

3 | “BROS BEFORE HOS”: THE GUY CODE

Whenever I ask young women what they think it means to be a woman, they look at me puzzled, and say, basically, “Whatever I want.” “It doesn’t mean anything at all to me,” says Nicole, a junior at Colby College in Maine. “I can be Mia Hamm, I can be Britney Spears, I can be Madame Curie or Madonna. Nobody can tell me what it means to be a woman anymore.”

For men, the question is still meaningful—and powerful. In countless workshops on college campuses and in high-school assemblies, I’ve asked young men what it means to be a man. I’ve asked guys from every state in the nation, as well as about fifteen other countries, what sorts of phrases and words come to mind when they hear someone say, “Be a man!”

The responses are rather predictable. The first thing someone usually says is “Don’t cry,” then other similar phrases and ideas—never show your feelings, never ask for directions, never give up, never give in, be strong, be aggressive, show no fear, show no mercy, get rich, get even, get laid, win—follow easily after that.

Here’s what guys say, summarized into a set of current epigrams. Think of it as a “Real Guy’s Top Ten List.”

1. “Boys Don’t Cry”
2. “It’s Better to be Mad than Sad”
3. “Don’t Get Mad—Get Even”
4. “Take It Like a Man”
5. “He Who has the Most Toys When he Dies, Wins”
6. “Just Do It,” or “Ride or Die”
7. “Size Matters”
8. “I Don’t Stop to Ask for Directions”
9. “Nice Guys Finish Last”
10. “It’s All Good”

The unifying emotional subtext of all these aphorisms involves never showing emotions or admitting to weakness. The face you must show to the world insists that everything is going just fine, that everything is under control, that there’s nothing to be concerned about (a contemporary version of Alfred E. Neuman of *MAD* Magazine’s “What, me worry?”). Winning is crucial, especially when the victory is over other men who have less amazing or smaller toys. Kindness is not an option, nor is compassion. Those sentiments are taboo.

This is “The Guy Code,” the collection of attitudes, values, and traits that together composes what it means to be a man. These are the rules that govern behavior in Guyland, the criteria that will be used to evaluate whether any particular guy measures up. The Guy Code revisits what psychologist William Pollack called “the boy code” in his bestselling book *Real Boys*—just a couple of years older and with a lot more at stake. And just as Pollack and others have explored the dynamics of boyhood so well, we now need to extend the reach of that analysis to include late adolescence and young adulthood.

In 1976, social psychologist Robert Brannon summarized the four basic rules of masculinity:

1. “No Sissy Stuff!” Being a man means not being a sissy, not being perceived as weak, effeminate, or gay. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine.
2. “Be a Big Wheel.” This rule refers to the centrality of success

and power in the definition of masculinity. Masculinity is measured more by wealth, power, and status than by any particular body part.

3. "Be a Sturdy Oak." What makes a man is that he is reliable in a crisis. And what makes him so reliable in a crisis is not that he is able to respond fully and appropriately to the situation at hand, but rather that he resembles an inanimate object. A rock, a pillar, a species of tree.
4. "Give 'em Hell." Exude an aura of daring and aggression. Live life out on the edge. Take risks. Go for it. Pay no attention to what others think.

Amazingly, these four rules have changed very little among successive generations of high-school and college-age men. James O'Neil, a developmental psychologist at the University of Connecticut, and Joseph Pleck, a social psychologist at the University of Illinois, have each been conducting studies of this normative definition of masculinity for decades. "One of the most surprising findings," O'Neil told me, "is how little these rules have changed."

Being a Man Among Men

Where do young men get these ideas? "Oh, definitely, my dad," says Mike, a 20-year-old sophomore at Wake Forest. "He was always riding my ass, telling me I had to be tough and strong to make it in this world."

"My older brothers were always on my case," says Drew, a 24-year-old University of Massachusetts grad. "They were like, always ragging on me, calling me a pussy, if I didn't want to play football or wrestle. If I just wanted to hang out and like play my Xbox, they were constantly in my face."

"It was subtle, sometimes," says Warren, a 21-year-old at Towson, "and other times really out front. In school, it was the male teachers, saying stuff about how explorers or scientists were so courageous and braving the elements and all that. Then, other times, it was phys-ed

class, and everyone was all over everyone else talking about 'He's so gay' and 'He's a wuss.'"

"The first thing I think of is my coach," says Don, a 26-year-old former football player at Lehigh. "Any fatigue, any weakness, any sign that being hit actually hurt and he was like 'Waaah! [fake crying] Widdle Donny got a boo boo. Should we kiss it guys?' He'd completely humiliate us for showing anything but complete toughness. I'm sure he thought he was building up our strength and ability to play, but it wore me out trying to pretend all the time, to suck it up and just take it."

The response was consistent: Guys hear the voices of the men in their lives—fathers, coaches, brothers, grandfathers, uncles, priests—to inform their ideas of masculinity.

This is no longer surprising to me. One of the more startling things I found when I researched the history of the idea of masculinity in America for a previous book was that men subscribe to these ideals not because they want to impress women, let alone any inner drive or desire to test themselves against some abstract standards. They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men. American men want to be a "man among men," an Arnold Schwarzenegger-like "man's man," not a Fabio-like "ladies' man." Masculinity is largely a "homosocial" experience: performed for, and judged by, other men.

Noted playwright David Mamet explains why women don't even enter the mix. "Women have, in men's minds, such a low place on the social ladder of this country that it's useless to define yourself in terms of a woman. What men need is men's approval." While women often become a kind of currency by which men negotiate their status with other men, women are for possessing, not for emulating.

The Gender Police

Other guys constantly watch how well we perform. Our peers are a kind of "gender police," always waiting for us to screw up so they can give us a ticket for crossing the well-drawn boundaries of manhood. As young men, we become relentless cowboys, riding the fences, checking the boundary line between masculinity and femininity, making sure that

nothing slips over. The possibilities of being unmasked are everywhere. Even the most seemingly insignificant misstep can pose a threat or activate that haunting terror that we will be found out.

On the day the students in my class "Sociology of Masculinity" were scheduled to discuss homophobia, one student provided an honest and revealing anecdote. Noting that it was a beautiful day, the first day of spring after a particularly brutal Northeast winter, he decided to wear shorts to class. "I had this really nice pair of new Madras shorts," he recounted. "But then I thought to myself, these shorts have lavender and pink in them. Today's class topic is homophobia. Maybe today is not the best day to wear these shorts." Nods all around.

Our efforts to maintain a manly front cover everything we do. What we wear. How we talk. How we walk. What we eat (like the recent flap over "manwiches"—those artery-clogging massive burgers, dripping with extras). Every mannerism, every movement contains a coded gender language. What happens if you refuse or resist? What happens if you step outside the definition of masculinity? Consider the words that would be used to describe you. In workshops it generally takes less than a minute to get a list of about twenty terms that are at the tip of everyone's tongues: wimp, faggot, dork, pussy, loser, wuss, nerd, queer, homo, girl, gay, skirt, Mama's boy, pussy-whipped. This list is so effortlessly generated, so consistent, that it composes a national well from which to draw epithets and put-downs.

Ask any teenager in America what is the most common put-down in middle school or high school? The answer: "That's so gay." It's said about anything and everything—their clothes, their books, the music or TV shows they like, the sports figures they admire. "That's so gay" has become a free-floating put-down, meaning bad, dumb, stupid, wrong. It's the generic bad thing.

Listen to one of America's most observant analysts of masculinity, Eminem. Asked in an MTV interview in 2001 why he constantly used "faggot" in every one of his raps to put down other guys, Eminem told the interviewer, Kurt Loder,

The lowest degrading thing you can say to a man when you're battling him is to call him a faggot and try to take away his manhood. Call him a sissy, call him a punk. "Faggot" to me doesn't necessarily mean gay people. "Faggot" to me just means taking away your manhood.

But does it mean homosexuality? Does it really suggest that you suspect the object of the epithet might actually be attracted to another guy? Think, for example, of how you would answer this question: If you see a man walking down the street, or meet him at a party, how do you "know" if he is homosexual? (Assume that he is not wearing a T-shirt with a big pink triangle on it, and that he's not already holding hands with another man.)

When I ask this question in classes or workshops, respondents invariably provide a standard list of stereotypically effeminate behaviors. He walks a certain way, talks a certain way, acts a certain way. He's well dressed, sensitive, and emotionally expressive. He has certain tastes in art and music—indeed, he has *any* taste in art and music! Men tend to focus on the physical attributes, women on the emotional. Women say they "suspect" a man might be gay if he's interested in what she's talking about, knows something about what she's talking about, or is sensitive and a good listener. One recently said, "I suspect he might be gay if he's looking at my eyes, and not down my blouse." Another said she suspects he might be gay if he shows no sexual interest in her, if he doesn't immediately come on to her.

Once I've established what makes a guy "suspect," I ask the men in the room if any of them would want to be thought of as gay. Rarely does a hand go up—despite the fact that this list of attributes is actually far preferable to the restrictive one that stands in the "Be a Man" box. So, what do straight men do to make sure that no one gets the wrong idea about them?

Everything that is perceived as gay goes into what we might call the Negative Playbook of Guyland. Avoid everything in it and you'll be all right. Just make sure that you walk, talk, and act in a different way from the gay stereotype; dress terribly; show no taste in art or music; show no

emotions at all. Never listen to a thing a woman is saying, but express immediate and unquenchable sexual interest. Presto, you're a real man, back in the "Be a Man" box. Homophobia—the fear that people might *misperceive* you as gay—is the animating fear of American guys' masculinity. It's what lies underneath the crazy risk-taking behaviors practiced by boys of all ages, what drives the fear that other guys will see you as weak, unmanly, frightened. The single cardinal rule of manhood, the one from which all the other characteristics—wealth, power, status, strength, physicality—are derived is to offer constant proof that you are not gay.

Homophobia is even deeper than this. It's the fear of other men—that other men will perceive you as a failure, as a fraud. It's a fear that others will see you as weak, unmanly, frightened. This is how John Steinbeck put it in his novel *Of Mice and Men*:

"Funny thing," [Curley's wife] said. "If I catch any one man, and he's alone, I get along fine with him. But just let two of the guys get together an' you won't talk. Jus' nothin' but mad." She dropped her fingers and put her hands on her hips. "You're all scared of each other, that's what. Ever'one of you's scared the rest is goin' to get something on you."

In that sense, homosexuality becomes a kind of shorthand for "unmanliness"—and the homophobia that defines and animates the daily conversations of Guyland is at least as much about masculinity as it is about sexuality.

But what would happen to a young man if he were to refuse such limiting parameters on who he is and how he's permitted to act? "It's not like I want to stay in that box," says Jeff, a first-year Cornell student at my workshop. "But as soon as you step outside it, even for a second, all the other guys are like, 'What are you, dude, a fag?' It's not very safe out there on your own. I suppose as I get older, I'll get more secure, and feel like I couldn't care less what other guys say. But now, in my fraternity, on this campus, man, I'd lose everything."

The consistency of responses is as arresting as the list is disturbing: "I would lose my friends." "Get beat up." "I'd be ostracized." "Lose my

self-esteem." Some say they'd take drugs or drink. Become withdrawn, sullen, a loner, depressed. "Kill myself," says one guy. "Kill them," responds another. Everyone laughs, nervously. Some say they'd get mad. And some say they'd get even. "I dunno," replied Mike, a sophomore at Portland State University. "I'd probably pull a Columbine. I'd show them that they couldn't get away with calling me that shit."

Guys know that they risk everything—their friendships, their sense of self, maybe even their lives—if they fail to conform. Since the stakes are so enormous, young men take huge chances to prove their manhood, exposing themselves to health risks, workplace hazards, and stress-related illnesses. Here's a revealing factoid. Men ages 19 to 29 are three times less likely to wear seat belts than women the same age. Before they turn nineteen though, young men are actually *more* likely to wear seat belts. It's as if they suddenly get the idea that as long as they're driving the car, they're completely in control, and therefore safe. Ninety percent of all driving offenses, excluding parking violations, are committed by men, and 93 percent of road ragers are male. Safety is emasculating! So they drink too much, drive too fast, and play chicken in a multitude of dangerous venues.

The comments above provide a telling riposte to all those theories of biology that claim that this definition of masculinity is "hard-wired," the result of millennia of evolutionary adaptation or the behavioral response to waves of aggression-producing testosterone, and therefore inevitable. What these theories fail to account for is the way that masculinity is coerced and policed relentlessly by other guys. If it were biological, it would be as natural as breathing or blinking. In truth, the Guy Code fits as comfortably as a straightjacket.

Boys' Psychological Development: Where the Guy Code Begins

Masculinity is a constant test—always up for grabs, always needing to be proved. And the testing starts early. Recently, I was speaking with a young black mother, a social worker, who was concerned about a conversation she had had with her husband a few nights earlier. It seems that her husband had taken their son to the barber, which, she explained

to me, is a central social institution in the African-American community. As the barber prepared the boy's hair for treatment, using, apparently some heat and some painful burning chemicals, the boy began to cry. The barber turned to the boy's father and pronounced, "This boy is a wimp!" He went on, "This boy has been spending too much time with his mama! Man, you need to put your foot down. You have got to get this boy away from his mother!"

That evening the father came home, visibly shaken by the episode, and announced to his wife that from that moment on the boy would not be spending as much time with her, but instead would do more sports and other activities with him, "to make sure he doesn't become a sissy."

After telling me this story, the mother asked what I thought she should do. "Gee," I said, "I understand the pressures that dads feel to 'toughen up' their sons. But how old is your boy, anyway?"

"Three and a half," she said.

I tried to remind her, of course, that crying is the natural human response to pain, and that her son was behaving appropriately. But her story reminded me of how early this pressure starts to affect an emotionally impervious manly stoicism.

Ever since Freud, we've believed that the key to boys' development is separation, that the boy must switch his identification from mother to father in order to "become" a man. He achieves his masculinity by repudiation, dissociation, and then identification. It is a perilous path, but a necessary one, even though there is nothing inevitable about it—and nothing biological either. Throw in an overdominant mother, or an absent father, and we start worrying that the boy will not succeed in his masculine quest.

Boys learn that their connection to mother will emasculate them, turn them into Mama's Boys. And so they learn to act *as if* they have made that leap by pushing away from their mothers. Along the way they suppress all the feelings they associate with the maternal—compassion, nurturance, vulnerability, dependency. This suppression and repudiation is the origin of the Boy Code. It's what turns those happy, energetic, playful, and emotionally expressive 5-year-olds into sullen, withdrawn, and despondent 9-year-olds. In the recent spate of bestselling books

about boys' development, psychologists like William Pollack, James Garbarino, Michael Thompson, Dan Kindlon, and others, argue that from an early age boys are taught to refrain from crying, to suppress their emotions, never to display vulnerability. As a result, boys feel effeminate not only if they *express* their emotions, but even if they *feel* them. In their bestseller, *Raising Cain*, Kindlon and Thompson describe a "culture of cruelty" in which peers force other boys to deny their emotional needs and disguise their feelings. It's no wonder that so many boys end up feeling emotionally isolated.

These books about boys map the inner despair that comes from such emotional numbness and fear of vulnerability. Pollack calls it the "mask of masculinity," the fake front of impervious, unemotional independence, a swaggering posture that boys believe will help them to present a stoic front. "Ruffled in a manly pose," the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats put it in his poem "Coole Park" (1929), "For all his timid heart."

The ruffling starts often by age 4 or 5, when he enters kindergarten, and it gets a second jolt when he hits adolescence. Think of the messages boys get: Stand on your own two feet! Don't cry! Don't be a sissy! As one boy in Pollack's book summarizes it: "Shut up and take it, or you'll be sorry." When I asked my 9-year-old son, Zachary, what he thought of when I said "be a man" he said that one of his friends said something about "taking it like a man. So," he explained, "I think it means acting tougher than you actually are."

Recently a colleague told me about a problem he was having. It seems his 7-year-old son, James, was being bullied by another boy on his way home from school. His wife, the boy's mother, strategized with her son about how to handle such situations in the future. She suggested he find an alternate route home, tell a teacher, or perhaps even tell the boy's parents. And she offered the standard "use your words, not your fists" conflict-reducer. "How can I get my wife to stop treating James like a baby?" my colleague asked. "How will he ever learn to stand up for himself if she turns him into a wimp?"

The Boy Code leaves boys disconnected from a wide range of emotions and prohibited from sharing those feelings with others. As they grow older, they feel disconnected from adults, as well, unable to experience

the guidance towards maturity that adults can bring. When they turn to anger and violence it is because these, they believe, perhaps rightly, are the only acceptable forms of emotional expression allowed them. Just as the Boy Code shuts boys down, the Guy Code reinforces those messages, suppressing what was left of boyhood exuberance and turning it into sullen indifference.

No wonder boys are more prone to depression, suicidal behavior, and various other forms of out-of-control or out-of-touch behaviors than girls are. No wonder boys drop out of school and are diagnosed as emotionally disturbed four times more often as girls, get into fights twice as often, and are six times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

The Pressure to Conform

I often ask my students to imagine two American men—one, 75 years old, black, and gay, who lives in downtown Chicago, and the other, a 19-year-old white heterosexual farm boy living 100 miles south of Chicago. How might their ideas about masculinity differ? And what ideas about masculinity might they have in common, ideas that transcend class, race, age, and sexual or regional differences?

While the Guy Code isn't everywhere exactly the same, and while there are some variations by class or race or age or sexuality, the pressure to conform is so powerful a centripetal force that it minimizes differences, pushing guys into a homogenous, ill-fitting uniform. The sociologist Erving Goffman once described the dominant image of masculinity like this:

In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports . . . Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.

This dynamic is critical. Every single man will, at some point in his life, “fail to qualify.” That is, every single one of us will feel, at least at moments, “unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.” It is from those feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that we often act recklessly—taking foolish risks, engaging in violence—all as an attempt to repair, restore, or reclaim our place in the sacred box of manhood.

It's equally true that guys express the Guy Code differently at different times of their lives. Even at different times of day! Even if he believes that to be a man is to always be in charge, to be aggressive and powerful, he is unlikely to express that around his coaches or teachers, let alone his parents. There are times when even the most manly of men must accept authority, obey orders, and shut up and listen.

This is especially true in Guyland, because this intermediate moment, poised between adolescence and adulthood, enables young men to be somewhat strategic in their expression of masculinity. They can be men when it suits them, when they want to be taken seriously by the world around them, and they can also be boys when it suits them, when they don't want to be held to account as adults for their actions, but simply want to get away with it.

Violence as Restoration

The Guy Code, and the Boy Code before it, demands a lot—that boys and young men shut down emotionally, that they suppress compassion, and inflate ambition. And it extracts compliance with coercion and fear. But it also promises so much as well. Part of what makes the Guy Code so seductive are the rewards guys think will be theirs if they only walk the line. If they embrace the Code, they will finally be in charge and feel powerful. And so, having dutifully subscribed, young men often feel cheated—and pissed off—when the rewards associated with power are not immediately forthcoming.

Violence is how they express all that disappointment. Rage is the way to displace the feelings of humiliation, to restore the entitlement. “The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence,” writes psychiatrist James Gilligan. “The purpose of violence is to diminish

the intensity of shame and replace it as far as possible with its opposite, pride, thus preventing the individual from being overwhelmed by the feeling of shame." "It's better to be mad than sad," writes psychologist James Garbarino.

Virtually every male in America understands something about violence. We know how it works, we know how to use it, and we know that if we are perceived as weak or unmanly, it will be used against us. Each of us cuts his own deal with it.

It's as American as apple pie. Resorting to violence to restore one's honor from perceived humiliations has been around ever since one cave-man chided another on the size of his club, but few modern societies have made violence such a cultural and psychological foundation. Cultural historian Richard Slotkin's history of the American frontier claims that our understanding of violence is regenerative: It enables us to grow. The great anthropologist Margaret Mead once commented that what made American violence stand out was our nearly obsessive need to legitimate the use of violence; ours is an aggression, she wrote, "which can never be shown except when the other fellow starts it" and which is "so unsure of itself that it had to be proved." Americans like to think that we don't start wars, we just finish them.

And what's true on the battlefield is also true on the playground. Watch two boys squaring off sometime. "You wanna start something?" one yells. "No, but if you start it, I'll finish it!" shouts the other. Adolescent male violence is so restorative that it's even been prescribed by generations of dads to enable their boys to stand up for themselves. And they've had plenty of support from experts, like J. Alfred Puffer, author of *The Boy and His Gang*, a child-rearing manual from the early twentieth century which offered this counsel:

There are times when every boy must defend his own rights if he is not to become a coward and lose the road to independence and true manhood . . . The strong willed boy needs no inspiration to combat, but often a good deal of guidance and restraint. If he fights more than, let us say, a half dozen times a week—except, of course, during his first week at a new school—he is probably over-

quarrelsome and needs to curb. The sensitive, retiring boy, on the other hand, needs encouragement to stand his ground and fight.

In this bestseller, boys were encouraged to fight once a day, except during the first week at a new school, when it was presumed they would fight more often!

The contemporary Guy Code also descends from older notions of honor—a man had to be ready to fight to prove himself in the eyes of others. In the early nineteenth century, Southern whites called it "honor"; by the turn of the century it was called "reputation." Later in the century, "having a chip on your shoulder"—walking around mad, ready to rumble—were installed as fighting words in the American South, as a generation of boys were desperate to prove their manhood after the humiliating defeat in the Civil War. By the 1950s, blacks in the northern ghettos spoke of "respect," which has now been transformed again into not showing "disrespect," or "dissing." It's the same code, the same daring. And today that postbellum "chip on your shoulder" has morphed into what one gang member calls the "accidental bump," when you're walking down the street, "with your chest out, bumping into people and hoping they'll give you a bad time so you can pounce on them and beat 'em into the goddamn concrete."

Violence, or the threat of violence, is a main element of the Guy Code: Its use, legitimacy, and effectiveness are all well understood by most adolescent guys. They use violence when necessary to test and prove their manhood, and when others don't measure up, they make them pay.

The Three Cultures of Guyland

Practically every week we can read about a horrible hazing incident on campus, or an alcohol-related driving accident following a high-school prom, or allegations of a date rape at a party the previous weekend. Bullying is ubiquitous in middle schools and high schools across America, and not infrequently a case of bullying is so outrageous it becomes newsworthy. Rape on campus occurs with such alarming frequency that most colleges now incorporate sexual awareness training into their

freshman orientation practices (apparently students not only must learn how to find their way around campus and how to use a library, but they must also learn how not to rape their classmates).

Every single emergency room in every single hospital adjoining or near a college campus stocks extra supplies on Thursday nights—rape kits for the sexual assault victims, IV fluids for those who are dehydrated from alcohol-induced vomiting, blood for drunk driving accidents. On many campuses, at least one party gets “out of hand” each week, and someone is seriously injured: A group of guys stage a “train” or a “ledge party,” or someone gets so sick from drinking that they need to be hospitalized. And that’s just the more “routine” weekend events. Newspaper and magazine stories, alarmist television exposés, and campus crusaders typically focus on the extreme cases—the fatal drunk driving accidents, the murder-by-hazing.

Though it may not be possible to read these headlines without a shudder of horror, most adults among us, particularly those of us with sons and daughters who live in Guyland, are nonetheless often able to convince ourselves that these stories are not about *our* kids. We might even think the media is a bit hysterical. Our sons aren’t rapists. They don’t tie cinderblocks to each other’s penises and then throw those blocks off the roof, for crying out loud. They don’t drink and drive, or get in fistfights, or paint swastikas on each other’s passed-out drunken bodies. They’re good kids. We believe these stories are anomalies, that the perpetrators are deviants, bad apples who otherwise don’t represent the majority of guys. We look to psychology to explain these rare occurrences: bad parenting, most likely, or the cumulative negative effects of media consumption. We treat these as individual cases, not as a social and cultural phenomenon that impacts all guys, including the ones we know and love.

And, as I’ve argued, for the most part that’s true. Most guys *are* good guys, but that doesn’t lessen the reality of the violence that surrounds them, or the ways that they, and we, collaborate by turning a blind eye. If we really want to help guide our sons to manhood, it’s imperative that we, as a society, look at their world with eyes wide open. We must be willing to ask the hard questions. How do such events happen? And

what do such extreme cases tell us about the dynamics of Guyland, the operations of the Guy Code in action?

Guyland rests on three distinct cultural dynamics: a culture of entitlement, a culture of silence, and a culture of protection. Taken together, these cultures do more than make these more extreme cases the actions of a small group of predatory thugs. They suggest the ways in which we, too, are implicated. Why? Because if we really want to help these guys, then we must know the world they live in.

The Culture of Entitlement

Many young men today have a shockingly strong sense of male superiority and a diminished capacity for empathy. They believe that the capacity for empathy and compassion has to be suppressed, early on, in the name of achieving masculinity. That this is true despite the progress of the women’s movement, parents who are psychologically aware and moral, stunning opportunities for men and women, is disappointing at best. But there is no way around it: Most young men who engage in acts of violence—or who watch them and do nothing, or who joke about them with their friends—fully subscribe to traditional ideologies about masculinity. The problem isn’t psychological; these guys aren’t deviants. If anything, they are overconforming to the hyperbolic expressions of masculinity that still inform American culture.

This culture of entitlement is the reward for subscribing to the Guy Code. As boys they may have felt powerless as they struggled heroically to live up to impossible conventions of masculinity. As William Pollack argues, “it’s still a man’s world, but it’s not a boys’ world.” But *someday it would be*. Someday, if I play my cards right, if I follow all the rules, the world will be mine. Having worked so hard and sacrificed so much to become a man—it’ll be my turn. Payback. I’m entitled.

It’s facile to argue about whether or not young men “have” power: Some do, some don’t. Some are powerful in some settings, but not in others. Besides, power isn’t a possession, it’s a relationship. It’s about the ability to do what you want in the world. Few *people* feel that sort of power even as adults: Most of us “have to” work, we are weighed down

by family and workplace obligations. But even when they feel powerless, unlike women, men feel *entitled* to power.

This sense of entitlement is crucial for understanding Guyland—and the lives of young men as they pass into adulthood. Here is another example. Not long ago, I appeared on a television talk show opposite three “angry white males” who felt they had been the victims of workplace discrimination. They were in their late twenties and early thirties—just on the other side of the Guyland divide. The show’s title, no doubt to entice a large potential audience was “A Black Woman Stole My Job.” Each of the men described how he was passed over for jobs or promotions for which all believed themselves qualified. Then it was my turn to respond. I said I had one question about one word in the title of the show. I asked them about the word “my.” Where did they get the idea it was “their” job? Why wasn’t the show called “A Black Woman Got *a* Job,” or “A Black Woman Got *the* Job”? These men felt the job was “theirs” because they felt entitled to it, and when some “other” person—black, female—got the job, that person was really taking what was “rightfully” theirs.

Another example of entitlement appeared in an Anna Quindlen column in the *New York Times*. “It seems like if you’re a white male you don’t have a chance,” commented a young man who attended a college where 5 percent of his classmates were black. By way of explanation, Quindlen commented

What the kid really meant is that he no longer has the edge, that the rules of a system that may have served his father will have changed. It is one of those good-old-days constructs to believe it was a system based purely on merit, but we know that’s not true. It is a system that once favored him, and others like him. Now sometimes—just sometimes—it favors someone different.

Young men feel like Esau, that sad character in the Bible who sold his birthright for a bowl of lentils and never felt whole again. From that moment, everything belonged to Jacob, and we never hear of Esau again. And, like Esau, young men often feel that they’ve been tricked out of it,

in Esau’s case by a pair of hairy arms offered to his blind father, and in the case of guys today, by equally blind fathers who have failed to pass down to them what was “rightfully” supposed to be theirs.

The Culture of Silence

If thwarted entitlement is the underlying cause of so much of the violence in Guyland, and if violence is so intimately woven into the fabric of the Guy Code as to be one of its core elements, how come no one says anything about it?

Because they’re afraid. They’re afraid of being outcast, marginalized, shunned. Or they’re afraid that the violence just might be turned against them if they voice their opposition too vehemently. So they learn to keep their mouths shut, even when what they’re seeing goes against everything they know to be good. The Guy Code imposes a “code of silence on boys, requiring them to suffer without speaking of it and to be silent witnesses to acts of cruelty to others,” write Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson. Boys and men learn to be silent in the face of other men’s violence. Silence is one of the ways boys *become* men.

They learn not to say anything when guys make sexist comments to girls. They learn not to say anything when guys taunt or tease another guy, or start fights, or bully or torment a classmate or a friend. They scurry silently if they’re walking down the street and some guys at a construction site—or, for that matter, in business suits—start harassing a woman. They learn not to tell anyone about the homoerotic sadism that is practiced on new kids when they join a high-school or college athletic team, or the school band, or a fraternity. Or when they hear that a bunch of guys gang raped a classmate. They tell no parents, no teachers, no administrators. They don’t tell the police. And they certainly don’t confront the perpetrators.

A friend recently wrote to me about his experience leading a workshop for high-school kids in the frozen Yukon Territories of Canada. From the stories of their teachers, it was clear that the school had a tough and aggressive boy culture. He was surprised, then, when the boys opened up, and spoke with candor and honesty. During a break,

though, he heard them talking about the fighting that went on each week at their school. A circle would form around a fight as it began. And the boys would cheer with glee.

He was taken aback. Suddenly these same boys, who minutes earlier had been earnest and caring, were now gleefully recounting blow-by-blow descriptions of the fights. Apparently without effort, they had shifted into masculine performance mode, each trying to outdo the other with shows of verbal bravado.

He interrupted them. "Wait a minute," he said. "I've spent the past day and a half with you guys, hearing you talk about your lives. I know you don't like that fighting. I know you don't like having to prove you're a real man. So how come you're going on about how great these fights are? Why do you stand in that circle and cheer the others on?"

The group went deadly silent. No one met his eyes. No one smirked or glanced that conspiratorial look that young people often share when an adult is challenging them. Finally, one boy looked up.

"So why do you cheer the fights?" my friend asked.

"Because if you don't, they'll turn on you. Because if you don't, you'll be the next one inside the ring."

If they're quiet, they believe, if they hide in the mass, if they disappear, maybe the bullies will ignore them, pick on someone else.

The silence is not limited to boys. Girls, too, know about the Guy Code, know how weaker guys are targeted, bullied, battered, and they keep quiet also. "We know that it's wrong," Ellen, a sophomore at the University of Illinois told me. "But we know that if we go along with it, the cool guys will like us. No big deal. It isn't like they're hitting *us*, is it?"

That silence, though, is what gives the perpetrators and the victims the idea that everyone supports the Guy Code. It's what gives everyone a mark of shame. And it's what keeps it going—even when so many guys are aching to change it, or eliminate it altogether. The first rule of the Guy Code is that you can express no doubts, no fears, no vulnerabilities. No questions even. As they might say in Las Vegas: What happens in Guyland stays in Guyland.

The Culture of Protection

By upholding the culture of silence, guys implicitly support the criminals in their midst who take that silence as tacit approval. And not only does that silence support them, it also protects them. It ensures that there will be no whistleblowers and, as we'll see, that there will be no witnesses when, and if, the victims themselves come forward. Nobody knows anything, nobody saw anything, nobody remembers anything.

Yet it's one thing for the guys themselves to protect one another—as we've seen, there's a tremendous amount at stake for them, and the pressure is high to conform—it's another thing entirely when the community that surrounds these guys also protects them. When the parents, teachers, girlfriends, school administrators, and city officials make the decision to look the other way, to dismiss these acts of violence as "poor judgment" or "things getting a little out of hand." I call this protective bubble of community support that surrounds Guyland the *culture of protection*. Communities rally around "their" guys, protecting the criminals and demeaning their victims. This shields the participants from taking full responsibility for their actions and often provides a cushion of support between those who feel entitled and the rest of the world.

It's natural for parents to want to protect their children. Parents work hard to keep their children safe—we immunize them, try to get them into the best schools, and intercede on their behalf if they are victimized or bullied. But sometimes this natural instinct to protect children may also infantilize them, may keep them from accepting responsibility for their actions, or confronting the negative consequences of their mistakes. And sometimes, parents' efforts to protect and defend their young adults may actually enable them to transgress again, or even to escalate the severity of their actions to the point where they are trying to get away with something truly criminal.

Not only do parents' responses characterize this culture of protection, but the entire community's response may shield them as well. From teachers, coaches, and school administrators who look the other way, as long as it didn't happen on school property, to the community determined to maintain the illusion that theirs is an ideal community

in which to live and raise children, it's often neighbors and friends who exacerbate the problem by siding with the perpetrators against the victims.

The culture of silence and the culture of protection sustain many of guys' other excessive behaviors—from Justin Volpe and his police friends who sodomized Abner Louima, to the military brass who looked the other way when cadets at the Air Force Academy were routinely sexually assaulting female cadets, to the codes of silence on campus following any number of hazing deaths. And those who do stand up and challenge the culture of male entitlement—the whistleblowers—are often so vilified, ostracized from their communities, and threatened with retaliation that they might as well join the Witness Protection Program. Parents who stick up for their victimized kids can find themselves shunned by their neighbors and former friends; administrators who try and discipline perpetrators often face a wall of opposition and lawsuits—especially if the perpetrators happen to be athletes on winning teams.

“Our Guys”

A startling—and extreme—example of how these three cultures play out in Guyland is the infamous sexual assault in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, in 1989. It is well documented in the bestselling book *Our Guys* by Bernard Lefkowitz and also in a made-for-TV movie. I use this example, and others like it, not because the crime itself is typical—thankfully it is not—but because the cultural dynamics that enable the most extreme and egregious offenses in Guyland are equally present even in the more everyday aspects of guys' lives. We need to take a close look at the kind of culture that allows this to happen even once. Sociologists often point to extreme examples of phenomena, as if to say: If we can see such processes at work even here, then surely we can see them at work in more quotidian events. And, indeed, the response—by the criminals, their peers, and the larger community—was typical of the social dynamics that sustain and support Guyland as a whole. (This summary is based on my friend and colleague Mike Messner's adroit reading.)

In the spring of 1989, thirteen high-status athletes at Glen Ridge

High School lured a 17-year-old “slightly retarded” girl into one of the guys' basement. Chairs had been arranged, theater style, around a sofa in the middle of the room. Most of the boys arranged themselves on the chairs, while a few led the girl to the sofa and got her to perform oral sex on one of the highest-status boys.

As the event began to unfold, one sophomore noticed “puzzlement and confusion” in the girl's eyes, and turned to his friend and said, “Let's get out of here.” Another senior baseball player, age 17, said he started to “feel queasy” and thought to himself, “I don't belong here.” He and another baseball player got up to leave. On the way out, he said to another guy, “It's wrong. C'mon with me.” But the other guy stayed. In all, six of the young men left the scene, while seven others—six seniors and one junior—remained in the basement. All of them were 17 or 18 years old.

As the girl was forced to continue giving oral sex to the boy, the other boys laughed, yelled encouragement to their friends, and derisively shouted, “You whore!” One guy got a baseball bat, which he forced into her vagina. As he did this (and followed with a broom handle), the girl heard one boy say, “Stop. You're hurting her.” But another voice chimed in, “Do it more.”

Later, the girl remembered that the boys were all laughing, while she was crying. When they finished, they warned her not to tell anyone and she left the house. The event concluded with an athletic ritual of togetherness as the boys stood in a circle, clasping “one hand on top of the other,” Lefkowitz writes, “all their hands together, like a basketball team on the sidelines at the end of a time-out.”

In the eyes of their friends, their parents, and their community, these guys were not pathological deviants. They were all high-status athletes, well respected in their schools and in their communities. They were not crazed psychotics, they were regular guys. Our guys.

So, too, were the football players at Wellington C. Mepham High School, a well-funded, well-heeled high school in a relatively affluent Long Island neighborhood, who participated in another extreme example. When students returned from vacation in the fall of 2004, they were confronted by rumors of a terrifying hazing incident that had taken

place during the summer. While away at a training camp in Pennsylvania in August, three varsity members of Mepham's football team sexually abused three young teammates in a hazing ritual. According to the police report, the boys were sodomized with pine cones, broom handles, and golf balls, all of which had been coated with Mineral Ice, a Ben-Gay-like cream that produces intense menthol-induced coolness, and is typically used to treat sore muscles. When applied to moist or broken skin, or used internally, it causes severe pain. Thirteen other players watched, but did nothing.

Once again, the perpetrators were respected members of the community—good boys, Boy Scouts, pillars of the tight-knit community. Just regular guys.

When I've described the sexual assaults in Glen Ridge to young men around the country, they instantly and steadfastly agree: those guys who actually did it are thugs, and their behavior is indefensible. "C'mon, man," said one, "they should be charged with criminal assault and go to jail. QED." And they show equal contempt for the guys who stayed, watched, and did nothing. "What is up with that?" another said. "It's just wrong."

When we consider the guys who left, many of the guys I've spoken with assure me that they too would have left at the first sign of the assault. Self-congratulation comes easily and quickly. "No way am I staying there," one guy said. "At the first sign of trouble, I'm gone," said another. Other guys readily agree. All seem to identify with the guys who left, who refused to participate. And they're all feeling pretty good about it until a female student invariably asks, "Yeah, but did they call the police? Did they tell anybody?"

No. No one called the police. No one told a teacher or an administrator. No one told their parents. No one told *anybody*.

And the next day, *everyone* at Glen Ridge High School knew what had happened. Everyone knew, that is, that a bunch of guys had "had sex with" that particular girl and other guys had watched. And she let them! And that next day not one student told their parents, their teachers, their administrators. Not one student—male or female—called the police to report the assault.

In fact, it wasn't until two weeks later that the girl herself finally told her parents what had happened to her, and why she was crying all the time, unable to sleep and eat, and why she was so bruised and sore "down there."

In the Mepham case, the assault was perpetrated by three guys while thirteen other players watched. They did not intervene to stop this cruel and horrific assault on their teammates. They did not tell the coaches, their parents, school administrators, or the police. They did nothing. "Of course, we heard about it instantly," one Mepham graduate told me. "Everybody did. Man, it was like the only thing everyone was talking about the next day. 'Hey, did you hear what went down at the football camp?'"

It's those *other* guys who illustrate the second cultural dynamic of Guyland—the *culture of silence*. And not only did none of the bystanders in Glen Ridge or Mepham intervene, but none told a parent or a teacher, or reported the assault to the police. As the case played out in Glen Ridge for six whole years the guys consistently refused to "turn" on their friends and provide incriminating evidence.

The motto of Guyland is "Bros Before Hos." One remains steadfastly loyal to your guy friends, your bros, and one never even considers siding with women, the hos, against a brother. It is the guys to whom your primary allegiance must always be offered, and for many that may even extend to abetting a crime. Anything less is a betrayal of Guyland.

No one is immune to the culture of silence. Every single kid is culpable. If you still don't think this has anything to do with you, ask yourself what you would have done. If you think this has nothing to do with your son, ask him what he would do if he heard about such a thing. Then ask him when was the last time he actually *did* hear about such a thing.

The culture of silence is the culture of complicity. The bystanders may think that they withdraw their support—by turning away, leaving the scene, or just standing stoically by—but their silence reinforces the behaviors anyway. It's as strong an unwritten code as the police department's famed "blue wall of silence," or the Mafia's infamous rule of "omerta," or the secret rituals of the Masons. Breaking the silence is treason, worse, perhaps, than the activities themselves.

The relationship between perpetrators and bystanders is crucial in Guyland. Peer loyalty shields the perpetrators, and helps us explain the question of numbers. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of guys do not sexually assault their teammates, gang rape college women at fraternity parties, or indulge in acts of unspeakable cruelty, they also do nothing to stop it.

Most bystanders are relatively decent guys. But they are anything but “innocent.” The bystander comforts himself with the illusion “this isn’t about me. I’ve never bullied anyone.” This is similar to the reaction of white people when confronted with discussions of racism or sexism on campus. “It’s not about me! My family didn’t own slaves.” Or “I never raped anyone. These discussions about sexual violence are not about me.”

It is about them. The perpetrators could not do what they do without the amoral avoidance and silence of the bystanders. In a way, the violence is done *for* them—and so it is most definitely *about* them.

When the story about the Mepham football hazing broke, and the national media descended on sleepy Bellmore, Long Island, the community reacted as one—it defended the players and the coaches who denied any responsibility. Parents of the boys who had been abused were threatened with death if they pressed charges. “It’s simple,” read one letter to a victim’s parents. “Keep your mouth shut and nothing will happen to your family.” Campus rallies were held for the team, both the coaches and the players.

When the school administration took the drastic (and courageous) step of canceling the entire football season, Mepham students felt that *they* had been victimized by an overzealous superintendent. “I don’t see why we should all be penalized for the actions of a few football players,” commented one girl.

Not everyone participates in this culture of protection, of course. Recall the case of Spur Posse a few years ago. The Southern California clique of young men kept tallies of the girls they had had sex with (many of the girls, some as young as 11, had been coerced). When the boys were exposed as sexual predators and rapists, their fathers seemed almost proud. “That’s my boy!” said one. “If these girls are going to give it away, my boy is going to take it,” said another. The mothers, however,

were surprised, even shocked. They wanted to talk to their sons, find out how such a thing was possible. So the culture of protection is not uniform; there are gender gaps—and these gaps between mothers and fathers will form a crucial part of our discussion of what we, as a society, can do to make Guyland a more hospitable place.

The Guy Code keeps young men from venturing beyond the borders of Guyland. The good guys are silenced and the predators and bullies are encouraged. What we need, of course, is exactly the reverse—to empower the silent guys to disable the predators, to facilitate young men’s entry into an adulthood propelled by both energy and ethics, and animated by both courage and compassion.

Now that we have a sense of the philosophical principles that underlie Guyland, we need to see the way the Guy Code operates in the lives of young men in America today. The next few chapters will explore the spaces they call home much as an anthropologist might explore a different culture—examining its terrain, its economy, its rites and rituals, its belief systems and cultural practices, and the behaviors and attitudes that support and sustain it.