

# Life

It would be fair to describe Our Boy as a nervous boy. It would be rather unfair, however, to call him a mommy's boy, especially if you were to shout it at him abusively like his classmates used to do. It would, again, be fair to assume that Our Boy took it personally, maybe even extremely personally, that is to say maybe more so than he ought to have done.

It is true that the boys' assaults were very much personal in the way that they were directed at Our Boy. But it is equally true that if, by some miraculously simple incident of possibility Our Boy lived in another similar town on the other side of the country, meaning that Our Boy just wasn't here, well, some other unfortunate boy would fill Our Boy's shoes. As the simple economic model of supply and demand would teach us, the reason we find so many shouting "mommy's boy" isn't because there are so many mommy's boys, but

because there is so much demand for them.

But that is a group thing, you see. To have a common ground for dislike. A symbol of solidarity. Like disliking Hitler, Thatcher or Simon Cowell. All beings of great repute. Not necessarily good repute. But definitely great. And it's not so personal at all, since you can modify the villain according to popular demand. Don't believe me? Just try it.

So. You a good person, then? Not a Nazi, I hope. They do some nasty stuff, you know. Well. Are you? A Nazi? No? Good. Then you're one of us. The good guys. Now try reading that bit again, only instead of Nazi, put in lawyer. Like this.

So. You a good person, then? Not a lawyer, I hope. They do some nasty stuff, you know. Well. Are you? A lawyer? No? Good. Then you're one of us. The good guys.

What's that? Do you happen to know a nice lawyer? Oh, sorry about that. Just take another definition and exchange. Take your pick. Banker. Murderer. The French.

Whatever suits your whim.

So you see, as far as group cohesion goes, it didn't matter one bit whether the symbol of solidarity was Our Boy or one of the other boys, or even the principal. Every good story has a villain and the same goes for a good group. If you take away the villain there is chaos. No means to define the parameters of the group as being "not that". And people seem to dislike that kind of chaos. But I'm afraid Our Boy didn't really see it this way.

And he didn't live on the other side of the country either. You know, some place with likeminded folks where he would have been accepted for what he was. Where he would have been happy. No. Our Boy lived in Dover, which happens to be a very lovely place, yet every day he had to tolerate the snickering and teasing and other general abuse that comes with the position of being a mommy's boy. That is why Our Boy spent a lot of his time feeling hopeless and nervous.

It should probably be noted here, just so there is no misunderstanding, that bullying is of course by

no standard acceptable behaviour. Also, the act of shouting “mommy’s boy” after someone and the act of stealing their shoes so that they have to walk home in their socks are clearly different degrees of bullyism. If I were to say, for example, that Bullyboy had stopped Our Boy outside school one day on their way home and held him down by sitting on his chest so that Our Boy could hardly breathe it would definitely colour your opinion of Bullyboy. Just picture it, there Our Boy struggles, sweat forming on his face. Frantic fear in his eyes. A sudden spasm of energy as he tries to push Bullyboy off. Bullyboy’s minions scurry by, some trying not to notice in fear of having to participate, others snicker or cheer him on, even the teacher tiptoes by, terrified as he is of Bullyboy’s father and maybe even secretly or subconsciously delighted by the sight of Our Boy punished feeling that it serves the boy right for not listening in class. Well, not Our Boy per say, it is very likely that any boy would do in the teacher’s case, according to the stereotype. Or maybe the teacher merely feels it isn’t his business what happens outside the classroom. And imagine the

hopelessness spreading throughout Our Boy's body upon seeing one possible aid after another show up only to ignore his dire necessity and walk by coldheartedly, a paralysing feeling numbing every muscle. This sort of experience would follow any boy well into adulthood. Surfacing almost every time he was in a tight spot, like say in a crowded elevator or in the middle of a deep swimming pool or relaxing in bed on a Sunday morning with his infant child climbing over him and innocently poking his eyes out.

So yes. As I said, this sort of incident would definitely colour your opinion of Bullyboy. He didn't do that though. Or, I mean, maybe he did and maybe he didn't. It's not an important part of our story. What is important is that Our Boy told his mother all about how abusive he felt Bullyboy acted towards him. Feeling being the concept to note here. She in turn organised a playdate for Our Boy with Bullyboy, convinced as she was that it would lead to everlasting friendship thus solving everything. Like pressing a magic button. A quick fix. Because, let's face it, we all crave that.

That's why industries like the Lottery and Anti-Depressant Manufacturers thrive, in spite of all logic.

And on such a playdate Bullyboy would as a matter of course not alter his behaviour, except for the brief moments when Mrs. Paige, Our Boy's mother, was present. The boys would naturally end up alone in Our Boy's room where Bullyboy would inevitably shake Our Boy's boat in a bottle, his prized possession, a little too roughly. Funnily enough, that was what Mrs. Paige often had to gently ask Our Boy to stop doing, but it was different to watch someone else do the shaking. To Our Boy it felt more severe when Bullyboy did it, although to be fair, an impartial outsider might not observe much of a difference between Our Boy's shaking and Bullyboy's shaking. If anything, it was a perception issue like the Doppler effect, sounding more loud when it's coming at you than when it's going away, just with shaking. The shaking feeling more rough when you are not the shaker.

Maybe Bullyboy did this on purpose. Maybe he revelled in the sight of anguish on Our Boy's face,

laughing menacingly out of pride from a mission accomplished. Or maybe he was just as nervous as Our Boy, shaking the boat too roughly because he was tense, laughing nervously because he felt a little ashamed for having sat on Our Boy's chest or for some other mischievous thing he'd done. It's up to you, really, depending on how wicked you require Bullyboy to be. What is unshakable is the avalanche of feelings rushing through Our Boy. He, being an 8 year old boy, wouldn't be able to explain any of them, but be assured he felt them. He felt the intrusion of privacy, watching his foe rummaging through his stuff. His stuff. So he felt the selfishness that haunts every hoarder and the fear of losing that which is rightfully his, as it belongs to his room, his thoughts, his world. And shortly following fear there was anger, for we humans are no different from the wounded tiger fighting for survival, finding that backup supply of energy boozt hidden within our anger. And how could anyone forget the righteousness? No wrath is complete without the might of someone who feels that he is in the right, that he is correcting a horrible injustice. And it is with that

righteousness that Our Boy went to his mother to make a complaint.

There she was, elegant and calm as ever. There he bursted forth towards her, not only his face distorted with anger but also his voice, his temper and his sense of reason. You can definitely imagine how that meeting went.

'Moom! He took my bottleship!' She was, as we've established, of the faith that giving way and being the gracious pushover, turning the other cheek and all that, was the sure fire way to be liked and make friends. Well, it is a way of existing in relative peace. So yes, her reply would have been something along the lines of:

'Come now, dear boy, you'll get it back. Now it is his turn.' and

'Which do you prefer, lending your stuff for a moment and gain a friend or keeping your stuff without a friend in the world?' It wasn't a very effective way to persuade Our Boy of a change of heart.

And after a bit of whining, Our Boy would go off to sulk. So, it turns out that a playdate is a fickle thing. Like so many things in life, it's not about what you do but the way you do it. If orchestrated beautifully playdates can build fine friendships, whereas an out of sync orchestra only produces more mess. In Our Boy's case, it provided Bullyboy with more ammo. Our Boy wasn't known as mommy's boy until after that playdate, you see. A lot of things changed after that playdate. Mrs. Paige wasn't as content with how Our Boy spent his time, for one thing. That is how it came about that Our Boy grew accustomed to lying at such a young age. Not as a game. Not for fun. Not in malice. It had been out of necessity. You could say it began when his mother approached him with a simple query.

'I notice that you have no one to play with today, dear son. Do you want me to call Bullyboy's mother? You played so nicely with him the other day.'

'There is no need, thank you mom. I'm meeting him at the playground.' This seemed to relax his mother.

Our Boy promptly put on his shoes and left the house before his mother had the chance to ask him any more about it. He wasn't a very good liar and felt a bit uneasy about the whole thing. Our Boy didn't really know where to go. He didn't dare go to the playground in case Bullyboy was there. Or the beach or any fun place at all. He couldn't go near any grownup place either like the main shopping street, in case his mother went there. He took the only option he could think of. He headed for the forested hills. He felt a sudden rush of delight upon solving his little problem. Then he remembered. He wasn't particularly fond of hills. Or forests. But it did make sense, so he kept walking. And walking. He couldn't find any solution. As far as he was concerned he didn't have any options, so he just did the only thing he could. And kept on walking. I'd like to say that as he walked he thought to himself that it served him right, having to go wander through the forested hills, for lying to his mother. It is more likely that he harboured the notion that 'This is all Bullyboy's fault'. It wasn't too bad though. Our Boy soon learnt that forests are nice

enough places and he enjoyed spending time there. At peace. So he started telling his mother more often than not that he was meeting up with Bullyboy when in fact he went exploring the forest. He climbed trees. Watched birds and bunnies and squirrels. Followed walking trails. Played with sticks and stones.

Most importantly, he had found a place where he could be alone. Safe. Albeit dreadfully lonely.

## **The Treasure Map**

And the story may well have ended here, uneventful as his life would probably have been, had his mother not happened upon the most rarest of finds. She had wrapped it up ever so nicely for his birthday. Or as neatly as was possible given their means. She had recycled a brown paper bag because it would have been too costly

to buy fancy wrapping paper. And still the parcel looked like it belonged on the cover of a style magazine. The cake was also very simple, covered in thick chocolate cream. It was simple yet elegant, much like Mrs. Paige. The same could not be said about the boys sitting around the cake. Their faces changed from greed to chocolate covered madness in the span of 10 minutes.

When Mrs. Paige was slicing the cake she had handed the slices out clockwise around the table, leaving Our Boy till last. She was used to serving the guests first. She had sliced each piece of cake evenly, but as she came to the last piece, she realised that it was noticeably bigger than the others. She paused and stared, contemplating whether she should slice it up further, to give him an even slice, or to let him have that little extra bit.

'Ah well, it is his birthday, after all.' she thought to herself and lifted the slice over to Our Boy's plate. And it would have been just fine. Had it not been for the other boys. Children have an uncanny

way of sensing any sort of discrepancy like that. Bullyboy, who had gotten a slice next to last, was quickest to notice it this time and bluntly remarked upon it.

'Hey! His slice is bigger than mine! That's not fair!'. This put Mrs. Paige in a right state. She didn't know how to respond because she cared too much about responding the right way. And because she cared too much she of course ended up doing the completely wrong thing.

'Oh, I see. Let's just swap, then shall we?'. And just like that she swapped Our Boy's plate for Bullyboy's plate.

'You are ok with that, aren't you, dear?' she asked Our Boy afterwards. Of course he wasn't ok with it, feeling the stab of betrayal with full force.

'No, I want the big slice.'

'Now dear, don't be rude.' was her only reply. Our Boy may or may not have acted out, as a result of that, but he definitely felt something akin to that

which a resident of Jerusalem might feel upon being thrown out of his country. Maybe a resident of Jerusalem might feel offended by that comparison, but righteousness is a strong feeling. It's not a feeling easily measured by the extent of the crime. It's not easily measured by anything at all, really. It's a feeling. And a person feeling wronged in any way can easily feel more righteous than other people might judge normal considering the circumstances. Just like one person can easily be more happy with a journey to Disneyland than another. It's a perspective thing. Anyway. After the boys had smeared themselves in the sinful chocolate from the battlefield of the uneven slices they proceeded to the ritual of opening up the presents. Mrs. Paige had piled them charmingly on the floor, given that they only had that one table in the living room around which the boys had dined. Not that we'd really call that manner of eating dining. If anyone had bothered to take a proper look they'd have noted the graceful style with which the presents had been organised. Not only size and colour but also texture and depth blended beautifully. But no one

appreciated that sort of thing around here. The boys were restless upon having to watch Our Boy open his presents. He decided to save his mother's till last, half hoping he'd be able to appreciate it in private. He didn't want Bullyboy to put his filthy chocolate smudged fingers on it. Our Boy looked around the nine presents, thinking strategically. He noticed a round package. Clearly a ball, he could tell. He was going to open that next to last, then, maybe, the boys would go off into a football game.

Now he finally started opening the presents, one by one. A toy car. A block of paper and a charcoal pencil. A flashlight. A pack of cards. A book about a lion. Another pack of cards. A toy sword. Right. This was it. The football. It was working. It worked. Well, it was destined to, a ball and a group of boys fit together like a glove with a hand. Except. It was only a bit of his plan which worked. Our Boy hadn't taken into account how his mother would react. She knew nothing of Our Boy's fear. She felt quite hurt that he were to forget her present like that. As if her present

didn't matter. She wouldn't stand for it. That elegant woman, who treated her son with so much respect, who organised everything neatly around his needs. Bowing down before others she could do all day long if need be. But she demanded recognition from her own son. Her only child. She didn't get all huffy puffy or high and mighty about it. She just calmly stopped the stampede of boys heading outside.

'One moment please, boys. There is one gift to be opened before you rush out for football.' And she handed Our Boy his parcel. He reluctantly took hold of it. It had been so close, they were at the door and all. He removed the wrapping to reveal a delicate and frail old thing. It was a book and it had the word pirate in the title.

'Oh, a pirate book! Thank you mother!' Our Boy's excitement did not go unnoticed by the other boys.

'Let me see!' Bullyboy said as he grabbed the book forcefully. Our Boy wasn't about to let go. They both stood their ground. Eventually it was the book that gave way. It ripped at the spine.

'My Book!'

Our Boy's mother, true to form, reprimanded her son feeling she had the right to because of blood being thicker than water, and the bond between mother and son stronger than having to respect each others boundaries. But no bond is strong enough for that. Boundaries are there for a reason.

'I don't believe it. I've always taught you to share your things nicely, haven't I?'

'Yes, mother. ' Our Boy uttered softly as he clutched the book in his arms. Bullyboy had let go, perhaps in the hope that by abandoning his direct touch with the damaged object he somehow could forsake responsibility in the matter.

'I think it's best that I take that for the time being,' Mrs. Paige said and held out her hand. Our Boy handed the book swiftly over.

'Now, boys. I think it's best you all headed out for that game of football. And let us not fret any more over this incident.'

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