, but it was still my dad and I who were expected to handle the 'real' farm work. She never drove the tractors, never repaired a fence. The divide wasn't something we spoke about, it was just understood.

Farming didn't just separate men and women through expectations, it did so through our bodies. From a young age, I learned that the 'real' work on the farm was the work that left you physically exhausted, the heavy lifting, the long hours outside. The tasks my mum did, no matter how essential, were considered secondary. Without thinking about it, I internalised that strength and masculinity were tied to physical endurance, and that being a man meant doing the kind of work that left you with aching muscles and calloused hands. It wasn't just about what we did, it was about how our bodies were shaped by the work we were expected to do.

For the first time, as I sat there in that pub, I started to wonder, had I just accepted this because it was all I knew? Had I ever really considered whether it was fair? My friend carried on talking, mentioning how his mum worked long hours and how his dad, despite having a full-time job, still cooked dinner most nights. That would have been unheard of back home. I couldn't picture my dad finishing a day of farm work and then standing at the stove. But why? Wasn't farm work just like an office job?

I took a sip of my pint and glanced around the room. The people here; students, professionals, city dwellers, weren't bound by the same unspoken rules that had shaped my childhood. For the first time, I realised that gender wasn't just a social expectation, it was something that shaped the way we moved through the world, the way we used our bodies, and even the way we valued different types of labour

Second Reflection – ‘Man Up’ and Emotional Suppression

The conversation moved on, drifting between casual topics and personal experiences. He talked openly about stress, mental health, and how important it was to reach out when struggling. I nodded along, but part of me hesitated. Back home, this kind of conversation just didn’t happen, at least, not between men.

I thought about the pub culture I was used to. Men in rural Wales did talk, but only in a way that skimmed the surface. They’d catch up over rounds, chat about the farm, the rugby, the weather, anything but emotions. If someone was struggling, it wasn’t acknowledged. You got on with things. You ‘manned’ up. The reality of this mentality had serious consequences. I’d heard the statistics before; male suicide rates were disproportionately high in farming communities. It wasn’t hard to see why. Farming was isolating, the financial strain was relentless, and the expectation to be strong, independent, and unemotional was ingrained from an early age. Struggling wasn’t an option. Talking wasn’t an option.

Yet, here was my friend, casually mentioning that he had spoken to someone about his mental health, without embarrassment or hesitation. I took another sip of my pint, feeling the weight of the contrast. Back home, men had to be tough, to endure. But here, I was beginning to see that strength wasn’t about suppressing emotions, it was about being honest about them.

Third Reflection – Career Expectations and Pressure to Farm

As our conversation carried on, my friend started talking about his future plans. He spoke about different career options, possibilities of moving abroad, maybe even switching fields if he found something more interesting. There was a freedom in the way he spoke, like his path was entirely his to decide.

Back home, careers weren't spoken about in the same way. For me, there was always an expectation, an unspoken assumption that I'd stay and take on the farm. It wasn't that anyone had ever sat me down and said, "*this is what you have to do*". But it was there, in the way people talked, in the way neighbours would say, "*one day this will all be yours*", in the way younger sons of farming families often had fewer options.

I had never openly resisted it, but I had never fully embraced it either. Part of me felt a sense of duty, of tradition, after all, generations before me had done the same. But another part of me questioned whether I was following a path that I truly wanted, or simply one that had been mapped out for me before I even had a say.

Sometimes I wonder if being a woman would have changed things. Would people assume I'd marry and move away? The pressure wasn't only about masculinity; it was about rural identity and class, too. Being a man on a farm meant inheriting responsibility, a legacy. It was more than a career—it was a life spanning generations.

I glanced at my friend, still talking enthusiastically about his options. Would he have felt the same kind of pressure if he had been born into a farming family? Would I feel differently if I had grown up in a city, where career choices weren't so deeply tied to family legacy and land? The contrast between our experiences was stark.

I took another sip of my pint, feeling the weight of expectation settle on my shoulders. Was my future really mine to decide?

Closing Scene – Understanding the Differences

As we finished our pints and stood to leave, I found myself reflecting on the evening. The unanswered questions I'd had at the start now made sense. I understood now that *'going for a pint'* meant different things depending on where you were. Back home, it was a social ritual, an unspoken agreement to stay for multiple rounds and keep the conversation light. That first moment at the bar no longer felt confusing, it was a reminder that the rural idea of "rounds" was as much about performing a certain kind of masculinity as it was about sharing drinks. Here, it was exactly what it sounded like, one pint, one chat, and then home.

I saw how masculinity played out differently, too. In my world, men didn't open up, didn't talk about feelings. Strength was in silence. But in my friend's world, masculinity wasn't about holding things in, it was about expressing them, being vulnerable without fear of judgement.

And then there was career freedom. My friend had choices, endless possibilities stretching ahead of him. For me, the weight of tradition had always loomed large. But maybe, just maybe, it didn't have to define me.

As I stepped outside and felt the cool Cardiff air hit my face, I realised something. I wasn't fully one or the other, I existed somewhere in between. A part of me would always belong to the farm, to the traditions I grew up with. But another part of me had changed, had opened up to new ways of thinking. And maybe that was okay.

Maybe I could carry both worlds with me.



what it is to be a man

Contorting my body in unnatural movements, I strained myself in order to manipulate objects constructed by solid metal and wood, around three quarters the size of myself into its rightful place.

Despite the burning I felt within my arms and shoulders I carried on. By the time I was nearly done, almost bested by these objects, I'd worked myself into a state of breathlessness and formed sweat on the brow. "Good lad" my primary school teacher offered in return for the strenuous labour I

had just endured when returning my tables chairs to the corner of the classroom.

That was all I needed; To be told I was doing well. Using the body I was given to do

what was needed in an effort to not task the girls that I was sat next to with the

monstruous task of returning the chair to the corner. I believe that the engendered use

of bodies was established in my, along with my classmates, beliefs long before there were

notable differences in biology between boys and girls. Asking the boys to move the chairs

to the corner of the classroom was not an isolated incident. Many times throughout my

childhood, teachers and parents alike would assign boys arduous tasks based on the movement

of larger objects whilst assigning girls creative or cleaning assignments. The use of boys for physical and

potentially dangerous labour or sport was instilled within myself from a very young age.



These assignments based on genders created a set of normalised practises. This constructed my understanding of gender and what it meant to be a man, some of which were wrong. The first being that boys, or men, are useful so long as they can continue providing and successfully completing the tasks that they are assigned. Boys are also hardy and should be encouraged to engage with rough play and sport. It also constructed my ideals of femininity. The belief that girls are fragile and should be protected from doing hard tasks. The belief that girls would rather play nicely inside doing creative arts, away from the hot sun. The belief that femininity is soft, passive, creative.



These conceptualisations my young mind fashioned together based on my experiences, upon reflection, are mostly ridiculous. Notions of a man's personal value being based in gender specific tasks and the ability of what one can or can't do should not be given any credence. However, as a child learning behaviours from those around himself and those in positions of authority (almost certainly from the generation that came before himself who held antiquated beliefs containing perspectives aligned with hegemonic masculinities) that is what I was taught to do to become a good boy man.

I reflect on these experiences not with negativity, or of images of a sad kid forced to work in the mines, as I had an incredibly happy childhood. Yet it impacted on my perceptions of masculinity as a young boy and now young man. However, my current view on masculinities is always in flux, changing based on new situations and experiences. In 2007, my little sister was born. Unknown to my 5-year-old self at the time, she would challenge and repeatedly disprove my beliefs of gender and how to perform it as we grew up. However, it wouldn't be for a few years that this would materialise, mainly on account of her being a baby. And so, I shall talk about my father. Standing at 6'4, weighing 100+ kilos, incredibly strong both physically and mentally my father taught me what a man should be. Despite his flaws (which he does possess), I believe my father is what every man should aspire to be (mostly). Stoic yet emotional, strong and gentle, intelligent but modest, the ultimate provider who depends on my mother, passionate bordering on obsessive, physically active, progressive, well read. My father is a great man.

Naturally, as his son, I would believe this. My relationship with my parents is positive, I can turn to them in times of need, when I am celebrating, when I grieve, and most importantly when I need advice on what to do. My house followed a semi traditional structure, with my father being the main breadwinner and my mother working part time as to be home with the kids. However, as my parents constantly reminded us (me and my siblings), it was not always that way. For the majority of their lives before children,



my mother supported my father through further education. This along with the way in which my parents acted as equals and not conforming to traditional gender roles within the household created some confusion for myself growing up when talking amongst peers as a young teen.

Teenagers are awful. They are trying to learn how to act, who they are, what it means to be themselves. This includes gender and the performance of it. The changing rooms after rugby training were a place of intense discussion and debate – finding out what is accepted (socially and physically), what is normal, what was the updates on the current drama, what girls were attractive, etc.

I mention teenagers, as I was this age when I first encountered explicit homophobia, sexism, racism, and antisocial behaviour from friends and peers. I will focus on the gendered beliefs that, within the confines of the rugby changing rooms, I heard for the first time. The changing rooms were a place that you were granted entry on based on the possession of traditional hegemonic masculine traits that are associated with rugby. To gain entry you needed to be good at rugby possessing masculine abilities such as risk taking, competitiveness, and violence. Yet to gain acceptance, you had to oppose feminine traits and belittle others in the name of banter. This included notions of ‘women belong in the kitchen, women can’t drive, your dad is gay’. The involvement of non-participation or taking offence to a comment which was just ‘banter’ was policed with the threat of being called some sort of slur that could be summarised by the base insult of ‘gay’. To be gay was the worst of all sins, it meant you were feminine, weak, defective, perverted.

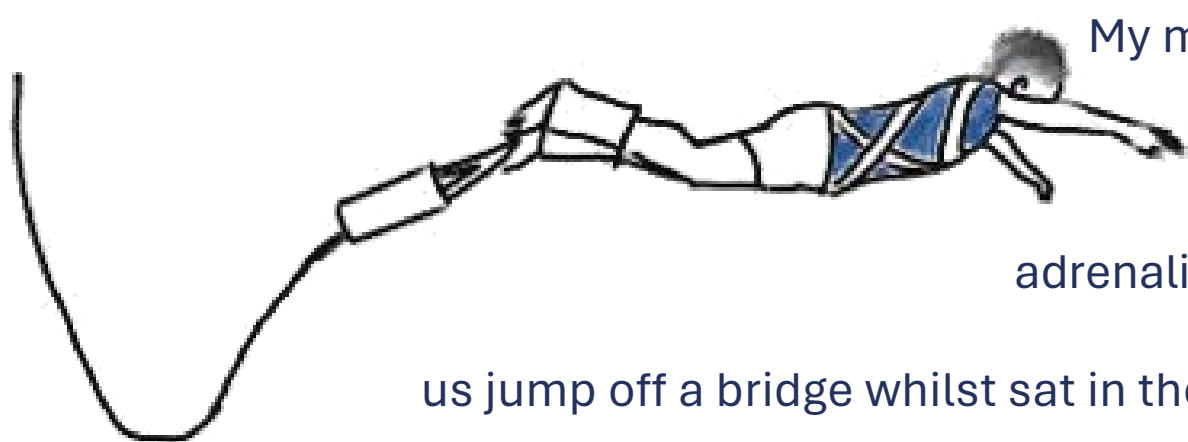
As I was a teenager too, I wanted to be accepted by the team. And those accepted were those who followed the expected script of rugby boys. Despite knowing this, I faced some difficulty. The music I liked unfortunately was gay. A new t-shirt I bought much to my disappointment was incredibly gay. Doing very well in maths, I’m sure you’ve guessed, also gay. Talking to girls at lunch, very confusingly, was gay.



Looking at the way my parents acted was very different to my teammates. Music to my father was to be enjoyed and fell into categories of good or bad. T-shirts, especially polos, were a thing to wear and occasionally complement. Educational success was to be encouraged. Talking to girls – We did not discuss emotions unless necessary.

And so, I was confused. I had two conflicting models of masculinities in front of me. One based in self-confidence, humility, encouragement, and acceptance. The other based in aversion to femineity, physicality, ridicule of others, and homophobia. Naturally, much to the dismay of my teammates, I chose to be a good man by following in my father's footprints. Thankfully my best friend held similar views to me, that the laddish boys from the team were insecure, misogynistic, racist, and not fun to be around. This regrettably I cannot say was an immediate reaction the first time I heard those comments. It took a couple years before I found the confidence within my own self and my masculinity to oppose the dominant hegemonic discourse. As a result of 'leaving the group', we were outcast, socially removed from the team and the parties. It wasn't only from the boys either, some of the 'popular' girls felt the need to remind us repeatedly that by disagreeing with the other rugby boys we were 'remarkably gay'.

During this transition period of exclusion from the rugby team friendship group, my ideals on masculinity and femineity underwent further changes. This was amplified by my sister who had grown to a point of independent action and thought – roughly 10 years old and older.



My mum is an adrenaline junky by proxy. By this I mean that she would sign my siblings and me up for some adrenaline-fueled activity, get a cup of coffee, and happily watch us jump off a bridge whilst sat in the café. Risk taking and extreme sport was taught to me, through media and teachers, as a masculine activity. However, as long as she has been old/tall/heavy enough to participate, my little sister barges her way to the front of the line for whatever we were signed up to do. She will ask me (as the more adventurous/sporty brother) on what to do to improve her snowboarding,

how to drive a 4x4 properly through the desert, what movements to do in the gym, if we should go cliff jumping, and any other outdoors typically masculine activity. This changed my perspective of masculinities and femininities. No longer do I classify activities by gender but rather desire and aptitude. She proved that traditional norms surrounding gendered activities are nonsensical. As much as she is a ‘girls girl’ who enjoys the process of makeup and dresses, if I ever need a friend go bungee jumping, she will be one of the first people I call.

Going through a brief history of my life, expanding upon key moments where gender and performativity were evident, I have come to the conclusion on what it is to be a good man. To be a good man is to be a good person. To be masculine is to be strong, tall, heavy, confident, and healthy. To be feminine is to be strong, pretty, confident, and healthy. Everything else, all other scripts, is up to personal preference. Within a household, chores such as cooking, cleaning, working, and childcare is assigned to those who want to, have the time, or split equally. Traits are attributed personally, depending on the person regardless of gender. Sport or music is left to desire not gender.

Oscar Walker



STORY NINE

Introduction

In this reflexive auto-ethnographic account, I trace my earliest encounter with becoming an engendered subject, charting the evolution of my gendered behaviour and thinking. This encounter from such a developmentally critical age transmitted and asserted a very specific set of messages about gender to me, that have borne long-lasting effects on my lived, everyday experiences.

To further jeopardise my gender experience, it is an intrinsically *intersectional* one. I have been trapped in the lifelong crossfire of negotiating my identities of gender, religion, and ethnicity which have all co-constituently been mediating forces in my gender experience. Operating as a multiplier effect, the complex intricacies of these three identities - female, Muslim, and Afghan – have cultivated unique intersectional challenges that I have had to meticulously navigate and reconfigure, to author a more authentic and meaningful life for myself.

My mothers - مادران من

My mothers. Plural because my father remarried my stepmother after divorcing my mother. For four-year-old me, this event was pivotal in teaching me the costly price of being a Muslim, Afghan girl.

Divorce is an unspeakable taboo in Muslim and Afghan spaces. I always felt like such a spectacle, but also secretly special, on the playground dramatizing to my classmates how my mother had left me, and boasting that I was getting a new mother. As though mothers were disposable; one leaves, but another quickly and readily replaces. This woman would be a brand new, shiny, nice stepmother. She would be kind, patient, cook my favourite meals and birth me new siblings to have fun with. She would pick up the pieces that my mother left scattered, diligently and dutifully. Meanwhile, my real mother became prey to my relatives' and community's unsatiable gossip. They said she was selfish. She was not a good mother. An even worse wife. They accused her of the most heinous crimes, irreversibly smeared her image, and branded her as an outcast. I believed every word.

I broke my mother's heart into millions of pieces when I refused to accept her birthday gifts, refused to speak to her on the phone, and eventually refused to see her at all. I was a six-year-old bloated and pumped full of mistrust for the woman who brought me into this world.

Two women, both my mothers, but both worlds apart. My stepmother became the backdrop against which I pitted the shortcomings of my real mother. She quickly adapted to fill in my mother's space, which I did not long for at all. At night, I would fondly sleep next to my stepmother, cradled in her arms and lulled by her bedtime stories. She became my new confidant, my friend and my carer. Scarcely soon, I switched from addressing her as my *stepmother* to my *mother*, meanwhile, my real mother faded into nothing more than merely a background piece in the occasional conversation.

This childhood experience taught me what bad and good women looked like; My *bad* mother pursued another university degree, she was devoted to her career, she spent hours on her hair and makeup, and she rewrote the rules for her life. Meanwhile, my *good* stepmother was quiet, obedient, cared for the children, maintained the house, wore no makeup, covered her hair, and was always ready to help others before helping herself.

This checklist was seared into the deepest pits of my conscience. As I grew into a teenager, I became hyper-fixated on the idea of *reputation*. I knew how strong gossip was as a mechanism of informal social control and its power gripped me in a chokehold. In many conservative, Global-South cultures like mine, a girl's reputation determines her worth and value within her community, ultimately dictating her life course. A girl's reputation is the most brittle, delicate, tender thing to exist. Once damaged, no amount of good behaviour, sacrifices, apologies or compensatory mechanisms can redeem and restore her reputation. Her family name becomes devalued, her marriage prospects dwindle, her place in the community is delegitimised, and her community makes her existence unbearably uncomfortable. Robbed of the right to space. Therefore, because I watched this happen to my mother, I spiralled into a deep, dark doom of paranoia, intrusive thoughts, and overthinking.

I dreaded sharing her fate.

And so, because of the transmitted beliefs I internalised about my mothers and by extension all women, I became hyperconscious of my own embodied gender performances and practices, and how they might be received under the powerful gaze of my Afghan community. The unblinking, surveillant eye. The weight of their expectations and social pressure suffocated me; was my makeup too much? Were my clothes too tight? Was my *hijab* showing too much hair? Was I talking excessively with the opposite gender for no legitimate reason? Did I laugh too loudly? Fundamentally, did this daughter in any way remotely resemble her mother, whose un-Afghan, un-Islamic gender performances got her blacklisted from her own family and community? My gender identity was undergoing processes of reconstruction, reassertion, and a *becoming*, but not quite positively; bodywork practices are typically supposed to *liberate* the individual, whereas I scrutinised and nitpicked and micromanaged my embodied performances mercilessly, disciplining my body to conform to my community's social expectations of me. I found myself bending backwards to fit into the template of the perfect Afghan girl with a perfectly intact reputation.

I wanted to curl up and retreat. Occupy as little space as possible. Become invisible to the piercing judgment.

It always struck me, as curious but bitter, how boys did not have to worry about a reputation. In the same way that a cat has nine lives, boys have unlimited chances, whereas girls barely have one chance to begin with. Those boys from my community who had multiple girlfriends throughout their youth still secured happy, fruitful marriages. Of course, their wives would be the *best of the best*, preserved and perfect and pure for them. Those boys who were rowdy, swore, drank alcohol and did drugs, were coddled and babied while their unlucky sisters boiled in resentment. Boys from my community could commit every crime in the handbook of Afghan crimes, and yet Afghan society would twist and stretch to accommodate for all of it. My culture taught me that boys were thinking, feeling *subjects*. Girls were passive, receiving *objects*.

Ultimately, through conforming to my community's gender norms, I successfully spared myself from my mother's tragedy. And so everyone would say I'm just like my stepmother. I embodied her qualities, her patience, her faith, her values, her decency, her manners. They said had I been raised by my real mother, I would have been poorly raised.

It is important to note that my father, despite the divorce, always maintained respect and love towards my real mother. He encouraged me to soften my unforgiving attitude. He raised me alone as a single-parent father in the period between the divorce and remarriage. He shattered every gender norm of Afghan society by balancing wage-work and care-work; alongside working full-time, he simultaneously cooked, cleaned and cared for me. He expertly navigated the dual burden of breadwinner and homemaker, subverting the essentialised, gender-normative politics of labour and care work. In this way, my father did not conform to the stereotypical Afghan male script. He did not embody the patriarchal and misogynistic parts of our culture, instead challenging them head-on and showing my community everything wrong with it.

As I matured into my teens, I saw the precarious façade of Afghan gender roles crumble right before my very eyes. I no longer gave it the power to author my practices and behaviours. I forgave my mother, or rather the assumptions I believed about her, because in reality, she had not done anything wrong. I reckoned with the years of hostility I internalised towards her, confronting each and every misgiving until I crumbled under the weight of the shame, guilt and remorse. Of believing my community's slander. Of being so judgmental. Of punishing her. Of wasting so many lost years not fully loving her. Of being so irredeemably, destructively naïve and blindly submitting to my culture's toxic gender norms.

We have since patched up the holes. My mother and I have sat and cried and laughed together, revisiting old wounds but this time, holding each other's hand through it all. Learning and relearning womanhood.

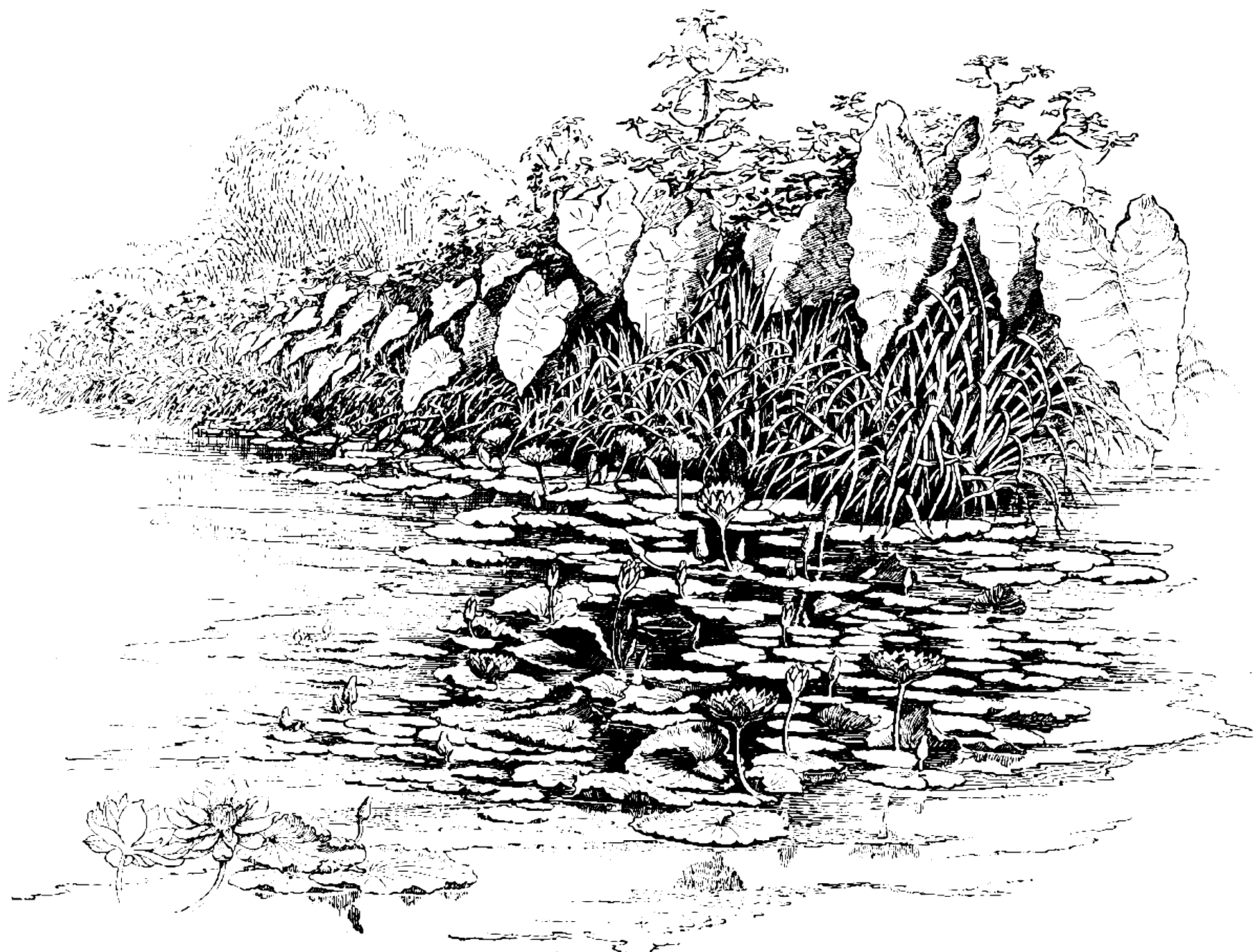
Frankly, it would send an Afghan community elder into cardiac arrest to know that my mother married three times, was divorced and widowed, raised my half-sister alone as a single parent, achieved a PhD against all the odds, and now lives on her own terms, alone, on the other side of the world. It would have bubbled up bitterness in the younger, brainwashed me too, but now it only brings admiration.

I went from wishing to be nothing like my mother to wishing to be even half of who she is.

Conclusion

The gender curse is plausibly the most unforgiving and relentless of Afghan society. Woven, tangled, knotted into its very fabric. A chronic symptom of a terminally sick society. I remember my mother once telling me that before I was born, she hoped I would be a boy, so I wouldn't endure what it is that girls endure. As though a girl's fate is sealed before she even opens her eyes in this world. Which it is, if you're from a country like mine. However, I decided I would commit to breaking this cycle of traumatic generational curses.

Breaking this generational curse has not only healed my relationship with my mother but also my troubled beliefs about what it means to be a Muslim, Afghan woman. My internalised misconceptions about both of my mothers and their intrinsic value translated into a much deeper problem of negotiating my own gender in a hostile, unforgiving culture. I am now unapologetically and wholeheartedly committed to being the change that I want to see for all Muslim and Afghan women, whether living back home or in diaspora, who have suffered for far too long under patriarchal and misogynistic societies. Although I came too late to save my mother, I can try my best to save future generations from sharing her fate.



AFTERWORDS

This collection began as fragments: private reflections, moments of vulnerability, memories that lingered too heavily to remain unspoken. Brought together, they form something greater than the sum of their parts; a tapestry of voices that refuses silence.

The stories shared here are not simply about gender, but about the lived experience of navigating a world that so often prescribes, polices, and punishes. Each journal demonstrates that gender is never just personal: it is spatial, political, and deeply relational. The body becomes a site of negotiation; the street, the school, the home become theatres where power is played out. Yet, within these struggles, there is also creativity, resilience, and resistance.

What unites these writings is not a single narrative, but a collective insistence on being heard. In their honesty, they expose the contradictions of living within systems that demand conformity while punishing difference. In their courage, they point towards possibilities of reimagining gender as something expansive, fluid, and self-defined.

As editors, we hope these journals serve not as a conclusion but as an opening. An opening to dialogue, to solidarity, and to new forms of imagining futures where gender is not a battleground but a landscape of freedom. These contributions remind us that change does not begin in legislation or policy alone; it begins in testimony, in storytelling, and in refusing to carry shame in silence.

To all those who have shared, read, and reflected: may these pages encourage you to claim space, to listen carefully, and to write the next chapters differently.



A NOTE
FROM THE
EDITOR

**THESE PAGES HOLD TESTIMONIES OF STRUGGLE
AND SURVIVAL, OF SHAME AND DEFIANCE. THEY
REMINDE US THAT GENDER IS NOT SIMPLY
PERFORMED BUT CONTESTED, RESHAPED, AND
RECLAIMED. THIS BOOK IS BOTH WITNESS AND
PROMISE: THAT OUR VOICES MATTER, AND OUR
STORIES ENDURE.**



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