

Extracts from:

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**REAL BOYS'
VOICES**

WITH TODD SHUSTER

2000



PENGUIN BOOKS



I'M READY TO MOVE ON

Taylor, 17

I'm seventeen now, I'm growing up, and I'm ready to move on.

It would take like an act of God for me to be close emotionally with my parents, but I actually don't mind much. There's something inside me that doesn't want to get close to them or open up to them. When I'm with them, I get embarrassed about who I am. I don't mind talking about school and work and stuff like that, but I avoid anything that requires personal knowledge. I don't like talking about problems I'm having, or relationships, or sex, anything like that. The only thing I ever opened up to my parents about was a breakup with a girlfriend, and that ended up being an interesting conversation, and both of them took turns telling me stories. They're pretty good parents, they're "nice to have around," but right now it's just tough to be close to them. I'd like to get out and move out, but I think we'll be closer one day. I'm not sure we'll ever get deep-down, emotionally close, because right now, it's emotionally dead between us.

When I was younger we were a lot closer. My mom's a teacher, so in elementary school she was always around. Then I got thrust into middle school, and that's when it hit. I felt abandoned, I guess. Parents seem to abandon boys at that age because we're supposed to be independent and manly and things like that. It really hurts when that change happens, but I think people are unaware of it because boys are so busy trying not to show it. We try to be big and tough and stand tall. But it hurts.

Before the fifth grade, I used to cry when I had to go to my uncle's house for the summer. I used to cry because I didn't want to be away from my mom and my dad. But now I pine to get away, I cherish the time away. There isn't any attachment anymore. I needed them then but I don't anymore. They're like a fixture in the house. They're there, but you don't feel it. It's kind of empty. And it's been empty since middle school.

Part of that might have to do with me, but part of it has to do with the way society says: Be a guy, go have sex, do it all on your own. I'm ready to move on.

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I TRY AND I TRY

Conrad, 16

I live at home with my mother, my father, my fifteen-year-old brother, Byron, and my ten-year-old sister, Elyse. We also have a dog and a fish. We're a very religious family and traditional. We go by the Bible, which is mostly patriarchal. The partnership between my parents is pretty equal, but if there had to be a very last word it would come from my father.

I can't really talk to my father because we're too much alike. The only difference between us is that I'm more open to new ideas, and he's basically very tunnel-minded. Sometimes I think I'm more intelligent

than him because of this. There are things I can comprehend and understand that he won't even consider or pay attention to. His way, straight ahead, is the only way; there are no turns in his sight.

The last four years of my life have been so depressing and stressful that a lot of times I'll just cry that I try and I try and I try, and nothing's happening. I try to do what my father says, I'm trying to do what people say to improve my grades, but it just doesn't work. My father just doesn't understand what's going on.

I'm in the ninth grade, and my school is like hell on earth. It stresses out the students too much, by overworking them without giving them a chance to adapt to what is basically a college environment. I was forced to mature. In middle school I didn't have to worry about a thing: I had friends, my grades were good, I could care less who looked at me. Then I got to my high school, and I had to quickly mature. The students walk around looking like college graduates, and the work that the teachers throw on is just incredible. So it was a big jump and I didn't do very well. I was forced to mature socially and I've learned a lot about life, but my grades weren't showing it. It got to be a pattern where I would go home with a couple of D's on my report card and I would know right away that I couldn't expect any support or encouragement from my father. He would tell me that I was gonna fail, and then I wouldn't be motivated to do better, so of course my grades didn't ever improve.

I know he still loves me. When things are going good, I do get support from him, but when things are not going so good . . . If he can understand right away, he can help me find a solution to the problem, but if he doesn't understand and he has no idea of what is going on, there's no point in even talking to him. He just gets blocks, and that makes me feel alone. He wouldn't listen if I were to try to talk to him about it. If I said, "Dad, I feel that you don't listen to me," or "I feel sad about what goes on," he would find some way to turn it around and make it my fault. He would tell me that maybe if my grades were good, I wouldn't be going through these problems.

What I do to get by is I try to block it out, him and all that criticism. Luckily I have a head on my shoulders so I can pretty much make good decisions; if I didn't, I don't know where I would be. If I know I'm wrong—which is kind of hard to tell sometimes because I'm still young—I do try to listen. But a lot of times I'll block off the wrong criticism; you block out so much of the bad stuff that you block out some of the good stuff, too.

I'm pretty much my own man, and I've had to learn for myself how to deal with stress and people and emotions. I ask myself, Am I happy now? How should I deal with this when I get home? I just try to aim for my goals and move forward the best way I can.

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ALONE

Kirk, 18

I'm not very happy. I was recently accepted into college, and now I have just started to slack off. It's been hell for four years, but I'm almost through. At least school is better than it was last year, when I was sure I wasn't going to get into college. I'm pushing myself for two more months, and then it's done.

My friends and I do a lot of drugs. We get high on everything. We drink a lot and smoke weed. Drugs that I've seen at my school are Ecstasy, cocaine, mushrooms, alcohol, and pot. I've done Ecstasy, but I don't do it now. I smoke pot and drink.

I'm addicted to pot and I have my share of problems with it. Sometimes I think it burns me out. I always want to smoke and when I try to quit, I can't. I start to wonder what my life would be like without it.

We all experiment. We limit it to coke and Ecstasy. Everyone knows that people start with pot, then you drink, which leads to other drugs. Ecstasy is the drug of our generation. The grossest thing about it is that the next day I feel retarded. My body feels like a piece of shit. When I'm on Ecstasy, I don't talk and I'm not myself. That's what I noticed the last time I was on it. I have one friend that we call the "Gnome," because when she does drugs, she puts on her hood and hides under the blankets. She just watches things without expression. Then one time, I was called the "Guy Gnome" because I was doing the same thing. That was the last time I did Ecstasy, and I noticed that I hated it.

I don't like really hard drugs. All I do now is drink, smoke weed, and take mushrooms—pretty normal. Every year I drop acid or something.

I don't really know who I am when I'm alone at night. It's a confusing time for me right now. The real me is sensitive and confused, and trying to get through this harsh time. I think I am going to be seen as the kid who has everything except brains. He has accomplished everything and is leading a good life. At the same time, he's not happy with things. He's depressed sometimes. There is definitely always something going on inside. I'm confused, I'm not happy.

I think it's hard growing up in the year 2000. It's definitely hard for a guy. Going through high school is tough. I have pressures in sports, school, life all rolled into one. My parents pressure me to do well in school, do well in sports, and I pressure myself to do well in life. My sister got like a 4.0 GPA and 1450 on her SATs. She didn't party at all in high school. We are exact opposites. It's so hard to live up to her that I never really tried.

I was always a huge athlete but not great in school—learning disabilities. I'm documented. Slow processing, poor concentration, but I don't have dyslexia or anything. I definitely do have some minor disability. It's hard sometimes, especially here in school. I've got something the other kids don't, and they have something I don't have. I blame it on an accident I had. I almost drowned as a child, as a baby. I was at the bottom of our pool for two minutes before my mom found me and gave me CPR. The doctors said nothing happened, but I personally disagree. I think I was damaged.

Everyone tells me I'm smart, but I don't believe them. I used to get down on myself a lot. As much as my parents would say to me "Don't ever let anyone say you're stupid," it only made me start to think that I was stupid. I told them that if they were trying to help, it wasn't working. I remember being teased back then, too, and getting upset about being made fun of. I was always a really good athlete and good with the girls. But kids knew where and how to attack me. They all knew that I wasn't the smartest kid in class.

I worry about life a lot. I feel like everything is going to work out for everybody except me, that I'll be left behind in the dust.

But I think everything will come together. I'll be on my own, learning to live.

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I HAD TO BE SKINNIER

Dylan, 17

If I get in shape, if I develop a more attractive body, I'd be more popular. It's like the way life is around here, what society shows you. It's a problem to be naturally skinny like me. You're not as athletic or muscular or attractive; you're not as good as the other kids are.

Everything in movies, TV, and especially the girl magazines tell you what your body should be like. Magazines like *YM* and stuff are biased and unrealistic, and they make girls expect guys to be a certain way. Girls definitely influence the way guys try to look, and they want us to be buff, wear certain clothes, and have a certain haircut. It's the girl magazines that make them want us to be a certain way: we are supposed to work out, get a good job, get a certain car, and have the right look.

A lot of guys worry about their bodies and working out. I think I did the opposite of what everybody else does, though. Instead of working out, I tried to get smaller. Because there's so much pressure on guys to be muscular and strong, I tended to go exactly the other way, to avoid that competition. Last summer I decided I had to be skinnier in order to be attractive. I worked out like crazy and didn't eat. I did some weights and a lot of running and push-ups. I ate only one small meal each day. I would not eat breakfast and there was no snacking after dinner. I would look at the music scene and celebrities and friends, and I didn't want to get pudgy. I wanted to be attractive. Eventually I got down to about 112 pounds.

I still skip breakfast and lunch each day, and I go through phases where I won't eat at all for a day or so. I don't talk to anyone about it, not even my parents. I'm fine, I don't need help with this kind of thing. It's just a thing, and I've dealt with it. I'm pretty much over it, I think. I've conquered that beast, so to speak, or at least chained it up.

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HANGING OUT WITH GIRLS

Max, 17

If a guy wants to get involved with a hot girl in class who is academically average, he might act like the disinterested anti-intellectual to im-

press her. Guys take on a new persona to impress girls. It's the same at any school. Even at a boys-only boarding school, there is a pressure to impress other guys by not acting smart. But I think it happens more in a coed environment. It's hard to tell if girls do the same thing. I don't know where it comes from. I think with guys it's sexual attraction, or maybe it's peer pressure.

I was talking to some guys about hanging out with girls as friends because it's a new thing for me. At boarding school we used to have the girls bussed in. It's humorous, but sometimes the comments can be pretty harsh, like "The meat is rolling in." In a setting like that, your only approach is to try to get some kind of relationship going quickly. In public school there's a lot more friendly interaction between girls and guys. It's hard to explain to my friends at boarding school what that's like. They don't understand or they don't believe it, and it's hard to explain to them. There's a part of me that likes meeting girls that way. And some girls I think are interesting, but I wouldn't want more than just a friendship with them.

It's different having friends who are girls. You can sit down and chat with them. You can't sit down and chat with a guy. There is some tension when I'm chatting with girls, but after a while it goes away. With guys you always need to make wisecrack comments, and lambast this or that. I know it's a stereotype, but girls are more sensitive. They have more feelings, whereas guys will joke with each other nonstop. With girls it seems more emotional. You're dealing with somebody who's softer and more emotional, more chitchatty.

Sometimes I can't figure out girls. They'll have things on their mind and expect you to know what it is, but guys don't pick up on those things and become confused. When you can't read their mood, I think they have a problem with that. Some girls seem to understand and they seem to put up with it, but they'll complain later or confront you. Other girls cut you off and move on, go somewhere else. If I could give advice to guys, I would tell them to communicate better to girls, that sometimes we just don't get it, and it's not because we're being mean or negative. Girls are always fishing around for it, but it would be nice if they helped us out a bit. I guess girls feel like guys don't care, or that we don't understand them. The fundamental shortcoming in relationships must be interaction.

Guys have always been behind girls in emotional development. In grade school, girls would approach boys with less fear. Boys seem to have more fear of being rejected by girls, but as you develop, guys are supposed to take charge of situations. It's an interesting conflict.

**I JUST CAN'T STAND REALLY HURTING
SOMEONE BAD**

Paul, 18

My father was abusive. When he was angry he'd just start ranting and raving, cussing like a storm and going out of control. Sometimes he'd resort to physical violence on me or my sister or my mom. He'd use a belt on me or my sister. He used to hit my mom, and with her it wasn't planned but something he would suddenly do when he got frustrated. He would grab her and she would get scared. I was never that worried about her—I always had confidence my mom could take care of herself. She could say, "I don't need this anymore," and stop whatever he was doing. I was so happy when she got the divorce—happy for her to be out of the relationship.

Sometimes my father would get angry and frustrated about work. Other times it was because no one at the house would be quiet. My sister and I played around a lot and we were often really noisy. We ran around the house having fun. It would make him really angry.

At first when my dad hit me, I'd get really scared. But when I turned twelve and then became a teenager, I was big enough to get away from him or even retaliate. And a couple of times I did retaliate. I hurt him back: I'd hit him in the chest. He acted like it hurt him badly. Maybe it was because of his stomach cancer. So, when I retaliated after that, I'd try not to hit him in the stomach because it hurt him too much. I just can't stand really hurting someone bad.

My father started abusing my family before I was born. The problem goes back to his father: he was the same way and abused him. I didn't know my grandfather (he died when I was four). I'm trying to break the chain. I don't want to be like my father to my son.

Because he is my father, I have had to accept my dad for the way he is. I don't want to lose him. I don't approve of the things that he does, or did. But, no matter what, I have never wanted him dead.

When he started getting older, I believe my father started to recognize that he was doing something wrong and I think he started trying to fix himself. He's changed a lot since the divorce. I went for a weekend and he seemed like a different person. It was the first time I'd seen him for two years. But I haven't spent enough time with him to see how he might cope today with anger or with frustrating situations.

When I was young I used to let my anger out in front of everyone at



home, just like my father did. Back then, I didn't realize how bad the things he did were, so I imitated him. But I don't want to be like him anymore. These days, when I get angry, I usually try to walk it off and concentrate on something else for the time being, to take my mind off what's bothering me. I do sometimes get violent but I don't show it in front of people. I'll just hold it in and then let it out somewhere where there's no one about. I don't like people seeing me like that. It's not something I want to project about myself. I went off recently to the locker room, when no one was there, and just hit a locker.

Usually I try to talk out my anger. I spend a lot of time at church with the pastor or with my friends, talking about my father. I also try to have a good relationship with God. When I think of God, I imagine him as my father. I've always depended on love from my Heavenly Father, especially in the times when I wasn't getting much love from my biological father.

It's hard to deal with an abusive parent. I think the best thing to do is to let it happen, but if you can, try to avoid it. If you see it coming, just walk out of the room or walk out of the house or go somewhere, go to a friend's house, go for a walk, take your dog for a run, whatever. Just try to get away from that situation before it actually explodes. I used to just try to walk out of the house and find some peace.

When I have a son, I hope he's just like me. I want a kid that I can go around with, play and have fun with, and teach everything that I've learned throughout my life. I want my son to be able to show his feelings and his sadness. I want to have that sort of special connection with somebody else besides my wife and my mother and my sister and my father, one so strong that the other person would be someone special to me for the rest of my life.

My dream is to become content with what I'm doing with my life. I want to work in medicine and I'm thinking of becoming an anesthesiologist. I love the thought of being able to lessen or even eliminate other people's pain. It's just like helping them through problems with their family in their lives.