Sleeping Beaus: How Toxic Masculinity is Poisoning America's Men

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Catcalls, rapists, dick jokes, and risky business are only a handful of symptoms of the current worldwide viral epidemic dubbed “toxic masculinity.” Focusing on hegemonic masculinity’s proposed birthplace, America, this project recounts the hierarchical masculine system’s development and the culmination of its most harmful performative behaviors and widespread dogmas into what we now call “toxic masculinity.” What follows is an exposé of the societal perpetuators which groom young boys throughout their lifetime, and an evaluation of toxic masculinity’s irreparable mental and physical damages. The project’s research portion concludes by addressing the small steps taken thus far to promote healthy masculinity; it proposes further necessary changes on both the individual and societal planes, and presents the ideal alternative to toxic masculinity—*mindful* masculinity.

The project then transitions to a creative retelling of Stephen and Owen Kings’ novel, *Sleeping Beauties*, wherein the world’s women contract a sleeping sickness and struggle to rebuild society in an alternate realm void of any men, who are left in chaos on Earth’s surface. The included rewrite, *Sleeping Beaus*, tells the struggle of the world’s *men*, who, after falling asleep, fail to rebuild civilization until they shed toxic masculinity’s vices.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents, Sandy and Ted, for encouraging the exploration of all of my passions and for helping me pursue my own unique identity. Without their help, I wouldn’t have become the person I am today. I would also like to thank my advisor, Dr. Emily Rutter, for her assistance in tackling this massive project.

Table of Contents

Process Analysis

Growing up in America, I've been surrounded by boys with fiery tongues who oversexualize and degrade women's bodies, are obsessed with sports and competition, and heft enormously inflated egos. As a total tomboy clad in baggy t-shirts, crocs, and knee-length plaid shorts, I was treated as "one of the guys"—not sexualized or physically or emotionally demeaned for my gender, until I changed my style of dress to something more unique and eye-catching (but not explicitly feminine!) and began to wear makeup. Suddenly, I received a plethora of unwelcome "compliments" and catcalls from thirsty young men eager to add me to their "hit list." In my teens, I found myself swept up in musical theatre and the world of fictional male heroes disguised as "gentlemen," but they were all cut from the same, stale archetype of male bravery, dominance, and a severe hero complex. Possibly due to my own nonbinary forms of self-representation, I've always wondered why males don't groom themselves and dress up more often—I had never felt shaken by a man in makeup or a dress. My passion to push healthy, deviant male expression from this toxic, stale archetypal masculinity was recently brought to a head after reading Stephen and Owen Kings' novel, *Sleeping Beauties*. Watching the world's men burn society to the ground in a matter of days (or rather, a matter of exactly seven-hundred pages) in the absence of women inspired me to fully research and articulate my views on the current "ideal" American man.

With the help of my advisor, I researched the roots of "toxic masculinity," a term whose definition finally became clear to me. I discovered that society as a whole is raising men with a twisted sense of righteousness—this is hegemony, the umbrella term for society's role in perpetuating male hierarchy. I recorded the biblical-esque principles of toxic masculinity and composed a list of all the societal fields I'd seen it at work within: I had always despised the "girl toys" aisle; The boys' shows on T.V. all boasted irresponsible, immature role models; today's

popular music is criminally misogynistic and oversexualized; and I hadn't encountered a single male elementary teacher or male nurse yet… The scale of this issue became very clear—and very alarming—to me. I realized that American men are doomed to adopt toxicity because they are choking on the toxic content which society crams down their throats. They *have to* adopt these ideas in order to be successful in American society. I pondered whether this issue was even solvable, and with optimism, theorized a few easy inter-personal level solutions for fixing this massive epidemic. I believe that emphasizing the importance of a single person's behavioral changes (regardless of their gender) allows the reader to hold a personal stake in resolving an issue at hand. These solutions are immediately implementable, and will help free currently-affected men and prevent more young boys from becoming victims.

My more complex societal solutions followed suit, reasoning that complete abolishment of unhealthy influences is the ultimate solution to absolving toxic masculinity in America, and in the world as a whole. As an entertainment-based society, America looks to the media to relate, learn, and adapt, so these poor influences which restrict a man's thoughts and actions *must* disappear in order to prevent toxic masculinity from infecting future generations. I culminated my research on a hopeful note, explaining what a *real* "good man" is like, and how anyone can reach that state of being with some patience and practice.

This creative rewrite is the first piece of extended fictional prose I've written, but my passion for the subject at hand deterred any wavering confidence in its completion. I set my story in a small town (less than 800 people) in the South—one sure to be less progressive than metropolitan areas. I researched southern mannerisms, drew upon my research essay's content, and referenced *Sleeping Beauties*, loosely following its plot. As I storyboarded, I reflected on

and included interactions, characters, and dialogue similar to experiences which I've observed in my day-to-day life.

Nearly all men in my rewrite are afflicted with toxicity. Deputy Jones is a typical toxic man who displays an inflated ego, saying he'd *never* let a woman save him. When faced with an alarming emotional crisis, he makes a wildly inappropriate joke because he lacks the capacity to handle sensitive situations. All of the town's police force ogle and sexualize Blythe's female newscaster—the football player, Brian, even says he wouldn't watch the news unless it was "that slut Lila reporting." Sheriff Fleming only calls his ex-girlfriend when he needs something from her, indicating the devaluation of women as social obligations; Fleming then abandons his sobbing wife in the bathroom after a traumatic incident, choosing to focus on his own career over familial responsibilities. Brian Kaiser the bully admits that the entire football team beats on the "weak" resident benchwarmer, David Webber— calling him a "momma's boy" due to his thin frame, lack of coordination, and often-teary eyes.

The new realm's men as a whole fight each other for dominance, go hungry because they see no value in cooking skills, and accidentally get high on misused cleaning supplies. It is only when they change these behaviors that Blythe's men begin to establish a functioning civilization. These are only some of the examples of toxic masculinity in my rewrite—see if you can spot the rest!

My hope is that this essay's wide girth and my story's semi-realism will help men realize how much modern American society has come to *depend* on effeminate traits. I hope that everyone reading this project will come to accept—and ideally, adopt—some effeminate traits, therefore abolishing the elevated social status which stems from socially-constructed gender.

Digging up the Roots of the "Sturdy Oak"

Toxic masculinity is a modern ailment which young white men in America are contracting at an incredible scale, alongside young men across the globe. The series of behaviors and principles which are mutating the young male identity have been dubbed "toxic masculinity;" they consist of restrictive behaviors such as withholding one's emotions, hypersexuality, aggression, unnaturally high self-reliance, and an aversion to femininity, among others. The term "toxic masculinity" is tossed around as often as a boy's baseball, but it is often applied erroneously. In order to understand toxic masculinity, one must first comprehend the movement from which it came.

Once upon the Industrial Revolution, society restricted men and women to different occupations based on their physical prowess. This segregation wove itself into American culture's ever-developing view of what makes a proper man, as psychologist R. W. Connell explains: "hard labor in factories and mines literally use[d] up the workers' bodies; and that destruction, a proof of the toughness of the work and the worker, [was] a method of demonstrating masculinity" (36).

What determined a man's success was his capacity to financially provide for his family; stronger and quicker factory workers and miners often received more income. The accumulation of wealth, then, became an early quantification of a man's success in his societal role. Henceforth, manliness planted its roots in the concepts of power and wealth. And these virtues are still buried deeply in today's manly success—most men are well-acquainted with some version of the adage "*he who dies with the most toys, wins."*

Studies have suggested that masculinity is not a genetic trait—it must be socially constructed. In psychologist Erich Fromm's journal, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), two

case studies indicated that the classic "authoritarian" type of masculinity, which featured a "hatred for homosexuals, contempt for women, conformation to authority, and aggression towards the less powerful," was traced back to rigid parenting, a father-dominated household, sexual repression, and conservative morals. Inversely, democratic masculinity featured more tolerance, an easy-going mindset, and kindness; and was tied to more relaxed, affectionate family relationships (Connell 18). Therefore, the toxic, hierarchy-loving authoritarian masculinity (which is comparable to modern toxic masculinity) was determinedly a result of one's social circumstances—it stemmed from a man's desire to possess a control over others just like the control his father had once held over him during childhood.

Psychoanalyst Stoller then propagated the term "gender identity" in 1968, triggering subsequent exponential growth in the research field of gender and hierarchy. Countless other studies further delved into and developed upon this concept. The hierarchy of masculinities was first pinned to the emerging concept of homophobia, which originated in the 1970s as a "product of homosexual men's experience with violence and prejudice from straight men" as analyzed by sociologists Morin and Garfinkle (Messerschmidt 27). Certain traits, such as cooking and altruism, were considered facets of the female gender—breadwinning and competitiveness were limited to its male counterpart.

The breakthrough term "hegemonic masculinity" then appeared in an early 80's Australian field study on social inequality in high schools conducted by psychologist Dr. R. W. Connell. Connell's study synthesized empirical evidence of "multiple hierarchies" in gender and class. This type of masculinity was based on a social situation's legitimation of unequal gender relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities (Messerschmidt 28). Hegemonic masculinity's societal perpetuation was a critical element of

Connell's thesis—she blamed it for teaching men numerous toxic traits, including an aversion to homosexuals and women (and feminine things), high self-reliance, forced bravery, and a lack of emotion. Connell then classified four types of alternative, nonhegemonic (socially inferior) masculinities: *complicit*, which realizes unequal gender relations but sustains hegemony through reaping hegemonic benefits; *subordinate*, which is socially lesser than and deviant from hegemonic masculinity; *marginalized*, which includes groups discriminated against due to factors outside of gender relations such as race, ethnicity, and age; and *protest*, which is a hypermasculinity formed to compensate social positions with little power (Messerschmidt 29). American society then stitched together a hierarchy between many types of masculinity and femininity, attributing certain traits (such as impassiveness and dominance) to higher social status. This is a hegemony, and hegemonic masculinity places the strongest, most stoic men on the highest pedestal. Men affected by discrimination stand below them, and effeminate men kneel with women in the dirt.

Connell also explains that it's important to understand that hegemony does not necessarily mean *complete* control; that it can still be disordered, or disorder itself. Toxic masculinity as we know it is preserved by the social hegemony and utilizes toxic actions to achieve its ends, in turn oppressing the subordinate masculinities of queer and effeminate men. This type of masculinity encompasses many behaviors that stem from and enforce societal hegemony, such as utter stoicism and suppression of emotion, physically beating femininity out of others to display strength, and imperiously refusing to take no for an answer. These behaviors and repercussions are the systematic guide which defines a 'real American man;' they are the principal subject of this thesis.

On a side note, because feminine men possess an "inferior" masculinity, it is imperative to report research on "sex differences"—the fabled genetically-tied social differences between males and females. On just about every trait measured since the 1890s, physical and social sex differences were determined as non-existent or very small (save for genitalia). The variances between men and women, "manly" and "womanly," are simply exaggerated by social dialogue, stereotyping, and unequal access to social power (Connell 21). There is also scarce evidence of even *weak* biological influence on an individual's preference for masculine or feminine behaviors. These differences, then, have nothing to do with one's sex, but rather, how society treats its members based *on* their sex. This is hegemony in action.

The "Guy Code" and Masculinity's Four Commandments

It's every young boy-man's bible, his creed. It contains the elixir he so craves. The "Guy Code," more commonly known as the "Bro Code," provides lost fledglings with the commandments of masculinity. In 1976, social scientists Deborah David and Robert Brannon synthesized the original "Guy Code" from years of research, having drafted four general rules for manliness:

1. "**No Sissy Stuff**: anything that even remotely hints of femininity is prohibited. A real man must avoid any behavior or characteristic associated with women." Being a true man includes escaping perceptions of femininity, and thus, weakness and gayness.

2. "**Be a Big Wheel**: masculinity is measured by success, power, and the admiration of others. One must possess wealth, fame, and status to be considered manly."

3. "**Be a Sturdy Oak**: manliness requires rationality, toughness, and self-reliance. A man must remain calm in any situation, show no emotion, and admit no weakness." Therefore, a man must resemble a void inanimate shell of an object.

4. "**Give 'em Hell**: men must exude an aura of daring and aggression, and must be willing to take risks, to 'go for it' even when reason and fear suggest otherwise." In other words, a man must not care what others think of him (Levine 145).

And now, for the unsurprising truth. Social psychologist Joseph Pleck of University of Illinois and James O'Neil, developmental psychologist at University of Connecticut, say these rules are *still* standing as strong as that sturdy oak (Kimmel 45).

Furthering this research was distinguished sociologist Dr. Michael Kimmel, who asked young men (ages 17-22) from every state in America—and 15 other countries—what phrases came to mind when they heard someone say "be a man." These were his findings:

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" (Kimmel 45).

This list, which Kimmel dubs "The Guy Code," will be referenced throughout the remainder of this thesis as the overarching principles and behaviors of toxic American masculinity.

But who is the affected demographic here? Sociologist Erving Goffman defined the hegemonic ideal western male as "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" (Kimmel 55). It's nearly impossible to meet *all* fourteen criteria, so nearly every American male experiences feelings of inferiority and powerlessness which lead to the development of depression, corporal and oral violence, the overvaluing of independence, an engagement in risky behaviors, and more, all to reclaim a sense of validation and power over himself and others.

Additionally, innumerable men are raised to believe that femininity equals weakness, and therefore, that men are superior to women. This teaching leads to the realization that "the capacity for empathy and compassion has to be suppressed, early on, in the name of achieving masculinity" (Kimmel 59). A man, therefore, will never put a woman before his "bros" and will always consider himself before helping other men, just to climb the competitive hegemonic hierarchy into manhood. And competitive it is. Young men making the climb tend to refuse even the simplest of concessions, such as asking for directions, because the possession of information is yet another manifestation of hierarchy. The male tendency to vehemently avoid asking for help, then, stems from the toxic masculine reluctance to admit any kind of inferiority to others, lest one lose his standing in the American hegemony (Connell 3).

Interestingly enough, even young boys who are currently powerless, still pursuing manhood, "feel *entitled* to power," unlike young women (Kimmel 60). Little boys are raised under the impression that they are inherently a "big wheel" deserving of great power and wealth.

One example of this prerogative is a since-discontinued-for-obvious-reasons T.V. talk show called “A Black Woman Stole My Job” in which the host interviewed (white) men who lost a job offer to a dark-skinned woman. When Dr. Kimmel, a guest on the show, asked the host why the program wasn’t titled “A Black Woman Got *a* Job” or “*the* job,” the host was left bug-eyed, veins bulging and gums a-flapping. The show’s host and guests had sincerely thought that the job they were only interviewing for was *already* theirs (Kimmel 60).

But how, exactly, does society impose this “Guy Code” on young, white men? During childhood, boys experience forced identity adoption by means of toy profiling, toxic television, sexualized advertising, misogynistic musical themes, and job discrimination. With innumerable influences from all sides, any boy would be fated to fall victim to toxic masculinity’s behaviors and beliefs. Society pushes men to the brink—suicide rates are high for this demographic; chronic bullying and belittling scar them during their vulnerable years, hazing reopens those wounds, rape and abuse land them in prison, and because their “toughness” prevents them from seeking medical attention for mental and physical health issues, they ultimately die younger than they should. These effects will subsequently be explored in depth.

Pretty in Pink: Toys and Early Reinforcement

Imagine this: you’re a parent scouring the internet for your elementary schooler’s Christmas present. You pull up your browser, visit Target.com, and search for “girl toys.” You see the categories “Baby Dolls, Beauty Kits, DIY Art Kits, Doll Playsets, and Play Food.” Now, let’s say you have a boy. A search for “boy toys” includes “Action Figures, Building Sets, and Toy Vehicles” (Target.com). This unequal distribution illustrates that from a young age, girls are restricted to cooking, crafting, and “getting pretty;” boys are taught to wire robots, admire hot

rods, and fight (albeit with action figures or toy firearms). And these results are consistent across the board.

Parent Kate Schweitzer was struck speechless when asked at a McDonalds somewhere between Chicago and St. Louis in 2019, "Are these [Happy Meals] for girls or boys?" Gazing at her two oblivious daughters, Schweitzer stammered out "one of each?" The first featured a miniature Barbie doll. "The other? A Hot Wheels car. It wasn't hard to guess which [toy] was for the girls and which was for the boys. (To add insult to injury, the Barbie came with a purple hair comb and the Hot Wheels car came with a two-piece plastic ramp a kid could learn to build)" (Schweitzer). Schweitzer's "boy" would learn construction skills and risk with the car playset, while her "girl" would domestically primp her hair and pose like the tiny blonde model.

Karen Klugman, an acclaimed culture writer, also recognized that pastel color palettes are conventionally marketed towards girls, and primary color palettes are intended for boys. Playmobil's pastel set is called Playhouse; its female figures are depicted cooking, caring for children, or riding horses, and its male figures get married, push strollers, and read newspapers. In the primary color-clad "boy" set, the *exclusively* male figures "ride motorcycles, fight fires, and pilot spaceships," navigating all kinds of risky business. These sets teach young boys that they must be brave, adventurous, and self-reliant, whereas young girls are trained to be nurturing, safe, and domestic (Klugman 170). Toy packaging rarely depicts boys grooming dolls, but rather, watching Hot Wheels cars crash in an explosive blaze or angrily wielding action figures packing beefed-up guns. Gendered toy marketing primes young boys to behave violently, to be unconditionally "sturdy" and brave, and to avoid feminine attributes like housework and empathy.

"So No Apologies for all the Misogyny"

The title of this section is a lyric from Hip Hop artist Danny Brown's 2011 song, "Outer Space," in which he plainly owns up to his misogyny—but he doesn't intend to *do* anything about it. Music's misogynistic themes are what will nurture the tiny seed of toxicity planted by early toy profiling. Authors Ronald Weitzer and Charles Kubrin analyzed the lyrics of all the rap albums that obtained platinum status from 1992 to 2000 for lyrical misogyny, evaluating platinum albums as an ideal category for study because their numerical success ensured pervasion across the American population. Analysis of 403 songs from 130 albums identified five themes that preached unequal gender relations: "(1) degradation of women, praise of men; (2) sexual objectification of women, sexual empowerment of men; (3) women as distrustful, men as invulnerable; (4) normality of violence by men, normality of women as victims; and (5) women as prostitutes, men as pimps" (Messerschmidt 59).

These themes all sustain the hegemonic masculine system in American society by teaching young men that they are entitled to power and wealth (as Kimmel said), that they should be dominant and sexually violent (as Katz will express later), that they should be "sturdy oaks" (as David and Brannon proposed), that they can rightfully use violence to sustain their hierarchy (as Kimmel's interviewees will soon recount), and that men are reluctant to grow up because they see women as sexually available without any undesired commitment (explained by Kimmel and Katz).

And rap music isn't going away, as artists like Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, and Saweetie landed hits on Billboard in 2020 which permeated American culture with objectification and overt sexualization of both women *and* men, which rocketed to astronomical levels of fame through dance challenges on the popular social media app, TikTok.

I Don't Wanna Watch That!

And of course, one can't forget the countless hours of television which young men consume. In many modern American television shows, the importance of male bonding has emerged, but it often occurs "in the pub, on the sports field and terraces, in clubs and in the workplace," and involves performing a variety of hypermasculine activities such as "drinking, brawling, bravado, sexual posturing, and social misbehaving" (Feasey 22).

The classic American situation comedy, *Friends*, has made a comeback in recent years, but the nostalgic program contains many unfortunate instances of classic hegemonic masculinity.

In an early episode, actor Joey Tribbiani and his new roommate Chandler Bing, a computer programmer, awkwardly struggle to bond until *Baywatch* appears on the television screen (3:06 'The One with the Flashback'). Although Chandler has never seen the show, both boys quickly plop down onto the couch to admire and compliment the skimpily-clad female lifeguards, beers in hand. The sexualization of *Baywatch*'s young women serves as the roommates' bonding device, comedically saving them from many awkward interactions. The boys' choice of bonding over the sexualization of women is "'the very essence of what hegemonic masculinity is'—the reduction of women to objects to assert one's own power" (Feasey 25).

Additionally, the show's male characters use violence and sports to impress others or redirect emotions, such as Ross's attempt to impress his new girlfriend by playing a game of Rugby against some comically robust men (4:15 'The One with All the Rugby,' Feasey 25). The other boys panic when Joey asks to practice a gay kiss for one of his scenes; Joey and Chandler express outrage when they are mistaken for a gay couple while babysitting on a city bus; Ross looks down upon a male student who confesses feelings for him; Joey and Chandler's conversations are peppered with subtle homophobic jokes; Ross's discomfort is obvious while

watching his son play with his first Barbie doll, and Ross flat-out refuses to hire a male nanny to watch his daughter because the "*manny* seemed too in touch with his emotions" (2:24 'The One with Barry & Mindy's Wedding,' 2:06 'The One with the Baby on the Bus,' 7:18 'The One with Joey's Award,' 3:04 'The One with the Metaphorical Tunnel,' 9:06 'The One with the Male Nanny,' Feasey 26).

The only featured gay male character in *Friends* is also an obvious stereotype of inferior masculinity—he is an ice dancer who is smart, funny, artistic, and throws "great academy award parties" but who also experimented with heterosexuality during college, insinuating that homosexuality requires well-roundedness and is a passing phase for experimentation (Feasey 27).

However, the show isn't purely hegemonic, as Chandler and Joey affectionately hug more often than they perform the typical male-male clasp-to-backslap, and they buy each other meaningful gifts across many episodes—but these instances are far fewer in number than the program's hegemony-enforcing incidents (Feasey 26).

Moving on to the genre of animation, *The Simpsons* builds the all-American dad up as a glorious walking, talking toxic pile of sludge. Homer Simpson is a gluttonous fool whose life aspiration is "to be a 'pin monkey' at the local bowling alley" (Feasey 36). Homer is also an uncommitted father who distances himself from childrearing responsibilities over and over again. One classic sequence of this principle opens on Homer flopped over in Moe's bar, thinking aloud: "Oh well you're closing, it's getting late, my kids are probably wondering where their daddy is… *there's got to be some other place we can go, think Moe, think*" (7:12 'Team Homer'). Homer eventually abandons his attempts to bond with his daughter because of her "superior intellect" and admits "I don't know jack about my boy," even refusing to attend his

son's little league games because he finds them dull (3:09 'Saturdays of Thunder). He even asks "who the *heck* is Margaret Simpson?" when asked to babysit his infant daughter (7:08 'Mother Simpson,' Feasey 36, 42).

When his wife Marge considers reentering the workforce, Homer dares to dream of moving into the woods to even *further* distance himself from societal responsibilities and his family (Feasey 37). The eldest Simpson is obviously reluctant to "grow-up," much like America's real-life young men who shirk the responsibilities of getting married, starting a steady job, and paying bills because "adults don't have any fun" (Kimmel 9).

It is important to note, however, that The Simpsons is a show about family, and Homer still possesses "an underlying sense of commitment and caring" underneath his stupidity, recognizing that "[his] wife and kids stood by [him]…" but "on the way home, [he] realized how little that meant to [him]" (Feasey 38). While Homer's character is extreme for the sake of comedy, *The Simpsons* is teaching young men that they can avoid fatherly responsibilities and still retain a loving, devoted family like the fictional one they love to watch.

Turning to the male-dominated genre of sports television, audiences are encouraged to view men as heroes because they "play through the pain" and injury; those who retreat to the sidelines are frowned upon by expecting spectators. Sports also legitimize forceful, physical masculinity by comparing the field to the battlefield of war, which connotates honor. During the 2007 rugby world cup, for instance, commentators referenced the players' "wounded bodies," saying they were "putting their bodies on the line," that "there was no surrender from England" and the final was "about dousing England's war spirit" (Feasey 99). This phrasing equates the violence of contact sports with wartime honor, asserting the everyday place of physical violence in a man's world.

And the commercial breaks are just as guilty as the shows they're slotted within. Male representation in advertising reinforces the masculine hierarchy by depicting exclusively ripped, virile men in sexual context and positions—look at any male fragrance ad for proof. Popular body care brand Lynx (called Axe here in the states) has aired many advertisements that reinforce conventional toxic masculinity and the ideal male body. Three of their notorious commercials airing from 2005-2006 all featured a "slim, lightly muscled, young, white, virile man" using their product to sexually reel in attractive women. "Hat Stand" features a man spraying his hat stand "to encourage his half-naked girlfriend to pole dance" for his entertainment; "Horse Riders" depicts a man spraying the ground to encourage two near-naked horse riders (female, of course,) to start a mud fight; "Kitchen" features a man spraying a path through his apartment to distract his partner while he sneaks another woman from his bedroom (Feasey 144). These adverts—and many others—depict men as hypersexual beings who must be physically attractive, conversationally assertive, and very sexually active—standards which assert the Guy Code's emphasis on risk-taking, frequent use of genitalia, high degrees of independence and leadership, and an inflated sense of self-importance.

But That's not *Your* Job!

Next, guys enter the work force with a preconceived notion of which jobs they can and can't pursue. Job discrimination against women is far more apparent than discrimination against men, but male job profiling is another restrictive condition of American hegemony's social standards. Elementary teaching and nursing are two such careers that are notoriously difficult for men to navigate without discrimination because of their unaltruistic upbringing.

Beginning in the classroom, student perception of the qualifications of male and female teachers tells a very gendered story; men are societally perceived as "overqualified" for early

education positions. In one such study conducted by Drs. JoAnn Miller and Marilyn Chamberlin of Purdue University and Western Carolina University, college students evaluated fake applicants of the same age, race, and parallel qualifications for a university faculty position. Despite the candidates' equally qualified résumés, a preference was shown for hiring the male candidate. Furthermore, a large percentage of male respondents exhibited a very strong preference for hiring the male candidates (Miller 283). Similarly, when the pair asked pools of college business students to evaluate the exact same recorded lecture given by a male or a female, the male professor was perceived to be more effective, organized, and credible than his female counterpart (Miller 285). Miller and Chamberlain determined that men are perceived to be unfit for elementary teaching positions because they are allegedly "more logical than women, more educated, they earn more, and occupy positions with more status or prestige" (Miller 286).

Delving into masculinity and elementary teaching, Emeritus Professor of Gender Education at University of Birmingham Dr. Christine Skelton explains that a substantial body of evidence shows that pupils exhibit comparable achievement under a male or female teacher. So, if it's not their ability to teach kids, why do men shy away from this career? Their hesitancy, Skelton explains, is due to society's views of early education as a type of child care revolving around the nurturing abilities that society assigns to women. Therefore, effeminate, altruistic male role models are absent from a boy's childhood (Skelton 8, 10).

Men who *do* choose to pursue early education are then confined to one of two archetypes: super heroes or demons. Super heroes exhibit hegemonic masculine characteristics including self-discipline, over-rationality, competitiveness, and strong assertiveness; they must also be "good at and interested in sports" and have the right humor to bond with male students (Skelton 11). Demons, on the other hand, have either too much or too little masculinity. Too little

masculinity leads to perceived pedophilia, wimpiness, or over-emotional characteristics; too much masculinity paints the man as ill-intentioned—only interested in his career track rather than his students (Skelton 12). Further, homosexual male teachers are strongly accused of and associated with pedophilia, and most parents worry about *all* male primary teachers concealing a covert desire to sexually abuse their pupils (Skelton 13, 12). This misconception has roots in society's perceptions of men as hypersexual beings—refer to the Guy Code's "size matters," the in-depth discussion of sexually rooted hazing in "You're Such a Bully! Hazing and Hard Times," or "This is Harassment!" for a substantial body of evidence on the male attitude towards sex.

Nursing is another career with parallel altruistic tendencies. An interview of eighteen male nurses by Dr. Tom O'Connor from the 2015 *Journal of Men's Studies* uncovered trends which explain the difficult place of masculinity in this field. Across their interviews, participants indicated that the career progression, high education level, and respectable financial stability offered by nursing were all important factors to them when considering that career path (O'Connor 203). Therefore, besides truly caring for others, men pursuing nursing are still searching for the respect, wealth, and status which will allow them climb the hegemonic ladder.

Additionally, to avoid being labelled as feminine, male nurses "play down the caring/altruism/helping aspect [of nursing] in favor of career aspiration/job security themes, [which is] a gender schism" commonly found in males entering "feminine" careers (O'Connor 205). This behavior, R.W. Connell reasons, could be understood as an assertion of the patriarchy and a natural suppression of subordinate, marginalized masculinities (O'Connor 206).

Because caring traits are not nurtured in male childhood, almost all of the participants interviewed by O'Connor claimed that they had "fallen into" nursing. They had all been older than the average female nursing student and had previously been hired as a porter, care assistant,

barber, trainee priest, chemical factory worker, lamplighter, builder, banker, ski instructor, travel agent, software writer, IT worker, trainee teacher, bookmaker, office worker, grocer, off-license (liquor store) worker, or post office manager (O'Connor 202). There were very few commonalities amongst all of these occupations, and many of them were not particularly altruistic in nature. This information is conclusive of men's non-desire to pursue altruism at a young age because American society doesn't value a developed emotional range in males.

The Gender Police

But who exactly is moderating young guys' behaviors? It turns out, nearly all males have become the self-employed gender police. Teachers, coaches, strangers, and—most importantly—a guy's own bros observe and judge his behavior. In the smelly dog-eat-dog physical education classes of high school, "everyone was all over everyone else talking about 'He's so gay' and 'He's a wuss,'" recounted a 21-year-old graduate (Kimmel 46). If a guy didn't have adequate physical strength and endurance, he wasn't deemed a man, and his classmates made sure he knew it, whether by taunts, physical assaults, or barefaced exclusion from activities.

Don, 26, a former college football player, remembered his coach's inexorable attacks: "Any fatigue, any weakness, any sign of being hit that actually hurt and he was like '*Waah! Widdle Donny got a boo boo. Should we kiss it guys?*' He'd completely humiliate us for showing anything but complete toughness" (Kimmel 47).

And it's important to acknowledge who taught these males the Guy Code in the first place: "Oh, definitely my dad," stated Mike, a college sophomore. "He was always riding my ass, telling me I had to be tough and strong to make it in this world." 24-year-old Drew remembers, "My older brothers were always on my case. They were like, always ragging on me, calling me a pussy, if I didn't want to play football or wrestle" (Kimmel 46). If one's closest

allies—his family and friends—enforce a certain type of lifestyle in the home, young men won't ever escape to a safe place of identity exploration. Boys who survive this interpersonal beating will later force these same values onto their own children, creating a sustentation of hierarchical-minded men.

Young boys are taught to put on their big boy pants and perform for other guys, who are constantly judging them, shaping them up, and often shaming them. Masculinity is a homosocial experience that binds together and pushes apart young men who are merely trying to navigate the turbulent sea of adolescence. Other boys their age constantly impress upon them the necessity to squeeze into a one-size-*doesn't*-fit-all mold while they are in their most vulnerable state—puberty.

Side Effects May Include: Damage to Your Health

Boys who develop depression are far less likely to seek treatment than their female counterparts. Why? Because *real men don't cry*. Boys are told constantly from a young age that they must man-up; that a man should be motionless, emotionless, unshakably tall and stiff like a sturdy oak. Psychologists William Pollack, James Garbarino, Michael Thompson, Dan Kindlon, and others argue that from an early age, boys are taught to stow away their emotions and never display weakness. As a result, boys feel immasculine not only if they express emotions, but even if they only *feel* any at all (Kimmel 53). For men, there is socially-sourced shame in crying, in hopelessness, and in sadness, all of which are common symptoms of depression. These feelings are left to fester and multiply until a man cannot bear his burden any longer. In the United States, eighty percent of suicide deaths are males, and "the suicide rate is highest among middle-aged white males" according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Holmes).

And what about the boys who survive the brutal transition to toxic manhood? According to a 2016 study conducted by market research company YouGov, thirty percent of men—that's nearly a third—testified that the last time they cried was "over a year ago" compared to only eleven percent of women (Moore). This disparity is due to the Guy Code's number one rule in fifteen countries—*"boys don't cry"* (Kimmel 45).

Additionally, the average man perishes five years before the average woman as reported by the CDC, but physiological differences don't explain this discrepancy. According to a study of 250 participants conducted by associate professor of psychology Diana Sanchez, men who held 'traditional beliefs' about masculinity were more likely to put off the confrontation of medical issues, compared with women or men who held less traditional beliefs ("Masculinity in the Doctor's"). Traditional beliefs included being "tough, brave, self-reliant, and restrained in expression of emotion."

A parallel study conducted by Himmelstein and Sanchez in *The Journal of Health Psychology* interviewed around 200 university students and 300 general population members; it concluded that both men and women who valued traditional masculine principles (bravery, self-reliance, and emotional restraint) were more likely to choose a male doctor with which to evaluate their health, but the participants were then *less open* to their doctor when asked about their health symptoms. These people, Sanchez concluded, didn't want to depend on another man or display weakness in front of him ("Masculinity Impediments"). So, people who hold toxic values are ultimately more likely to die early as a result of—not genetics—but their own toxic willpower.

You're such a Bully! Hazing and Hard Times

When bright-eyed young boys cross the threshold into high school, many come to realize that they're still "not quite men," if not by self-realization, then by the stern words and hands of the awakened alphas. The National Bullying Prevention Center reports that one out of every five high-school students recall being bullied at least once; male victims are attacked almost exclusively because they are gay or simply "appear gay" to others. Calling a boy "gay" or a "fag," Kimmel explains, was at first an insult to one's masculinity; overuse has acclimated these terms to mean "stupid" and "wrong." To simplify, it's "dumb" or inferior to be gay because those behaviors and appearances just don't meet the standard set for a true man. You're either gay, or a guy.

Straight men's toxic attitudes toward gay men involve a medley of discrimination methods, from media vilification to harassment, and job discrimination to imprisonment. These practices were dubbed "oppression" by the early Gay Liberation movement, and often still occur in the twenty-first century (Connell 40).

One such waifish high-school student, Jesse, was punched, kicked, and tripped in his high school's halls day after day. Jesse's fellow "guys" superglued him to his seats, thieved his books, and pitched cutlery at him regularly. The more disturbing events included a particularly bold (heterosexual) tormenter grabbing Jesse's buttocks and his own genitals in tandem, grinding against Jesse's backside, and even throwing him on the ground and pretending to rape him, all in front of a crowd of mostly male bystanders. The catch? Jesse was *straight*.

Similarly, an openly gay student was mock-raped, urinated on, and called "fag" by his peers and teachers. One day, while he was seated in the hallway before first period, he was approached by a football player who kicked him in the stomach for roughly ten minutes in front of a group of laughing bystanders. The student reported the incident to the school's police

officer, who retaliated, saying he had earned it for being gay. Weeks later, the student collapsed from internal bleeding. The cause? His tyrant's unpunished act of violence (Kimmel 77).

Boys who bully clarified that they did so to uphold the pecking order. Thanks to the gender police's physical assaults, the elite men are able to stay on top. But what about girls who bully? Unexpectedly, most girls reported harassing others to draw the attention of and impress the alpha males (Kimmel 81). Therefore, most girls' cruel actions only serve to perpetuate the toxic male-dominated hierarchy created by bullying, grounded in the idea of what makes a man.

Referencing the aforementioned Guy Code, many school-bound organizations use harassment as a tool to help young boys "man up" and learn to "take it like a man." If the victim cannot do so, his harassment triples. Boys who have successfully transitioned into glamorous "manhood" during their school years are all-too-eager to toughen up the incoming fresh meat. Many school assaults are sexual in nature, preserving the dominance of the virile, violent man society expects to see.

The impact of hazing is not just conditional; it is collective and cultural. Elizabeth Allan, Ph.D. and Mary Madden, Ph.D., offer a few alarming findings from their 2008 study, *Hazing in View: College Students at Risk:*

55% of college students involved in clubs, teams, and organizations are hazed.

25% of coaches or organization advisors were aware of the group's hazing activities.

Only 26% of hazing victims talk about their experience with family.

48% of hazing victims talk about their experience with peers.

Over 51% involve *publicly posted pictures* of the hazing incident.

95% [of cases did not end with the victim reporting] the event to campus officials.

47% of students come to college having experienced hazing in some form.

90% percent of students who have experienced hazing behavior in college *do not consider themselves to have been hazed.*

Hazing, therefore, is an undercover pandemic that enforces hegemony; senior organization members are often the instigators of this unnecessary emotional and physical abuse. The most alarming part of Allan and Madden's findings was that *nine out of ten students didn't even realize that they were victims of hazing* (Allan & Madden). This statistic exposes how completely we overlook hegemonic enforcement—it has become a natural process of life.

One such hazing case details the escapades of three varsity football members of small-town Mepham's High School. At football camp, they penetrated three younger recruits with pine cones, golf balls, and broom handles coated in Mineral Ice, which contains menthol, an ingredient that, if used internally, causes agonizing pain (Kimmel 66).

In a similarly sexually-rooted assault, Brian Seamons, a football player from Utah, was seized by his captain and some teammates as he left the shower. His genitals were wrapped tightly in athletic adhesive tape; his naked body was tied to a towel rack in the locker room, and his ex was brought in to gawk at his sorry state. When Brian furiously relayed his assault to the school administrator, his coach was informed, and a team meeting was held. The team captain accused Brian of "betraying the team" by going public and demanded that *he* apologize, or he'd be removed from the team permanently (Kimmel 84).

These cases aren't isolated to football teams, however. Jeff, an Iowa senior equipped to letter in football, baseball, and track commented on all three of his coaches' abusive behavior, which included requests to beat up rookies, gift them used tampons, and verbally abuse them, all to "toughen up the wimps" and teach them to *take it like a man* (Kimmel 85). Needless to say, Jeff graduated without lettering in any sport, having quit all three teams.

But these traditions are even more infamous on university campuses: one such fraternity at the University of Georgia makes a yearly process of getting their pledges drunk and coercing them into sexual hazing by the formation of an elephant circle (in which each naked member grabs the penis in front of him through its owner's legs and the unit walks in a circle for several minutes), culminating with nude pledges perched blindfolded on the house's balcony, tricked into thinking cinderblocks are attached to their penises by ropes. During this time, the members yell, "your dick is going to be *ripped* from your body if you're not strong enough!" so "ya better pray your dick is big enough [aka you're man enough] to get into this house!" (Kimmel 97).

But why do guys put up with this grueling treatment? They want to be liked, to be accepted, to be cool—to just finally be "one of the guys."

Hazing isn't just a male-explicit activity; girls haze too, but their acts often give power back to the guys. Hazing often involves young girls performing implicitly or explicitly sexual acts, such as 14-year-old gymnast Lizzie Murtie, who was one of several gymnastics team initiates who had to perform mock fellatio on the school's most popular boys, eating bananas protruding from their zippers in a parking lot while a large crowd took photos and looked on (CBS).

An undiscussed constant in these situations, however, is the presence of bystanders and their unwillingness to intervene. At Mepham's football camp, three players sexually tortured teammates, but there were *thirteen* bystanders. Brian Seamons' entire team witnessed his assault, and the entire University of Georgia's frat house watched their pledges undergo emotional injury all night. Unfortunately, the Guy Code can easily explain the reluctance of bystanders to stop an assault. Real men don't show weakness, which includes walking away from a situation, stepping forward to stop it, or informing an authority figure of any misdoings—real men have each

other's backs. Mepham's assaulted pledges were threatened not to press charges, and campus rallies were held for the *rest of the football team and coach*. Brian's team and coach banded together to keep his assault secret, in accordance with the Guy Code. The University of Georgia's fraternity believed their initiation was normal because they only accepted real men—those who readily took risks and were emotionally sturdy, and certainly not wimps who cried. Guys learn not to tell their teachers, their police force, their parents; to look the other way when lewd remarks are thrown at women. They learn to stay silent when a guy is accused of committing rape, so that there are no witnesses. They learn to let immoral behaviors continue unpunished. And thus, the Guy Code lives on.

This is Harassment! Abuse and Cahoots

Many of the aforementioned instances of bullying and hazing included sexual violence of varying degrees; this behavior stems from the Guy Code's assertion of the hypersexual, dominant male. Eighty-eight percent of men whose actions fit under the legal definition of rape adamantly denied that they had committed that act—this is because men are misled about what exactly constitutes rape. Society teaches them through sexist, brutal pornography and misogynistic music that all women are sexually available and have a sex drive just as high—or even higher—than men's, which is not exclusively true (Katz 27). Men are taught by American culture that women are continuously open to sexual advances (whether they voice a "yes" or not) and always ready to take it rough, which often results in rape or attempted rape.

In America, "less than one percent of rape is committed by women," but rape is classified as a women's issue—even though men are the perpetrators. As American educator, filmmaker, actor, and advocate Jason Katz explains, "*Men* are the ones doing most of the battering and almost all of the raping. *Men* are the ones paying the prostitutes (and killing them in video

games), going to strip clubs, renting sexually degrading pornography, [and] writing and performing misogynistic music" (5). Therefore, rape is a men's issue after all.

Countless studies by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the U.S. Department of Justice, and more reveal that 87 percent of stalkers are male, that 15.9 percent of women have been raped, that 30.7 percent of women have been the victim of physical assault, and that 10.2 percent of women have been stalked (Katz 21). If you don't think those numbers are all that bad, 15.9 percent equates to *17.7 million women* who have been raped or have become the ill-fated victim of attempted rape at least once during their lives. Furthermore, according to the FBI, 80-90 percent of rape isn't even reported (Katz 21). And when rape *is* reported, sanctioned cases dub the victim as the "accuser" and the rapist "the accused." This unsuitable labeling turns the blame and action onto the victim and sets the perpetrator up as the "good guy" (Katz 78).

Because most women stay silent after sexual abuse, countless men don't comprehend how severely men's violence affects the women around them (Katz 38). When requested to speak out against men's violence, a guy's most common response is "but I'm not a rapist"—even though no one accused him of such a thing. Many men take a statement that applies to only some men and make it personal. Speaking out against men's violence, then, appears unattractive to males due to the personal offense they've just taken (Katz 26, 80). And every man who does not speak out against men's violence because he believes it's "not his problem" is guilty by association. If men do not preach civility to other men, they are also bringing harm to the women in their lives (Katz 43).

Furthermore, guys who call themselves "chivalrous" also unconsciously exert control over their female partners. Men who force their partner to stay "at their side" for protection are guilty in another form—by controlling a woman's fate, a "chivalrous" man is still exercising unearned

governance over her actions and destiny (Katz 54). Men's reluctance to call out abuse also has negative repercussions on the next generation of men. Boys who watch their fathers abuse their mothers often grow into mental illnesses and adopt substance abuse issues, setting the scene for another generation of abuse (Katz 42).

In general, "rape culture" is the term assigned to these behaviors which describe a group of males who are not sick or deviant, but purely the products of a culture that "glorifies and sexualizes male power and dominance" (Katz 149). Most men who rape have been historically found to be more emotionally distant, angry, and hostile than nonaggressive men, but in recent years, these men have taken to harming their acquaintances, and are labelled "undetected rapists." They conform to toxic masculine practices, possess hyper-sensitive pride, and view sex as conquest—but they are not outwardly suspicious or detectable (Katz 151). Some men rape because they want to conquest a virgin—a mythical creature whose deflowering would bring them social honor, or simply to give a "whore" what she's asking for (Katz 152). Society forces girls into the virgin/whore dichotomy; toxic men view both sides as exotic and worthy of sexual conquest.

Baby's First Step (in the Right Direction)

Recent American cultural representation movements have brought *some* nonhegemonic masculinity to film, media, advertising, and more, but there's still a long way to go to destroy the masculine hierarchy.

The "Schools and Communities Act" is one part of the larger federal "No Child Left Behind Act" passed by federal government in 2001, and all fifty states have adopted school policies that specifically condemn bullying, 48 of which include cyberbullying ("Anti-Bullying," "Bullying"). 17 states' policies also extend to student harassment which occurs off-campus

("Bullying"). Additionally, Founding Partner Sean Callan of Fraternal Law Partners and an expert on legal issues surrounding hazing celebrates the 44 states which have passed legislation which classifies hazing as an illegal activity. It also currently violates almost every U.S. colleges' codes of conduct. "Moreover, numerous activities associated with hazing, including theft, assault, coercion, trespassing, and sexual assault are illegal at both the state and federal level" (Rich).

On television, queer films have skyrocketed in popularity, but many still depict the stereotypical gay or hierarchy in the gay world. One such case is *Love, Simon*, the popular gay film that uses homonationalism to show that whiteness can heal Simon's LGBTQ identity, in comparison to the broken black characters who aren't "fixed" by the film's end (Schotten). Additionally, television personality James Corden was recently nominated for a Golden Globe award for his portrayal of a gay man in *The Prom*, which was composed of countless banal phrases such as "ya bettah *werk* it, honey," despite the public's furious outcry.

Ungendered toys have also begun to pepper the internet such as KiwiCo's STEM kits that teach construction, programming, music, and more to a variety of age groups and genders; American Girl Doll's boy-inclusive doll, Logan Everett, hit the shelves in 2017 (the first boy in the collection) followed by four Truly Me customizable male dolls ("Logan Everett"). But in supermarkets and toy stores, the aisles are as segregated as ever—cars and dolls are still largely marketed to opposing genders.

Regarding the media, James Charles and Jeffree Star, two male beauty gurus, battled for the highest beauty channel subscriber count on YouTube from February of 2019 to through December of 2020 (up to 16.5 million each). Both men lost the crown, however, due to "scandals" involving their personality, but they accumulated billions of views and helped pave

the path toward normalizing men's use of makeup (YouTube.com). James Charles was also selected as the first male Covergirl in 2016, to the same effect. Male makeup and skincare lines and brands have also popped up to ease the everyday man into the normalcy of primping and grooming, such as Clinique's For Men line and Hot Man products.

A few advertising campaigns have also broken away from the old-as-time virile, ripped man on screen and received lots of love for depicting "the best a man can be." Gillette's 2019 campaign did just that, depicting a (literal) teardown of hegemonic masculinity with an inspiring narration calling men to action: "IT'S ONLY BY CHALLENGING OURSELVES TO DO MORE THAT WE CAN GET CLOSER TO OUR BEST. WE ARE TAKING ACTION AT THEBESTAMANCANBE.ORG. JOIN US." The ad opens with Classic Gillette ads showing a woman kissing a man's cheek beside the Gillette logo and slogan—until a horde of boys smash through the screen, running and chasing another screaming child. This scene represents the visual teardown of Gillette's old, sexualized advertising style (parallel to Lynx's, which was discussed earlier). Another notable moment involves boys roughhousing in a backyard while an infinitely lengthy line of men behind their barbecues chant, "boys will be boys will be boys will be boys…" The endless line of men, in the case of Gillette's ad, represents the larger-than-life power of male hegemony. Gillette then offers visual evidence of how to overthrow the hegemony, presenting everyday men intervening when catcalling, bullying, fighting, and sexism arise. The ad's powerful visual rhetoric cleverly shows the large scope of the hegemonic issue facing American society, and it provides a powerful visual resolution coupled with an inspiring narration to guide *all* men to become the "best they can be," "because [just] some [good men are] not enough" (Knudson & Anderson).

Similarly, Lynx took a U-turn by means of a 2016 campaign opening with "57% OF GUYS HAVE BEEN TOLD HOW A REAL MAN SHOULD BEHAVE," followed by a series of questions asking "is it okay to…" "be skinny?" "to not like sports?" "to be a virgin?" featuring first point-of-view scenes to incorporate the viewer completely into its situations, asserting the personal responsibility and involvement of the entire audience. The advert depicts non-hegemonic, everyday men in relatable situations, from first loves to the simple act of getting dressed, proving the extent to which guys must question themselves every day. While Lynx's ad emphasizes the emotional distress caused by an ideal masculinity's presence, its solution is less clear; the ad resolves with, "Go look for yourself" (Knudson & Anderson).

"You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown:" Mindful Masculinity

Now, there is such a thing as a good man, and America's "real" men are well-aware of his presence. When Dr. Michael Kimmel asked countless men to describe a "good man," participants offered an inspiring handful of values: "integrity, honor, responsibility, being a good provider, protector, doing the right thing, putting others first, sacrifice, caring, [and] standing up for the little guy." So, perhaps these men were good-er than the rest? False. When Kimmel asked participants to describe a *real* man, the crowd began to shout excitedly over one another: "never cry, be strong, don't show your feelings, play through pain, suck it up, win at all costs, be aggressive, get rich, get laid[!!!]" (Plank 289). Many of the "good" and "real" male values contradict each other (i.e., sacrifice versus winning at all costs, putting others first versus getting laid the most…), so society's men are aware that they can't be *both* good and real. Most men choose to adopt "real" over "good" masculinity because of the higher social credibility and hegemonic control tied to it.

However, as author and award-winning journalist Liz Plank reasons, “the *world* is becoming more feminine.” This means that the skills which society has been attributing to women have become increasingly more valuable in modern America. One such trait is emotional intelligence, or EQ, which is the ability to monitor and express one’s own emotions in order to achieve happiness and higher overall performance. Therefore, there is modern masculine value in crying, in avoiding revenge, and in toning down self-reliance; to take these values to heart, a man must abandon his society-given bible (that pesky Guy Code) and exercise his EQ. This practice is what will allow our men to reach “good” masculinity, which is often called “mindful masculinity” (Plank 293).

Mindful masculinity is defined as a state of awareness towards one’s internal dialogue and behaviors, or essentially, meditation. Men who actively reflect inward and classify their behaviors as those of “good men or “real men” are then able to differentiate between the two and choose healthier behaviors, according to psychologist Daniel Goleman (Plank 294).

Men must also learn to process pain and feelings in healthier ways than abuse, bullying, and rape. One such safe space for processing feelings is a “men’s circle”—a concept implemented by social scientist Dr. Clinton J. Jesser. Participants in Jesser’s groups perform cathartic activities such as hugging, exchanging concerns and advice, voicing affirmations, sharing stories of embarrassment, exhibiting emotional vulnerability, and processing withheld trauma and anger in a safe environment. Jesser reports that many men are at first hesitant to seek the help of a support group, but nearly all participates come to enjoy and depend on regular sessions to improve their quality of life (114—118).

Mindful masculinity is what makes a good man—it is the simple act of understanding that all behaviors, even toxic ones, are learned, and then actively *choosing* to foster only the

mannerisms which best serve oneself. Mindfulness is the optimal method to reach nontoxic masculinity; it allows men to acquire the tools necessary to healthily process emotional events so that they can cry or breathe easy, rather than "getting even" and harming one and all.

But that's not *My* Problem…

Toxic men and malleable boys can only achieve a "good man" status if society makes some overarching changes. The following are simple but necessary actions every parent and family member must do in order to raise good men.

Beginning in childhood, toys should not be gendered. While this may never catch on in the marketing world, families should encourage their children to openly explore the concepts represented in both girl toys *and* boy toys. Young boys should be proud to carry *Beauty and the Beast* lunch boxes and wear lovely pink t-shirts. Allowing a child to explore ideas and passions of all types will help them develop a healthy, individualistic personality. Male teachers should provide authentic, nurturing male role models in the classroom to teach boys empathy through example. As these boys age, their parents should talk to them about what parts of television shouldn't be taken seriously, and should monitor their music tastes. Boys are desperate to fit in, so they need to hear from loved ones that it's okay to prefer watching Disney Channel over live sports. When puberty knocks them into a cesspool of confusion and self-discovery, teens should openly accept a diverse range of bodies, countenances, and sexualities. They should uplift and praise differences rather than striking them down.

As a whole, American culture should take a step away from misogyny and overt sexualization in lyrical music—it's old fashioned in the face of feminism and the #MeToo movement. Schools should reform their Sex Education programs to teach men not to rape, rather than teaching women how to avoid being raped. Male college students should feel free to pursue

careers in teaching children and caring for others without facing taunts from peers. And, most importantly, men should be encouraged by other men to explore their emotions and meditate on the fairness of their values and actions.

But until that day comes, if all the women in the world were to suddenly disappear, I don't believe that our toxic men would survive on their "holy virtues." If America is the land of the free, then it's time to free our men of these hegemonic chains and let them truly become themselves. Let them become *good* men. Let them love and cry openly, find family in others, chase their dreams, and ultimately, reach a state of true self-realization. The following story, *Sleeping Beaus**, tells the tale of freedom for one small southern town in the not-so-distant future.

**TRIGGER WARNING: The following material contains instances of violence, gore, adult language, and brief instances of drug use.*

Sleeping Beaus

The moth makes Adam smile. It alights upon his open palm; he admires its wings with a light sigh. The moth stirs and rises into the inky darkness, disappearing above tangled branches. "My darlings," he whispers into the night, and ten thousand moths shoot up into the heavens, pushing forward, forward. His light steps follow the cluster, caressed by prickling crabgrass, and his nose detects the first scents of mold, gasoline, grease, and cheap smoke. Under the muted sky, silk webs glimmer in his footprints, bejeweled with dew.

I

As Adam stepped into the clearing, a foul scent stung his nostrils; his sallow face puckered in distaste. From the hill upon which he stood erect, Adam spied the amber glow of a small town leeching into the early dawn's haze. He trained his gaze onto the source of the obscene scent—a lonely building positioned near the tree line, bedecked in tangled overgrowth. Its cracked panes exuded an aching purple light which irritated the traveler's eyes—it was so unnatural—and that foul stench was dampening his thoughts. With a great heave of his bare, delicate chest, Adam feverishly raced toward the secluded structure.

II

As Unit Six careened down the dirt path, the officers inside failed to notice Adam perched limply beside the road, dressed in only Doug Edison's blood and Doug Edison's old flannel shirt. Their wide eyes were instead pinned on the thick, ashy smoke and amber glow rising from the old pool-house by the tree line.

"Unit Six to base," Jeeves called out, thumbing the radio. "We've almost reached the site. Looks like Edison's pot operation finally went up in smoke."

Just as he was settling the small black box into its holder, Unit Six's cruiser dropped down a particularly steep hill and shot into the air, jerking both men's bodies toward the mud-splattered windshield. Jeeves dropped the radio and cursed; his partner gave a loud grunt. "Well *shewt*, ah guess we're here," drawled the large driver as the cruiser crawled to a stop. Both men exited the car, the large driver reaching into the trunk to arm a single, cheap fire extinguisher. "We've jus' gotta contain this until the fire department arrives," he sighed, checking his wristwatch.

Jeeves watched his companion douse the charred undergrowth surrounding the old pool-house and wondered which local arsonist's fault it was this time. His ears perked at the sound of uneven footsteps approaching and his wandering gaze landed on a shirtless man stumbling into the clearing. "Uh, Jones?" he called out to his partner, his voice rising in pitch. "It's the pothead!"

“Jee-SUHS!” Jones crowed, abruptly looking away. “Put yer clothes on, man!”

“Ah was *jus’* wearin’ my shirt, ah swear,” mumbled Edison. His bare torso was covered in deep, bleeding scratches and he was sporting a black eye that was quickly ballooning in size.

“What happened here?” Jeeves asked the pale man, who slowly shook his head.

“Ah was tending to my, uh…*bus-i-ness*…” Edison began sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck, “when ah heard da front door open and somebody must’a whacked me, cause next thing ah know, ah woke up an’ my life’s work was all up in flames!” His voice broke, puffy eyes glistening with tears. “Why would somebody do thay-ut to me?”

“You’re going to be alright, sir,” Jeeves reassured the man, retrieving a blanket from the car. “I think we’d better take him to the station, Jones” he reasoned, looking to his partner. He carefully folded Doug Edison into Unit Six’s cruiser while deputy Jones scratched his stubble-clad chin.

As Unit Six careened back to town, lightbar painting the sky red and blue, the residents of Blythe, Georgia—population 704—greeted a new day, blissfully unaware of the disaster approaching on papery wings.

III

Sheriff Richard Fleming was sipping his afternoon coffee, legs buttressed on his desk, when two of his deputies nearly tore his office door off its hinges. Fleming started, his fresh coffee spilled onto his lap, singeing his privates; he cursed.
“DICK—Uh, ah mean Rich! Somethan’ weird is going on out here! Ya gotta come look!” crowed deputy Jones, fat face sweating. His young partner Jeeves wasn’t far behind, looking frazzled as hell.

“Jesus, guys! What, did another cat run in front of your car?” questioned Fleming, rolling his eyes. “I have half a mind to revoke your driving privileges, Jones.”

“It’s the pot grower, Edison,” Jeeves chimed in. “We brought him back here ‘cause he was hurt, and now his face is growin’ some weird *stringy shit*, ya gotta come see, boss!” Grunting, Fleming abandoned the comfort of his chair and followed his deputies into the morning light.

Jones opened the cruiser’s rear door and pointed at the motionless man half-wrapped in an old blanket. “You idiot, he’s just sleeping,” grumbled Fleming.
“No, *look!*” Jeeves protested, peering over his shoulder.

Fleming bent over to examine Edison's sleeping body. Thin, silky tendrils were creeping out from the sleeping man's eyelids and slowly wrapping around his face. Fleming touched the white wisps leaking out from Edison's nostrils; he jerked away when the greasy fibers squished under his fingers. Fleming wiped his hand on his wet pants. "What in the hell *is* that stuff?"

Jeeves, bug-eyed, was barely holding in his lunch. The threads were quickly weaving into a white mask, encasing the pothead's entire head. "It's covering his goddamn *mouth*! He's gonna suffocate! What do we do??"

"Man up, deputy!" Fleming barked. "Keep your head on straight!" He checked Edison's pulse; it was slow, but beating. Jones asked if they should wake him up—Fleming said no, what if that stuff was poisonous? He shouldn't have touched it. Glancing down at his hand, the webs had disappeared, evaporating into thin air without a trace. The three flustered men, scratching their heads, plodded back into the station to ponder their next move when the lobby's television screen caught their attention.

Blythe's favorite shapely, attractive newscaster was giving an urgent report—bold red headlines scrolled past her hips. The men took a moment to admire her newest outfit, Jones giving a whistle. "Atta girl, Leela! Lookin' mighty fine today!" Jeeves stood beside him, simply grinning like an idiot.

Lila continued to speak, unaware of their gawking, "…several hundred separate cases have been reported around the globe. The victims' faces appear to be covered in a white encasement, and they do not respond to any attempts to wake them. This condition appears to affect only men at this time, and it appears to be spreading rapidly without direct contact. All victims experienced these symptoms after falling asleep, so keep your heads off those pillows, everyone! Stay safe. More updates coming soon on Channel Seven News." Cue that blinding signature smile.

"What the hell?" breathed Jeeves. "It's like a fucked-up version of *Sleeping Beauty*." "Well, ah'd rather keep on sleepin' than rely on a woman tuh wake *me* up," Jones snorted.

Fleming asked for a moment alone and began to pace the length of his office. "I don't get paid enough for this shit…" he groaned. It was already afternoon—how could he manage to keep the entire town awake after nightfall? Even he hadn't caught a wink last night, thanks to his son's rampant night terrors…

Fleming called his deputies back into the office, and the feeble police force of Blythe, Georgia drafted a plan as dusk peeped her murky eyes over the horizon. Jeeves, the proud owner of a crisp Chicagoan accent, would walk down to the news station to give some urgent, waking

advice to the Blythe's households ("do ya think I'll get to meet Lila?") while Jones would travel door-to-door in his cruiser, blasting music and night-knocking until the sun finally returned. Fleming would call the nearest doctor to examine their… *specimen*.

"Let's first…unload… Unit Six," Fleming reasoned. The three men approached the cruiser. Edison's face was now completely covered in a shapeless white cast. Carefully avoiding the body's cloaked head, Jones and Fleming each grabbed an arm and yanked the pot grower out onto the gravel with a thud; Edison didn't even stir. The three men hoisted the body up like a log and stumbled into the station, tossing it onto the long slab-bench inside the station's only holding cell.

With growing unease, Fleming watched deputy Jeeves back his beat-up Sedan out of the parking lot while Jones packed Unit Six's cruiser with sugary snacks (for himself) and bagged instant coffee grounds (for the neighborhood's residents). Jones eased his broad gut into the driver's seat, and giving a small salute, set out at a crawl, his cruiser's speakers bellowing *Tennessee Whiskey*.

As Richard Fleming reentered the station, his boots dragged across the floor—he felt as though he was forgetting something. But he brushed aside the feeling and rubbed at the threads tickling his cheeks. A heavy mass settled in the pit of his stomach. Brandishing the office's landline, Fleming begrudgingly dialed Doctor Beth Cohen's cell.

"Beth, this is Rich."

"It's been a while, Rich. What's up? I mean, *besides* the entire world rapidly going to Hell," she bitterly remarked.

"Beth, you know you're the only doctor around, and I was wondering if you could come down from Hephzibah and help me out." The other end of the line was silent.

"Yeah, I should'a expected this. You're just the same, only calling when you need something from me, it's never 'Beth how are you?' 'Beth, how's work these days?' *Jesus*, Rich, I'm glad I didn't marry you. You never think of anyone but yourself."

Marriage…his *wife*. His family! Richard Fleming's chest seized, the oxygen immediately leaving his body.

"My FAMILY! FUCK!" He shouted. "Beth *please* come to the station, there's a body in the cell for you to examine. I'll leave the door unlocked, just, please help me! The entire town is looking to me for answers and I'm in over my fucking head!"

"I never thought I'd live to see the day when Dick Fleming asked a *woman* for help," Doctor Cohen snarked. But Fleming was already out the door, the landline clattering across the tiles.

"Rich? Rich? …I'll be there in 15, you selfish idiot."

Collapsing his tingling body behind his steering wheel, Richard Fleming fumbled with his cell phone and dialed his wife with shaking hands.

"Abby, are you okay? What are you doing right now? Where's Tyler?"

"What's wrong honey? I was just sitting down for some T.V. I just put Tyler to bed."

Fleming's pupils contracted; his vision went white. "Abby, get OFF the phone! Get Tyler up, *NOW*!"

"Honey, what's happening. What's this on the news? This lady says the world is getting sick?! Is everything—"

"*NOW, GODDAMN IT*!" Fleming roared. The line promptly disconnected.

Heart racing, Richard Fleming was racked with immense guilt. He'd forgotten about his own family—what kind of man did that make him? He smacked the steering wheel. "FUCK!" Throwing on the car's lightbar, Fleming flagrantly ignored the speed limit, hurtling home to see his son.

IV

Doctor Beth Cohen arrived at Blythe's Station in just over eleven minutes—probably a world record if you asked her. Her hair was tangled, her t-shirt speckled with mud. It was long past time to fix that piece-of-shit SUV's broken window. 'Damn boys and their baseballs,' she thought. Stepping into the main office, Doctor Cohen dropped her bag onto the tiles. Her gaze quickly landed on the cell's iron bars and the human form laid out on its slab bench. Stepping into the cell's confines, Doctor Cohen stared at the thick white covering wrapped around the body's entire head. She checked its pulse—the victim was still alive, his chest rising and falling sluggishly. "Asleep," she mumbled.

Pulling on rubber gloves, Doctor Cohen gently touched the white, sticky surface. A thin thread stuck to her retreating fingertip and snapped in half, thin fibers dancing in the air. "Now this, this is some weird sci-fi shit," she breathed. "What in the *hell* am I even doing here? I'm a fucking *OB-GYN*."

Unpacking her small antique home-microscope (luckily unbroken, despite hurried packing), Doctor Cohen examined the tiny filament. It was composed of individual cells, each complete with a wall, nuclei, chloroplast, vacuoles.... "But how could the human body produce *plant* matter?" She breathed aloud, in both wonder and horror.

Doctor Cohen jumped as her cell began to buzz on the counter.

"Hello? Rich?"

"Beth, whatever, you do, do NOT tear the white stuff off his face!"

"Rich? What do you mean?"

"I'll explain later!" the line went dead. Beth rolled her eyes. Typical Fleming, never telling anyone the whole story.

As she slipped her phone into her bag, Doctor Cohen's gaze landed on the lobby's television screen. A flustered young deputy was fidgeting beside an attractive reporter. "…do whatever you can to stay awake guys! Play music, turn the lights on, have a dance party, drink coffee, I don't care! We just gotta stay awake until the scientists figure this out, but there'll be a cure, I swear on my honor as a deputy!"

"Thank you, deputy Jeeves," the reporter beamed, all smiles and waves as the deputy reluctantly withdrew from the screen, gawking at the unbothered reporter. Her flawless composure was eerily out of place, but it reminded Doctor Cohen to breathe deeply and compose *her*self.

"Okay Beth, *think*. So, it's plant matter. How can we remove it? Plants breathe, plants freeze, they burn… Oh! Plants *burn*!" Fumbling with her lighter, Doctor Cohen had never been happier to be a smoker. Tossing the thin silvery thread into the air, she sparked the lighter and touched it to the floating strand. A massive cloud of fire engulfed the surrounding air instantly, leaving only thick, pluming smoke behind. "Plants *burn*!" She laughed gleefully. "Yes!"

Doctor Cohen gasped as frigid water abruptly soaked through her clothes. The smoke had triggered the station's sprinkler system. Shielding her possessions, Doctor Cohen ran out of the station into the summer evening, shivering in her wet clothes. The sun was gone, but the closest houses' windows glowed nearly as bright, and country music penetrated the evening air. Doctor Cohen could see people—mostly men—jumping, exercising, and dancing, many sporting unnervingly painful expressions, tears wetting their cheeks. Shaking her head, Doctor Cohen dialed Richard Fleming's cell.

V

Just as Doctor Beth Cohen was arriving at the station, Sheriff Richard Fleming flew up the steps of his own porch, and began to pound on the front door. "ABBY! OPEN UP!" he shouted, but received no response. Jamming his key into the lock, Fleming burst into the front hall. His head whipped around the room. Several rugs were bunched up, a chair was overturned—there was blood on the floor, on the wall, on the bathroom door. His chest tightened with panic. "Abby? What happened?!" He shouted. Stumbling over to the closed bathroom door, Fleming pounded on it. From inside the room, his wife screamed, "No, no no! PLEASE, TYLER, DON'T!"

"Abby are you in there??"

"Rich?" The lock clicked and Fleming's wife cracked open the door. Seeing her husband, she threw it open and locked him in a tight hug, sobbing.

"What happened, Abby? Are you hurt? Where's Tyler?" He held his wife at arm's length. Her shirt was torn to shreds; her ankles, chest, and face were covered in deep scratches that were oozing blood.

"I tried to wake him up, but there was this—this white *thing* on his face! I tried to wipe it off and then he *attacked* me! He chased me like he could see—but his eyes, they were *closed*! It's like he was trying to *kill* me!"

Rubbing his face, Fleming strained against a tidal wave of emotion. His son was sick.

"Where is he now?"

"In the bedroom, I think. Please—be careful, Rich," Abby pleaded.

"Stay here," Fleming commanded, and closed the door.

Remembering that Doctor Cohen was alone with yet another turned-murderer, Fleming quickly dialed her cell.

"Hello? Rich?"

"Beth, whatever, you do, do NOT tear the white stuff off his face!"

"Rich? What do you mean?" Cohen sounded confused, but Fleming had no time to waste—he had to save his son.

"I'll explain later!" Fleming hung up and pocketed his phone.

Heart racing, Fleming approached the bedroom door. Wishing he'd brought a baton, Fleming instantly stiffened at the thought of hurting his own child. He peered into the bedroom and nearly collapsed in relief—and sadness—when he saw his son's body lying motionless on the floor. Approaching the cocooned form, Fleming crouched and watched white silk spin out from under the boy's closed eyelids, resealing the ragged hole his wife had carved into the mask. Lifting his little boy's body into his arms, Fleming stilled the waves of emotion raging inside his skull and held his son in silence. "I'm so sorry, buddy. Sorry I wasn't here to protect you."

Returning to the bathroom, Fleming told his wife what he'd found. She cried out, shaking with sobs. "It's best to leave him be right now. We'll find a cure, honey, I promise. Let's patch you up, now. You're still bleeding." Lifting Abby onto the bathroom sink, Fleming removed her shirt and began to wash her cuts while she wailed in grief. Feeling his pocket buzz, Fleming fished out his phone. It was Beth. "I'm sorry, hon, I have to take this" he sighed, abandoning his wife on the bathroom counter.

"Any progress?" Fleming asked, stepping into the living room.

"It seems to be some kind of plant matter, Rich," Doctor Cohen panted into the receiver. "It's *combustible*! We just have to figure out how to avoid burning the bodies inside!"

"Yes! That's great news, Beth! I'll tell Jeeves to make another announcement."

Stepping into the muggy summer night, Fleming palmed his cell and brushed webs from underneath his nose. He dialed Jeeves's cell, and as the receiver rang into his ear, four, five, then six times, Fleming began to sweat. At last, the line connected.

"Hello? Sheriff Fleming? This is Aimee Barr from the Channel Seven News team. We were about to call you—your deputy's been fighting sleep for the last half hour, and he drifted off before anyone could catch him. I'm very sorry."

He'd lost Jeeves. Fuck. Fleming's team was dwindling. "I understand, Ms. Barr. Just—leave him there for now. Could you get Lila on the line, it's urgent." Fleming's muscles buzzed with newfound energy. The white shit *burned*. There was still hope after all.

VI

Lila Thomas's eyes were fluttering between several monitors, watching as the graphics department sifted through security footage from all corners of town. Perched over one man's shoulder, she watched with morbid curiosity as a young waitress shook the sleeping form of her late-night customer. Poking his white mask, the waitress's face soured. She dug a long, painted nail into the mask and began to rip it open, wearing an expression of concern. As if he'd been shocked, the sleeping man suddenly sprung to life. Lunging forward, he knocked his assailant to the floor. She tried in vain to shield her face as he ripped open her clothes and began to tear and bite into the skin on her stomach with animalistic ferocity. The waitress's eyes widened in shock, her mouth flew open. Her screams of pain were silent, unrecorded by the footage. And *God,* there was so much blood. It flew into the air, splattered onto the tile, and splashed out onto her attacker's torso. The man abandoned her bleeding chest cavity, only to seize her head and slam it into the tile floor—once, twice, three times… Blood poured from the hole in the back of her head; she fell limp at once.

Shit. None of this footage was remotely appropriate for television. Lila's stomach flipped. Feeling a tap on her shoulder, she stiffened. It was her assistant, Aimee Barr.

"Sheriff needs to speak to you," she explained, holding out a cell phone.

Lila sighed and took it, raising the receiver to her ear. "Sheriff? What is it?"

"You have to make another report, right now, Lila. If you wake these, these—sleepers—they become violent, they try to *kill*, and then they just go straight back to sleep. My *goddamn son* tried to rip open my wife's throat. They're dangerous, Lila. They're not our family anymore. But my friend—she's a doctor and she's just discovered that the cocoon shit is flammable. We just gotta figure out how to keep the bodies inside safe while we burn it off."

"The team has actually been sorting through security footage of sleepers for a while now, Sheriff. We're trying to find something remotely appropriate enough to air... It's absolutely

chilling, they're so *violent*. We'll be sure to make that report soon. Good luck, Sheriff. I hope you can work something out."

VII

Brian Kaiser's head snapped up, nearly giving him whiplash. He must've fallen asleep on the couch. Damn it. He was missing *Baywatch*. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Brian scanned his surroundings. The desk on which his head had been resting was covered in wet dust and loamy filth. Nearby chairs were overturned; many desks were split into rusted pieces; long loops of ivy bedecked the crumbling walls. Brian shot up at once and began slapping at the dust on his letterman. "Dammit, not my jacket!"

Wandering toward the doorway, he asked the empty room, "Is this a dream?"

Rolling up his sleeve, Brian held his breath and pinched his left forearm as hard as he could. His eyes watered but he didn't wake up. "FUCK! OW!" Shaking out his arm, Brian marched through the classroom's doorway and out into the hallway. Scanning the building, his gaze landed on a familiar trophy case, its glass smashed in, gold plaques askew. Stepping closer, he noticed a torn, faded poster of the football team pinned beside the case. All his teammates were there—even that pathetic momma's boy, David Webber. Brian remembered posing for that photo, rolling back his shoulders and standing as tall as he could manage (girls *loved* the tall guys). "What's going on here?" he wondered, fingering the poster's frayed edges, and his heart sank. "This *is* a dream… isn't it?"

Hopping over broken glass, Brian marched toward the school's south entrance, eyes darting around, searching for anyone to explain what was going on. He spotted a body slouched over in front of some tarnished lockers; Brian kicked the sleeping kid with his punting leg. The kid's head suddenly whipped up and he scrambled to his feet, yelping and cradling his side. It was none other than "Wimpy Webber," the football team's resident benchwarmer. This had to be Brian's nightmare—why else would sorry little Webber have been the first face he found?

"You're gonna tell me what's going on, you little *shit*, or I'm gonna kick your balls up into your throat" Brian growled and pinned his teammate to the lockers, dust spiraling into the air.

"Brian?" David squeaked. "Could you let go of me, *please*?"

Lifting the skinny boy's torso away from the lockers, Brian slammed David's shoulders into the rusted metal.

"I *said*, where *are* we?"

David's eyes welled up. "I-I'm not sure, Brian, but could you back up, *please*?"

Brian released his teammate. "You're such a *pussy*, Webber. You should be glad we beat your momma's influence outta you." He slapped David's cheek for good measure.

Casting his eyes onto the ground, David spoke. “Have you been watching the news, Brian?” he asked softly, cradling his cheek.

“The news is for nerds. Unless that little slut Lila is reporting, I don’t give a shit.”

“Well, Brian, it seems we’ve become, uh, sick and fallen asleep. So, our bodies are sleeping back home in cocoons—”

“You think you’re fucking *funny*, Webber? This ain’t some sci-fi novel of yours, you ass. Tell it to me straight, *NOW*!” Brian kicked David in the shin.

“Brian, I’m telling the truth!” David whimpered.

“*This*” he gestured all around them, “must be where the sleeping guys go!”

***

As the two teens loped out onto Blythe Community High School’s football field—one sporting a prominent limp—all attention was directed on a lanky man dressed in a deputy’s uniform, standing erect on the bleachers. About twenty other males were gathered below him. He appeared to be making a speech of some sorts.

“…not sure where we are, but come nightfall, we’ll be wishing we had a place to stay, so we ought’ta find a place to hole up in for the night...”

“Well, *this* shithole looks like Blythe after a dog shat on it n’ then baked it in the sun for a decade” one voice called out, and the crowd snickered.

“Well, ah think we should just walk until we find suhm civilization,” countered a balding man, thick arms crossed over his broad chest.

“Well, I, uh, think it’s really best that we find a place to stay… I checked the houses and they’re all rotting through…” the deputy mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Hey, who put you in charge, asshole?” another man called out.

“Yeah, I wanna be king a’ this shit-hill!” a third man shouted, aggressively hopping up the bleachers. He socked deputy Jeeves square in the nose. In an instant, the men of Blythe were at each other’s throats, punching, kicking, and tearing as the two teens hid, cowering, in the shadows.

***

In a matter of minutes, the field was scattered with bloody, bruised bodies, chests wheezing into the afternoon’s thick air. From behind the bleachers, Brian watched his second period science teacher, Mr. Holcomb, wobble to his feet.

“What in the *hell* are we doing, guys?” Wiping the blood from his lips, he raised his voice. “Let’s not behave like wild animals—we’re *men*.” Groaning, the crowd pushed themselves to their feet, mumbling apologies.

“Wherever we are, it sure looks like Blythe, so it might have a town hall. If anybody else is here, they’ve gotta be at the central hub.” And so, Blythe’s sleeping beaus waded through overgrown crabgrass, marching along the sun-baked road to their newfound “Shithole’s” town hall.

VIII

In Blythe, the night dragged on. Deputy Jim Jones licked the sugar from his stubby fingers and opened his second dozen donuts, shifting Unit Six’s cruiser into park for the fifty-third time that night. Reclining his seat, he figured a five-minute break wouldn’t hurt anyone. After all, men were tough. They’d wake up eventually, Jones was sure of that. He turned down the radio.

Fleming had better pay the medical bills for his hearing damage. He was exhausted and his ringing skull was about to split open. Jones groaned as a high melody filled his car. “Thaht Swift girl ain’t no real country artist, and she ain’t no *good*, either.” He flipped through the stations, and, finding nothing to suit his taste, let the radio news station prattle on.

“…after Channel Seven’s report stating the flammability of this mysterious white silk and the sickness’s monstrous side effects, some civilians have been seen *burning the sleepers alive* to prevent them from committing acts of violence. Reporter Lila Thomas reasoned that, quote, ‘they aren’t our husbands, friends, or fathers anymore—they’re dangerous creatures without a soul.’ So, it seems concerned citizens have taken it upon themselves to put their loved ones to rest for good, but remember that these guys aren’t violent unless you mess with ‘em. So just stand by for a while if ya can bear it, ladies! More updates in a few.”

Unbuckling his seatbelt, deputy Jones heaved himself out into the cool evening’s air and stomped up the front drive of house number fifty-four, nursing a headache and a bad attitude. “Let’s jus’ get this over with.”

Having heard his heavy footsteps approaching, a young girl of about twelve pulled open the front door. Her face was puffy, dampened by tears.

“Deputy, it’s my paw-paw, he fell asleep and I don’t know what to do! I’m real scared!” She pointed behind her at the thin, wrinkled form of an old man, head encased, laid out on the carpet.

Dragging a gummy hand across his eyes, Jones sighed in frustration. He wasn’t built for this kind of emotional shit. His gaze traveled past the elder’s sleeping form to the house’s television; it was projecting an eerie red-orange glow onto the dimly-lit room’s walls. Jones watched a clip of several bodies twitch as they were engulfed in roaring flames, smoke spiraling up into the night sky.

"Well, if ya' scared, thahn just *burn* 'em. That's what people are doin' now, ah've heard," he threw his hands in the air. "They're pretty dangerous, little lady. Ya don't wan' yer paw-paw to cut open yer guts, do ya?" Jones wiggled his fat fingers for effect.

The girl's eyes widened and she began to sob. "I don't wanna *kill paw-paw*!" she wailed.

"Well, it's a dog-eat-dog world, girl. Ya gotta be more like a man if ya wanna make it." Jones shrugged, and promptly spinning on his heel, plodded back to his cruiser, cradling his throbbing temples.

Sometime later, as deputy Jones dragged his heavy body down house number 58's driveway (no one had been awake), he heard a sharp cry. Whirling around, Jones watched the young girl slump over in her driveway, small chest heaving with cries. A lit match fell onto her paw-paw's chest and she scrambled backward as his body ignited instantly. His boney limbs began to twitch and writhe, and her high screams of fear chilled the humid night air.

***

Brian Kaiser was not pleased to have been assigned shopping duty with none other than Wimpy Webber. The two boys had been sent to collect nonperishable foodstuffs from the Shithole's long-derelict Fresh-Mart. Brian didn't even know what "nonperishable" meant. Hadn't *all* food "perished" by the time it was eaten?

Swiping a jug of milk, Brian unscrewed the lid and took a few deep swallows. He tasted something sour on his tongue and began to cough. "What the *fuck* is wrong with this milk?" he asked aloud.

David whipped around, eyes wide. "Don't drink that Brian, it's spoiled!"

Brian shrugged. "Fuck off, Webber. What the hell are we even looking for?" he complained. His stomach was doing flips; the smell of rotting goods and rat shit stung his nostrils. Even the flies had long since abandoned this place.

"Could you treat me with respect just this once, Brian?!" David shouted. "Watching my mom in the kitchen is paying off for *once* in my life, and I'm *still* your punching bag! Get a GRIP, because right now, your life depends on ME!" He jabbed a thin finger into Brian's chest.

For a long moment, the crickets stopped singing; the window pane stopped rattling; the breeze hushed and the Fresh-Mart fell silent.

"You know what? Fine. I've got nobody to show for here. The team tells me to push you around, and they're not here, anyway. Shake on it?"

David's brows raised. Was it really that simple? His thin lips immediately turned up. A smile suited him well, Brian thought. Stepping forward, Brian offered his large hand; David grasped it and the pair sealed their agreement with a firm shake.

"Now, we're looking for canned things: soup, pasta, vegetable, rice…"

Brian watched his partner prattle out a list of goods, observing the way his eyes lit up in a way they never had during football practice. He smiled. Maybe this guy wasn't the worst, after all. His stomach suddenly gurgled—Brian groaned, placing his hands on his knees.

"That must be the milk coming up," scolded David. Brian's stomach heaved. Gagging, warm, thick liquid pushed itself up his throat, splashing onto the tiles.

IX

After his brief, inspiring speech, Merle Holcomb had earned the men's respect. As the unofficially-appointed leader of the party, Holcomb had sent off a few men to pick up food and cleaning supplies from the Fresh-Mart, while several accompanied him on a mattress retrieval expedition. The other twelve residents were left to break into and prepare the dilapidated town hall building for Blythe's first unofficial all-male slumber party.

Picking up a large rock, deputy Jeeves began to beat on the door handle of the old town hall. Breaking the windows would be unwise—the night's temperature might drop and blankets were going to be scarce. After several tries, Jeeves reluctantly asked for help; a reedy man stepped forward from the pack's rear. Scrutinizing his thin arms, Jeeves raised a brow, but relinquished the rock and stepped aside.

The stranger raised the stone over his head, and, bringing down his arms swiftly, bashed the doorknob clean off in one swing. It hit the cement with a hollow clang. "I, uh, broke into my fair share of establishments in the day. Sorry, deputy" he smiled sheepishly.

Jeeves toed open the door and was immediately overwhelmed by the stench of mold. Turning to the waiting crowd, he assessed the situation: "lots'a mold in there, guys. We're definitely gonna need that bleach." The break-in party stretched out on the nearby grass, waiting for their grocery-hounds to return.

In little time, the silhouettes of two teens breached the horizon, pushing shopping carts piled up with goods and supplies. "My guys, we bring you gifts!" bellowed Brian Kaiser.

The party heaved several gallons of bleach into the moldy, damp town hall. Some men drained jugs onto the floor, drowning the mold in cloudy liquid, while others soaked cloths and wiped down the walls. But this was no quick task, and after fifteen minutes or so, David Webber was feeling more than just a bit woozy.

"Hey, Brian?" he asked, his breath hitching. David's lungs were boiling and his chest had become uncomfortably tight.

"Woah, man, are you okay?" Brian asked. "You don't look so hot. I mean—you do—wait, not like that, like, you're *sweating* a lot—"

"I think I need to go outside" David panted, dropping his cloth to the wood with a wet splat.

Brian surveyed the large room. Seeing red, watering eyes and labored breathing all around, he called out, "Guys! Let's take a break."

Gratefully, the men collectively abandoned their task. Falling to the lawn, they gulped in the evening's moist air as a parade of mattresses and blankets arrived, led by Merle Holcomb. Dropping his mattress, he ran up to the lawn, eyes wide. "Guys, you look awful! Don't tell me you used the bleach without opening any windows? Basic knowledge! Didn't your mommas teach you that bleach is *toxic*?"

A collective shrug rippled across the grass. "We didn't know any better," David breathed guiltily.

"Why don't y'all tell some stories while we wait for the place to air out," reasoned Merle Holcomb. He entered the fume-house to pry open a few windows while the bleary-eyed group trekked around the building on heavy feet and settled around a makeshift fire pit. Jeeves lit a match from his pocketbook, and the spent men's visages melted over the evening's flames.

X

Sheriff Richard Fleming had returned to his office in the black of night, searching for his next move. Threads tickled his cheeks; he yawned and slapped himself awake, brushing webs from his skin. He was dead tired and felt entirely hopeless. On his desk rested a notepad with half-baked ideas scrawled in a messy hand. He had to stay alert, but how? He'd already drank several cups of coffee but his eyelids still betrayed him. Pacing the length of his office, Fleming's eyes fell upon the evidence locker. Pulling a keyring from his belt loop, Fleming opened the locker and examined the large bag of meth he'd confiscated several days ago.

Pushing balled fist into his eyes, Fleming racked his conscience. He'd promised his wife he'd stay away from drugs after Tyler had been born. She hadn't wanted their child to become the next victim of Fleming's substance-induced beatings.

"I'm sorry, Abby, but I have no choice," Fleming mumbled, and dropped the baggie onto his desk. All too quickly, Fleming's hands took on a life of their own, expertly rolling a crisp tube from spare cash. Laying out a line, Fleming bent over the desk and inhaled, sighing as the fine powder flew into his nose. It felt too good, too right. Staring past his notepad, Fleming smacked his hands together. It was decided. He would visit the scene where everything had first begun.

***

As his car careened over the same hill that had given Unit Six the power of flight just over twelve hours earlier, Fleming whooped into the evening's air, reveling in his newfound energy. His heart was racing, his fingers were tingling with heightened sensation. Slapping his foot onto the gas pedal, Fleming reached the old pool in record time, grinning like an idiot. His car gave a high cry of protest as he slammed on the brakes, throwing pebbles and dirt into the air. Shifting into park as the small dust storm settled, Fleming coughed up some grit and entered the building.

Switching on his phone's flashlight, broken glass crunched underfoot as Fleming treaded further into the room. Sweeping the light's weak beam across the room, he saw that most of the young plants had been ripped from their soil; the purple growing lamps were smashed to bits. As his light bounced off the far wall, Fleming squinted in confusion. The wall appeared to be pulsating and *squirming* as if alive. Blinking hard, Fleming wondered if the meth was twisting his perception.

Stepping closer, he gave a shout as the entire wall suddenly barreled toward him. Closing his eyes instinctually, Fleming felt endless papery wings slap his face; a strong wind beat his chest. The old pool fell silent and Fleming cracked open an eye. The wall was only a wall. Running outside to pursue his strange assailant, Fleming craned his neck toward the sky as thousands of large moths, silhouetted in the moonlight, swarmed past the old pool building. "What in the *hell*?" he breathed.

Following the moths' path, Fleming entered a large clearing. His eyes widened in surprise—how could he have not seen such a large tree before? The old oak boasted hundreds of arms, its great spine extending thousands of feet into the air. There was a hollow at the base of its massive trunk, large enough for a grown man to stand inside. Fleming slowly circled the tree, shocked at its impossible size. It most certainly hadn't been there just a few days ago, but where, then, could it have come from? Having scouted the entire circumference of the tree, Fleming arrived at the hollow once again and shined his flashlight inside. A hunched, willowy figure turned its gaze towards Fleming, glimmering blue eyes reflecting the beam. The man was impossibly thin, yet elegant. His eyes were ringed with dark circles, and his high cheekbones were hollow. His skin was impossibly pale, almost sallow. Fleming sucked in his breath.

"Sir, are you injured? Do you ne—" he called out, his voice cutting off suddenly as he noticed the blood staining Adam's arms, which were clad in Doug Edison's familiar flannel shirt.

"Woah, woah, woah!" Grasping for his pistol, Fleming aimed at the folded figure, who merely blinked at him. "Don't move! Who are you!"

"Perhaps you would like to bring me in for questioning, Richard Fleming." Adam raised his crimson hands into the air, pressing stained wrists together. Fleming cocked his pistol.

"No sudden movements!" Fleming barked, his sheriff's instincts taking over. His mind was whirling. How did this unfamiliar man know his name? Cuffing his thin wrists, Fleming elbowed Adam back to the car, roughly shoving his long body inside. As the Sheriff's cruiser rolled back into town, sirens screaming, Adam's thin lips curled up into a cat-like smile. Containment did not faze him. After all, Adam was everywhere—he was a fly perched on a pebble near the rushing river; he was a moth slumbering inside the pocket of a freshly-deceased paw-paw's suit jacket; he was a small spider twirling from a delicate thread, watching Abigail Fleming cradle her sleeping son's body from up above.

XI

As a local cashier was finishing his dramatic reenactment of "The Angry Soccer Moms Who Demanded I Give Them Full Refunds," Brian Kaiser tossed several logs onto the dying fire. Peels of weak laughter echoed across the starry-speckled, inky sky; the men felt feeble from hunger but none knew how to cook. Brian gently slapped the back of David's head and whispered that he should volunteer.

"I—I can try I guess?" David stuttered into a sea of expectant faces. After all, his mother *had* made cooking look pretty easy. Stepping up to the fire, David poured several cans of mushroom soup into a large pot he'd grabbed from the Fresh-Mart. The men resumed their storytelling, surrounding him with low, pleasant chatter.

After some time, the pot began to emit a foul, smoky smell. "Uh-oh," David thought. Someone yelled for him to take the pot off the fire, and, in his embarrassment, David grabbed the hot metal with his bare hands. He gasped and dropped their supper onto the dirt—the metal pot bounced several times and rolled to a stop, mushroom pieces and broth flying everywhere. Scraping the bottom of the pot with a ladle, David discovered a hard, blackened soup-crust covering the metal surface. He hadn't stirred the soup well enough. Who knew that one could even burn soup?

One voice spoke up, "Now, how're we supposed to eat that?"

David said nothing. He shook his stinging palms and brushed tears of embarrassment from his eyes.

Some others joined in. "You're a shit cook!"

"And you even kept us waiting, too."

"We're fucking *hungry*, boy!"

Brian cut them off. "HEY! David tried his best. If you fuckers are gonna tease him, next time why don't YOU cook while everyone else is staring?!"

Sudden silence extinguished the campfire's mirth.

From one corner of the pit, soft sobs rang out. A young doe-eyed boy sniffled and began to beat his fists on his thighs. "I want my mommy!"

The haggard man seated next to him swiftly turned. With a furrowed brow, he slapped the boy's face hard, shouting "Man UP, boy!" Instantly, three other men knocked the haggard into the dirt and began to kick his sides as he cried out in pain. The doe-eyed boy's eyes widened in fear and he began to sob with renewed vigor.

"STOP IT, ALL OF YA!"

Holcomb's low voice echoed into the evening. "After all we've been through, can't the boy just cry?" He drew in a slow breath, kind eyes crinkling in a soft smile. "Now, what's your name, son?"

"Tyler," he hiccupped.

"We'll make sure you stay safe until your momma can come get you, Tyler," reassured Holcomb, placing a hand awkwardly atop the young boy's head.

The early evening's mirth was now long-gone; the three assailants reluctantly released the haggard, who spit on their shoes.

"I think we'd best retire for the night," reasoned Jeeves.

The trip into the town hall building was a somber procession, and the hungry, exhausted men climbed onto shared mattresses, grumbling,

"Keep ya hands to ya'self."

"I'm no fag, so don't get close."

XII

"Society is on the brink of collapse. Approximately one third of the world's men have gone up in flames in the recent hours, and hundreds of thousands of casualties have occurred at the hands of these 'sleeping' men. Two planes overrun by violent sleepers have crashed into the New York skyline. American citizens are storming the capital, demanding that the President act, but we haven't heard from him in several hours. No sick man has regained consciousness thus far, and all attempts to wake a sleeper have ended in death."

Lila Thomas's face was masked with gloom, her signature smile nowhere in sight.

***

Strapping the cuffed man to the interrogation table, Fleming eased himself onto the wood.

"Sir, why are you covered in blood?"

"Blood?" the man echoed, blinking in confusion.

"Did you kill Edison Thomas?" Fleming asked cooly.

"He had poisoned himself," Adam grimaced. "He was a carcass, rotting from the inside. It was mercy."

"You *bastard*, fancy yourself some sort of savior?" Fleming slammed his hands onto the table and stood up, bending down to Adam's eye level.

"It is *you* who will be your savior, or your demise." Adam grinned a shark's smile. "I am merely the tool sent to test you."

"What the fuck are you taking about?!" Fleming raised his voice. "You'd better start making sense, and *quick*."

"Earth's men have been put on trial, Richard Fleming," lilted Adam. "Your abilities must be tested. Perhaps you should join the convicted—I can feel your resistance. Even now, you grow tired as the artificial stimulants leave your body. You have no deputies left. No team to aide you. Embrace peace, and sleep, Richard Fleming."

Fleming's eyes widened. "How did you know—"

Adam cut him off. "If all agree to return to Earth, a door will open and the men shall return. But if even just *one* is to refuse, Earth shall never see its men again. Perhaps you'd like to carry along that message?"

"You're absolutely insane," spat Fleming. "Next you'll be saying that giant tree is yours!"

"I own nothing, Richard Fleming," replied Adam, icy eyes flashing. "But that oak, she sings the most beautiful, ancient melody."

While this man appeared entirely crazy, Fleming had no other leads. He had to return to the massive oak tree. Unchaining Adam, Fleming threw him into the cell atop the sleeping Doug Edison. Locking the door, Fleming held Adam's sly gaze. "You're going nowhere."

Exiting the station, Fleming wobbled on unsteady feet. He was crashing. He wondered if Adam had been right about Jones. Dialing his last deputy, Fleming waited, but the call never connected.

Fleming felt hopeless; he cursed into the wind. Night blanketed the Earth once again, and the world's men slept on. Fleming swiped at his eyes. Amongst the threads, tears had soiled his cheeks. Once again silencing his nuclear emotions, Fleming dialed his wife. The call went to voicemail.

"I don't know how much longer I can last. I'm going to the clearing by the old pool to try my last lead. Just know that I love you, Abby."

***

Sheriff Richard Fleming craned his neck, axe in hand, eyes searching high into the late night's sky. The mysterious tree seemed to stretched into infinity, past the clouds and even the twinkling stars. This interspatial doorway talk was a steaming load of shit if he'd ever smelled one, but Fleming was out of ideas. Stepping into the tree's hollow, he traced the hole's far wall

with the pads of this fingers. It was rough, without seams, and felt like ordinary bark. Drawing in a hopeful breath, Fleming flattened his palm onto the bark and pushed, hard. The hollow didn't give. Of course, it couldn't be that easy.

Hefting his axe, Fleming squeezed his eyes shut and shamelessly pleaded to any greater powers in the universe who were listening to give him strength. With a loud, raw yell that tore up his throat, Fleming brought the axe down upon the hollow's wall. In a frenzy, he hacked again and again. After several minutes, Fleming began to cry openly. Dropping his axe to the dirt, he watched as the bark around each cut wove fresh wood over his desperate hack-marks.

"Fuck. FUCK!" He yelled, dragging his hands up and down his face. Fleming's chest grew heavier by the minute—he was sinking, down, down deeper into despair. His body slid to the ground, cradled by the massive oak. Angrily wiping tears from his cheeks, Fleming pushed balled fists into his eye sockets. He felt silk tickling his wrists, and let them fall to his sides. Wrapping his arms around his waist, Fleming imagined his wife Abby was holding him—holding him up, holding him together—a broken, hopeless man. As tears trickled down his cheeks, Fleming let his head hang, and silk webs shyly crept across his cheeks, gently licking his tears.

XIII

Richard Fleming awoke suddenly. Sitting up, he recoiled as long wisps of grass tickled his arms. He gazed up at the cloudless blue sky; his breathing slowed. Where was he? Pushing himself to his feet, Fleming spied hearty smoke pluming from the center of an oddly familiar town. With a small sigh, he loped down the hill, searching for answers.

Fleming squinted as he approached the once-familiar welcome sign: it read WELCOME TO ~~BLYTHE~~ SHITHOLE, GEORGIA. Fleming raised a brow at the distasteful addition in red paint. Hanging from the bottom of the sign was a scrap of cloth that read "WELCOME HOME, GUYS."

More confused than ever, Fleming slapped his cheeks and shook his head. Walking on, he passed strangely familiar buildings caked in mold, moss, and rust. As Fleming gazed at the town's peripheral houses, he recognized Blythe, and wondered just how much time had passed. A nearby front door hung open—it swayed in the breeze, gently thumping against its wooden frame. Crabgrass had wormed its way up onto porches and busted through the once-immaculate roads, forcing Fleming to walk a drunkard's path around the bubbles. As he approached the town hall, he heard faint laughter drifting towards him on the breeze.

***

On this particularly sunny afternoon, Blythe's men were no less sunny themselves. Merle Holcomb was teaching deputy Jeeves to crochet—both men laughed as Jeeves held up a horribly crooked half-blanket; Brian Kaiser was pulling fat orange carrots from his small garden while David Webber led a line of food preps adeptly chopped the growing pile into small bits, which even more young men tossed into a cauldron; deputy Jones was tending the growing fire over which it boiled, smoke wafting high into the air. The other men, about three hundred in total, were kicking and tossing cans across the neighboring field, screaming and laughing, or slouched in dingy lawn chairs, sharing stories and smiles.

Jeeves suddenly dropped his blanked onto the dirt.

"Now what'd you do that for?" asked Merle Holcomb. "We're gonna have to wash that!"

But Jeeves had already covered half the lawn in a matter of seconds.

"SHERIFF!" He bellowed, and attacked the approaching figure, enveloping him in a tight hug.

"Oh!" Merle Holcomb exclaimed, and trotted over to the newcomer. "It's about time you arrived."

The two men shook hands.

"Name's Merle Holcomb. I'm the head of this here operation, Sheriff. Pleased to officially meet you. Now, how long's it been back in Blythe?" questioned Holcomb.

"What do you mean?" Fleming's brows furrowed. "I think I was on hour thirty-two. It'd be about two in the morning? But how'd you guys do all this in thirty hours? And how's it daytime? Where exactly are we?"

"It's been about five months here, give or take," Jeeves reasoned. "It's Blythe, but time passes differently here. Everything was gutted and run-down when we arrived, like nobody'd lived here for a hundred years… But most people started showing up after I was here three months… Turns out that was only 24 hours back in Blythe."

Fleming's brows hiked up his forehead.

"I know it's a bit overwhelming. Why don't we show you around, Sheriff?" offered Holcomb, gently slapping Fleming's shoulder.
"Welcome to Home."

***

Fleming found himself guided across the lawn toward an assembly line of several young boys, all chopping vegetables with practiced precision. A lanky boy with watery green eyes glanced up—he beamed, laid down his knife, and stepped around the table to greet Home's newest arrival. The boy introduced himself over a delicate, albeit awkward handshake; his name was David Webber, and he was head chef here in Home.

"And that's my sous chef, Brian," David pointed a finger at a muscular, olive-skinned teen who was dicing a carrot with impressive form. "He's the perfect example of how Home has helped us all become better people," David reasoned. "Brian couldn't even hold a knife correctly when he got here, but now food prep is his favorite activity. Brian, why don't you come on over and testify for the Sheriff?"

Carefully setting down his knife, Brian rounded the long table, trotting toward Fleming with a sheepish look on his face.

"Hi there, Sheriff," he mumbled, avoiding eye contact.

"So, David here tells me you're a changed man, eh Keiser?" Fleming prodded.

"I'd like to think so, sir," Brian replied, eyes darting to the ground. He sighed and locked eyes with Fleming. "I don't beat up kids anymore, sir, or sneak alcohol, or carry knives—well, other than that one," he gestured to the nearby prep station.

"Impressive, Keiser, but it's a pity" complimented Fleming. "I was beginning to enjoy your regular…visits... to the station."

David's eyes widened. "Brian, you had a *criminal record*?!"

"Uh, yeah… But I guess once you stood up to me, I realized that I was just hangin' with the wrong guys… I'm totally different now, you've seen it, David!" Brian reasoned.

David smiled, all teeth and gums. "Yeah, I sure have."

Brian turned to Holcomb. "Thank you for all you've done for us, sir"

"Don't thank me, Brian. Thank yourself. We've all changed," added Holcomb, "because we had to in order to survive."

***

Richard Fleming had been escorted through a full-service tour of Home—he'd entered several of the restored houses (each hosted a "family unit" of several men and boys); Holcomb flourished many crocheted blankets and accessories (his chest had swelled with pride, for they were his work); explained Home's water filtration process (recounting how the muddy water had made the men vomit and fall ill at first, in unnecessarily barf-filled graphic detail); and introduced Fleming to many familiar faces. Circling back to the town hall, high screams and giggles rang through the crisp summer air; the young children had been released into the nearby field to play. Fleming's heart swelled. Tears pooled in his eyes yet again when a familiar doe-eyed gaze locked with his own—Tyler immediately began running towards his father, wailing happily. Fleming scooped up his son and squeezed him tightly, inhaling his familiar scent. This time, Fleming couldn't hold back the tide. He finally let hours of stress and grief-induced tears soak his cheeks through.

But uneasiness gnawed at Fleming's chest as he thought of his wife back on Earth. Adjusting his grip on his son, Fleming asked Merle Holcomb to assemble the residents of Home; he had an urgent announcement to make.

"Sure thing!" Holcomb had brightly responded, but seeing Fleming's grim expression, he had quickly realized that this was no congratulations speech.

Scanning the crowd of several hundred faces from atop a picnic table-turned-pedestal, Richard Fleming felt guilty. These men looked so happy here, he thought. But he relayed Adam's explanation to them, and all the chaos above—burning bodies, anarchy as the stock market crashed, and violent drugstore raids for stimulants.

"I think it's time we head back to Blythe," urged Fleming.

"But we're happy here!" a voice called out from the crowd, catalyzing waves of protest ripped throughout the crowd in a rumbling storm.

"We've rebuilt our entire lives!"

"How can we just leave?"

"You can't make us go!"

David Webber, who stood beside the pedestal, tugged on Fleming's trousers and nudged him to the side, climbing onto the table. "I think what the guys are saying, Sheriff, is that they're happier here than they ever could be back in Blythe. We're different now. We cook, we clean, and we even cry, and there's no place on Earth for men like that."

"I see," responded Fleming, deep in thought. "Well, men, let's think about this logically. Society is experiencing complete annihilation. *Society* is what set us up for failure. For unhappiness. But society is in shreds now! If we go back, we can rebuild everything from the ground up! No more pressure to behave a certain way, 'cause everyone'll be equal, once and for all.

Men, we've learned the importance of compassion, so I think it's about time we use it to change the world."

XIV

In the early dawn, Abby Fleming cradled her husband's warm, motionless body. She had cried herself dry hours ago, but grief continued to warp her soft features. Leaning her head against the strange tree's trunk, she whispered, almost inaudibly, "Please, Rich, come home."

***

Abby's head snapped up—she had dozed off in the early dawn. The sun was ascending, urging the world to greet another day of Hell. Glancing beside her, Abby gaped at the empty

space where she had laid her husband's body hours before. Her heart squeezing, she began to sob anew; she would never see her husband again. She jumped when a great rumbling began to shake the earth beneath her feet. Her teeth rattled; she whipped her head around, scrambling away from the great oak for fear it might fall. Before her widening eyes, the bark inside the oak's hollow was moving, pieces unlocking and sliding past one another in a massive, discordant dance.

Her cotton-dry mouth fell open; Abby watched in awe as a figure emerged from the doorway, then another, and another. Like a colony of ants, men poured from the great tree, stepping into the sunlight and embracing one another. The clearing rang with echoing laughter and joyful tears. Abby's eyes darted around, searching desperately for her lost husband and son—Richard Fleming emerged at last, carrying Tyler in his arms. Abby ran to him in desperation. Fleming embraced her, Tyler wrapping his small arms around her neck.

Over his wife's shoulder, Fleming gazed at the large oak from which he'd come. Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the tree glimmered, and like a mirage, and was gone in an instant. Releasing his wife, Richard Fleming rounded his shoulders. There was still work to do. It was time to rebuild.

Epilogue

Fleming parked his cruiser in the gravel lot, and steadying his shaking hands, entered the station. He still had unanswered questions for the gaunt, electric-eyed stranger he'd locked up only hours earlier. Pushing open the door to the containment room, Fleming's brow furrowed. The iron door was still locked, but the cell was empty—except for a single fat, grey moth.

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