

# THE MAKING OF THEM

## *The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System*

by Nick Duffell

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### Extract

#### Chapter 8 *Leaving Home*

I was homesick during the whole of my first term at St. Peter's. Homesickness is a bit like seasickness. You don't know how awful it is till you get it, and when you do, it hits you right in the top of the stomach and you want to die. The only comfort is that homesickness and seasickness are instantly curable. The first goes away the moment you walk out of the school grounds and the second is forgotten as soon as the ship enters port.

Unless you have been to a boarding school when you are very young, it is absolutely impossible to appreciate the delights of living at home. It is almost worth going away because its so lovely coming back. I could hardly believe that I didn't have to wash in cold water in the mornings or keep silent in the corridors, or say 'Sir' to every grown-up man I met, or get flicked with wet towels while naked in the changing room, or eat porridge for breakfast that seemed to be full of little round sheep's-droppings, or walk all day long in perpetual fear of the long yellow cane that lay on top of the corner-cupboard in the Headmaster's study.

Roald Dahl.

**WHEN I WAS SEVEN** and knew that I was about to go away to my first boarding school, it was to my mother that I went to be prepared for this event. My father was a self-made man who had grown up in the streets of Hackney. He had clearly struggled and sacrificed to afford the luxury of my education. With his customary foresight he had not only put my name down for my public school when I was still a toddler, but had also, by means of clever insurance policies and dedicated saving, paid the bulk of the fees before I went there. But since he had never experienced boarding school life, he was unable to brief me; neither could he subsequently comprehend, nor share what I was going through. For him my schooling remained the most terrific privilege and opportunity: I was living in a country-house with extraordinary facilities, beyond anything he had ever experienced. I am sure

that my being there also created the right impression in the social circles in which my father, on his continuing rising star, was finding himself.

My mother, however, had been away for most of her schooling. Her cultural expectations more naturally included having her own children at boarding school. She had apparently loved her time. It was, she told me, with what I took to be excitement and conviction, "the best days of your life". However, it was not until she was in her seventies and my father had died that she acknowledged her abiding memory to be one of fear. But in those days she fed me on tales of midnight-feasts, pillow fights, the exciting atmosphere of the school railway carriage on the first day of term, and the strangeness of being evacuated to Wales at the outbreak of the war. To this diet I added what I had

gleaned from comic strips inspired by Frank Richards, with names like 'Forbes of the Fourth'. In these the hero was constantly engaged in adventure, either vanquishing the despicable bully in the boxing ring, or trapping a band of robbers during half-time in the vital football or cricket match, in which he was starring.

The reality of my experience turned out, of course, to be quite different. The atmosphere of school was certainly tense, if not exciting, particularly at public school. The tension was not due to adventure, for the lack of free time and the unending ritual of daily routine meant that life could be experienced as utterly boring, if there had been time to think about it. Rather, the tension came from the need for constant vigilance, out of pride and self-protection, to keep your misery concealed and others off your back. I have already described my first parting, when my mother fled from her own tears, which would doubtless have embarrassed me too. I suspect most of us suffered from the enforced separation, and yet I cannot remember seeing the signs of it. Nor were there signs of general homesickness in my contemporaries, though we constantly complained together about school and counted the days until the current sentence (which is how we viewed each term) had been served. But we did not show each other our sorrows, and this for most of us, will have become the habit of a lifetime.

My response to this invisible suffering was to reason that I was the only one with this debilitating weakness. That made me feel extremely vulnerable. As a child, however, I did not even have the concept of vulnerability. I had no idea that there might be others who thought that they also were the only ones who were 'weak'. But what I never doubted for a moment, though it was not till much later that I understood how it worked, was the threat which the other children represented. This was apparent at each and every moment, for we lived within a herd mentality. Alliances and friendships were formed and could be changed instantly, according to how the social wind in the group blew.

We organised ourselves in groupings where those who had been longer at the school had progressively more status – unless their behaviour gave them away. Physical size and

cutting wit were qualifications which could make you more popular and more safe. You were not meant to like the school, but you certainly were not allowed to miss your parents. You were not supposed to cry – unless the group wanted to make you cry through some humiliation or bullying. In which case they, and of course we, because everyone will have joined in the persecution at times, were extremely capable of doing so. All in all it was a perfect atmosphere in which to develop the skills of the seen-and-not-heard child. Here is Tom, hero of the famous *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, advising new boy Arthur:

Don't you ever talk about home or your mothers and sisters ... or they'll call you home-sick or mama's darling.

Such advice to the new boy has been unchanged since the beginning, witness this eight year-old prep school boy, quoted by Lambert, in *The Hothouse Society*:

If a boy cries everyone laughs at him or goes away because he is a baby and very wet.

It is easy to see now, with hindsight, that having lost our parents and being thrown into that 'dog eats dog' environment we were all caught up in the need to survive. But of course then I thought the problem was just me, that I was childish, that I was not tough enough to not feel the desperate longing to be taken home and away from this jungle, which had not turned out to be the way I had been told it was going to be. Now I know that many children will have felt exactly the way I did – personal failures, or weaklings. Many of those who have written to us, or who have done our courses, have experienced some immediate relief to know that they were not alone in feeling like this. This relief comes after a lifetime of believing that they were the only ones who had felt bad, and were therefore one of 'life's failures' – a phrase often used by boarding-school enthusiasts to humiliate those who have turned out to be against the convention of sending young children away. Those who are aiming for this sore spot know what an easy target it is, since they will also have been desperately guarding against 'failure' and 'weakness' in themselves.

The idea of being ‘the-only-one-who-cannot-take-it’ powerfully effects the personality of the child and the subsequent adult in a specific way. It strengthens a vicious double-bind which can be seen to operate both on children and parents. In his delightful autobiography, *Trivial Disputes*, Fraser Harrison, writing of his first days at prep school, describes this double-bind with precision:

If he [the new boy] is to survive being sent away from home, he must develop the ability to do without their affection, at least for the time being. And to achieve this he must either cease to feel any affection on his side or split himself off from his feelings, suspending them until they can begin to flow painlessly again.

The loss of affection and the consequent cutting of from feeling is a rapid and often irreparable amputation. Journalist David Thomas, remembering his school days, in a review of the television film *The Making of Them* in the *Telegraph*, 6 January, 1994, makes the point.

The first lesson I learned about boarding school life is that if you want to survive being deprived of your parents’ affection then you have to persuade yourself that you did not need it in the first place. Herein lies the great flaw in the public school system. In many ways prep schools are idyllic places. They are usually in the country. You can play football and cricket and make huts in the woods. But what you cannot do is love. You can’t love your parents because it hurts too much. And you most certainly can’t love your fellow-pupils because there is an overriding taboo against any hint of homosexuality. So, after a while, you just get out of the habit of loving. As I dare to say many of those Boarding School Survivors – not to mention their wives – will testify, getting back into the habit can be a very difficult task.

In the initial stages, most children simply want out. Apparently, for the first year or so, I wrote letters home begging to be taken away, which clearly caused my mother a deal of misery. And in my secret world, stimulated no doubt by the current literature and films about brave Tommies escaping from the Nazi POW camps, I remember endlessly fantasising about running away. But as Fraser Harrison points out:

The double bind was a python with many more coils .... They had, after all, sent me away from home, which was bad enough; what might they do to me if I made a fuss? It could only be worse. And anyway I wanted to please them, not to irritate them ... I was frightened of losing their love by telling them how much I needed it.

This situation spells calamity inside the mind of the child. It cannot be tolerated without some immediate adjustment. And what a powerful sentence that last one is – how familiar it is to the English. Has not our literature been rooted in the pathos of what happens when people are unable to express their feelings for each other?

I think that there is another even more vicious twist to Harrison’s python. It is one which operates from the very basic survival logic of the child. We may imagine that the child has to work out an answer to the difficult question: “If they love me, why did they send me away?” He will very likely have already been supplied with a few answers, such as “it will make a man of you”, or “it’s for your own good.” But it is a complex question, and one which involves the child in the first of many mental acrobatics, so expertly mastered by the double-life characters we were following earlier.

Something like the following may be running through the boarder’s mind during his first few hours, weeks, or months, and then sinks and becomes something not thought about again. The thought may never get actually verbalised or put together in this way, but nevertheless, I have heard enough stories from people about how they actually felt about being sent away, to believe it to be fairly universal. In

generalised terms it could be expressed something like this:

I know Mummy and Daddy love me. They have told me so. I know it's important to them to send me away to school and that it costs a lot of money and that I should be grateful. But I hate it. If they love me, why did they send me away?

Either they don't love me or there's something very wrong with me for feeling like this. If they don't really love me it must be because I am bad. If they do, and I feel like this, it must be because I am bad.

However he reasons, if he wants to retain a sense of having parents, the child has to come up with the notion that he is either bad or unlovable or both. This is a classic double-bind, a lose-lose situation that is very hard to get out of. So how do children deal with this? My answer is that they rapidly construct a Survival Personality to protect them. It is strategically orientated and builds on the social skills already developed. The human spirit is amazingly creative, and there many different ways that children cope with problems. What determines the precise way that children solve such difficult questions and adapt seems to be due partly to who they have become in their family of origin, partly to how they read the particular circumstances they find themselves in, and partly to the mystery of nature. Who knows ultimately where children get their particular tendencies, character structure, and degree of willpower?

I think that many children in the grip of this boarding double-bind do in fact decide that they are somehow terribly flawed, and build their bewildered inner world around a very low self-image. Outwardly, this self image may well be clothed in the self-reliant successful – if brittle – front that they are supposed to adopt. But their inner world is a secret, and they are now perpetually on guard. Many never regain an ability to trust others, and their self-confidence is a fragile affair. If these people are 'life's failures' then there are many of them. Yet we as a nation have a curious relationship with this syndrome, since traditionally we seem to admire the values of modesty and self-deprecation above all, and

consider them somehow peculiarly English virtues. Here we have a further reason why it is so hard to notice the problem of boarding school survival.

If some children harbour the secret of their 'failure', then others set out with absolute determination to deny its existence, to succeed, to become 'Winners', and will go to any lengths to achieve this. The schools provide endless outlets for such ambition, since competition and grading feature in all activities, even for those of six, seven and eight. This is doubtlessly done in the spirit of 'cultivating excellence', but often it is pursued with a curious fanaticism. And of course, where there are winners there must be losers. All this differentiation provides more scope for increasing the rivalry, hostility and cruelty amongst the children. The need not to appear a failure can become utterly chronic.

There are many ways in which children deal with the bewilderment of being sent away and arriving into this highly charged atmosphere. Some are driven by revenge, and others decide to keep a low profile, or to be nice, or a fool. Some, God help them, find their niche by being sex objects, or the butt of others' scapegoating. We shall look at this in more detail later. However, the first step for all concerned in surviving the double-bind is dealing with feelings. Feelings are unwelcome in the school, but they have all too often already been discouraged by the family, since both school and family are underpinned by the same attitudes concerning the non-rational, which we discussed previously. What could be less rational than emotions? Distaste for emotion is consistent, and promoted by children, parents and staff alike. Here is the advice of a boy of sixteen at a public school, quoted by Royston Lambert:

Keep your feelings to yourself – spare us the embarrassment!

Lambert goes on to describe this conventional anti-emotions stance. I quote him at length.

Until recent decades, emotional display was not readily witnessed at home, for the upper-middle-class parent avoided the real chores of bringing up sticky

babies and preserved a public self 'in front of the children'.

Single-sex boarding schools cannot officially provide their children with an emotional life; what there is must be hidden and furtive, and both the school and the boy world discourage the display of emotion and the revelation of deep feeling, as this makes people vulnerable. Instantly, one can become the target for gossip and in such societies the deeper the feeling the quicker and deeper the hurt. Hence some boys grow up with an inability to communicate real emotion, a fear of it in many forms, an acute sense of embarrassment at the sight of it in others, and a preparedness to accept relationships with others only within certain limits. Some have an inability to make deep affective relationships, and are keenly aware of this. It can cause them considerable distress, as does their ignorance of how to handle deep emotional situations. It is not only a question of deliberately imposed self-control, of the conscious stiff-upper-lip. A minority of public school boys find that they cannot act in any other way, they are affectively neutral and worry because of it.

Here Lambert gets right to the point, and what he says is extremely serious. In hindsight, observing my own process of adjustment, I think that I coped with the double-bind by killing two birds with one stone: I began to disown my family along with my feelings. In other words, I tried to pretend to myself that I didn't have parents, so that I couldn't miss what I didn't have. My emotions clearly had to be disposed of anyway, like everyone else's. This disposal of parents was encouraged by the fact their visits were few and short, and life at home – known as 'the hols' – seemed increasingly a minor episode in my life.

For my real life actually happened at school. It was punctuated by the visits to what I

contrived to call home, but which became ever more alien. At some level, I never got back home again, and always felt a stranger in my family's house. Some people fared much worse than I. Boarding school children by definition lose contact with their homes, but even the concept of home can get lost when a child is shunting backwards and forwards in the transitory world, and it might never be regained. A woman participant on one of our workshops put it succinctly:

I never came home, I don't know what that is.

For me, like so many others, the visits home, or holidays, began and ended with unpacking and packing my trunk and tuck box. We may imagine the trunk as a kind of portable schoolboy coffin, the tuck box as his secret symbol of love. For the depth of feeling – elation at the end of term, and misery at the end of the holidays – are too much for a child's body to contain. Feelings get stored in the tuck box at the back of the heart – unlocking them is more painful than putting them away. This problem has to be solved. Everything pointed me to one obvious solution: to cut off home and feelings with the same blow. Not that this was done as a conscious decision, of course not. But the one inside, who protects and guides a child towards survival, could be said to have made a wise choice, on the face of things. And the process of growing up seems to affirm the choice. Looking back to my teenage years, spent largely at my public school, I recognise that the inevitable search for my own identity was accelerated by there being no apparent need to separate from my parents, since I had already cut them away. This was of course an illusion, because I had not really separated, rather I had amputated them from my sense of myself, in order to not feel the loss. In that sense it was a false separation, a compensation which meant that I would have to revisit that area later on if I wanted to complete it.

I now understand how difficult it is to achieve a healthy separation from parents if it has not been allowed to happen in its natural course. I suspect that a natural separation would occur some time just after the onset of puberty. In most of the ancient societies, who were more wise about these things than we, there would be proper rites of passage to mark the

transition from childhood to adolescence and into adulthood. These would be a central part of both the child's education, and the life of the community. The initiate would be handed on from the family unit to the larger unit of the community and to the more specific one of gender, the man's lodge or the woman's. This would doubtlessly have been done with pride, respect, and celebration – not with silence, insoluble double-binds, and the constant fear of humiliation.



### Replacing the family

I have been describing how I coped by psychologically ridding myself of emotional awareness and of the sense of myself as one who belonged in a family. Now this association of family and feelings may seem odd to some – considering that the average English family is not renowned for its ability to permit the expression of feelings. But whatever the family is like, it has been the place where the children belonged and were cared about. The need to be cared about and to belong does not end when children go away to school. All human beings have a profound and undeniable need to belong. Belong they will, for belong they must. The simplest way of achieving this under the conditions of boarding is to transfer the belonging needs from the family to the school. The nearest thing to the family is the peer group of children. A partial transfer always happens when children start or change school. It is inevitable. Day-school children have and need their parents to bear witness to the change. For the boarder, however, the transfer has to be total. It is therefore more precarious.

Getting your belonging needs met by your peer group is always a risky business. You cannot demand it, you have to earn it in some way. This frequently involves betraying yourself, as the following story shows. In her first term, a girl walking 'in crocodile' (two by two) falls over. "I can see you won't be an asset to the school", chimes in her companion, already lost behind her false-self. Even though the girl considers this comment disgustingly snobbish

and cruel, she needs to belong, and takes it on herself to try not to be clumsy, to become an asset. It is a powerful wound, still remembered after twenty years. The price of belonging is clear – you have to become a thing, an asset. And then maybe you can belong.

The peer group imposes the conditions of belonging. It has its own code, and it is dedicated to maintaining it. In every school, in every house, in each year it will be slightly different. But one feature appears to be universal: no group wants a 'cry-baby'. No members of the group want to be reminded of their own feelings which they have had to do without, nor of their own unfulfilled need to have a mother and father present. A certain hardness is inevitably cultivated, and the weak only have a place as scapegoats. Splitting off of feelings and family is effectively policed, most simply in the prohibition against 'blubbing'. Once again, Fraser Harrison spells out the tragedy clearly and elegantly.

Our stoicism needed no promotion by the staff; it was one of those unwritten and virtually unspoken mores which nevertheless is fully understood by each member of the community. Everyone's self respect was at stake: if one boy blubbed, the others would be poignantly reminded of their own unhappiness and brought dangerously close to blubbing themselves. He had therefore to be repressed at all costs. For most of us, who had mostly been raised in families where every little worry was drawn out and soothed, this was the beginning of that process by which our feelings were first numbed and then disconnected, giving us the distinctive quality of the boarding-school 'man'. At all events something vital was killed off in me during this period which I have never been able to revive.

Though he says 'repressed' Harrison clearly means 'suppressed'. The slip is an easy one to make. The external suppression of the problem-displayer by the group is matched and supported by the internal repression of all the

group members. Each boarding school child must somehow survive the loss of the family and keep his feelings under wraps if he is not to become a spectacle to be ridiculed and bullied by his peers, or tormented by the chaos inside him. Therefore the answer is clear: mummies, daddies, warmth, safety, comfort, vulnerable feelings, pets, younger siblings, toys, own rooms, teddy bears, birthday cakes, freedom, love – all these things get lumped together with the family and are dispensed with, to take on a secret life of their own, somewhere deep inside the child.

Naturally, into the breach of missing parents, there step other substitute figures. In the boys' schools father-figures are most readily supplied. At prep school these tend to be the headmaster, whereas at the larger public schools it is the housemaster who is responsible for the daily life of his charges. In addition, friendships and special relationships may develop between a boy and a particular master or even an older boy. In my day these did not have immediate paternal associations for us, although of course they were usually compensations for the lack of caring parents. These relationships could offer much, but they could be dangerous, for we were constantly, and with intense fascination, on our guard against the slightest suspicion of a homosexual scandal. We did not know the concept of sexual abuse, but we would always have imagined it to be our fault had 'something happened'.

The ersatz father-figures whom I remember tended to be vigorous and vocal Christian Gentlemen. They were a source of wonder and sometimes a strange unidentified longing. Their natural spartanism could miraculously co-exist with their also having homes with wives, flower-covered sofas, coal-fires, pipes, dogs and occasionally – unbanished children! I do not remember consciously wanting love or affection from any of these men, except perhaps for a dim memory from the prep school I started when I was twelve. I had only just joined, coming from a previous boarding school which was 'abroad'. I was an outsider because the other boys had been there from the beginning. I was therefore systematically scapegoated for being distinctly different, and I must have been keenly on the lookout for some figure of possible rescue. The headmaster of this place had some of the qualities I associate

with the actor Michael Horden. I can recall a kind of vague longing for his affection and attraction to his manly physicality. We called him by his initials, JLR, which must have been a token of some intimacy.

On the whole, these father-figures were more likely to be challenging, or at best encouraging, rather than affectionate. They were generally on the look out for 'funking' (cowardice), not wanting to be seen as 'fussing' (being supportive). Here is Harrison on the subject:

It seemed it was the job of the great architect our headmaster and his team of master builders to turn us into sound, morally waterproof little dwellings, with roofs strong enough to resist the rain of temptation from without, and damp-courses to secure us against corruption from within. And so, in the name of character building, we were made to undergo all kinds of physical indignity and discomfort.

The sanction, or glorification of discomfort was in the name of manliness and would clearly be the absolute opposite to the 'fuss' and comfort which the world of the mother might represent. Some father figures took their job pretty seriously, in that they became specialists in letting their charges know just how useless they were, how little they knew. The sinister side of this is apparent, but it does not necessarily imply that they did not mean well. It was the style in those days. Perhaps in their reasoning it was in order to make a clean job, to construct a brand new building, to use Harrison's metaphor, unspoiled by the influences of the past. The children who came into the school with some status, or some sense of their own worth, who had been mother's little darling, or big brother, needed apparently to be brought down a peg or two. And they generally were; their frustration of coping with the changing standards will have been great. But getting used to living with double messages was one of the skills that had to be learned.

The power of the housemasters was reinforced by the use of corporal punishment, and at public school this was also meted out by prefects. In the matter of beating younger boys,

prefects seemed like the housemasters' henchmen, but in my day they also had considerable autonomy. Being beaten by another boy, even if he is much older, helps to reinforce control over the children, by means of the good old imperial strategy of divide and rule. In the matter of beatings, many children will not have experienced this at home, and receiving a beating could come as quite a shock.

I well remember my first taste of the cane. For the first few terms we had our lockers and did our prep (homework) in a large room called the JCR (Junior Common Room). Whenever a prefect, who might be seventeen or eighteen years old, came in we had to stand up and greet them, and open the door at the other end for them. How they loved to swagger through, savouring their first taste of real power. Many of them chose to enter the house that way, although there were other more direct routes. Although not a conspicuous rebel – I was far too timid and determined to survive – I had been appalled and repulsed, from the start, by the hierarchy. This I had not encountered in my first boarding school, which was run on European lines. I had lots of fear but little respect for the prefects. On that particular day, I had to open the door for a prefect and something, maybe some sarcasm directed my way made me snap: I slammed the door after this haughty young man. Calmly, the prefect let me know that I would regret it. As I already had one or two minor offences to my name, probably lateness or scruffiness, this threat produced a buzz of excitement in the house, which was fuelled in the customary manner, as I shall recount.

The prefects' study was strategically situated between the stairs, the mail table, the general common room and the main passageway. Unlike most of the traditions, which seemed to exist simply because it had always been so, the door to the prefects' study was routinely kept open for several practical reasons. Firstly, this room was an important communications centre: all manner of chits (notes) passed through there, and all kinds of permissions for any variations in daily activity had to be obtained from there. Secondly, the door was kept open because there was an electric toaster within. The prefects liked to make toast at all times of day, and what was the fun of toast unless it could be smelled by those who

couldn't have it? Lastly, it had to be open because the canes, symbols of their authority, were displayed there, crossed on the wall. Whenever there was to be a beating, which happened after lights out, the canes would be off the wall from early morning. Then everyone knew someone was going to get it, but no one quite knew who. This engendered terrific suspense. The atmosphere in the house would be electric; gossip would be rife. All those who were near the mark would either turn ashen, or adopt attitudes of devil-may-care defiance, depending on their personalities.

When the lights were out there would be an unusual hush in the dormitories. Eventually, you would hear leather-soled prefect's shoes determinedly striking the floor boards and stopping at the chosen cubicle (we each had a little partitioned section of the dormitory). Only then could you be certain who was to receive the punishment. On that occasion I recall the footsteps stopping outside my cubicle, and a serious voice commanding: "Duffell, put on your dressing gown and slippers and come downstairs." I remember fearfully making my way below, past the prefects on sentry duty on the landing, to the JCR, where the head of house was waiting, cane in hand. First your offences were read out to you, next the sentence, then you had to bend right over a Windsor chair and hold onto the bottommost rung. Naturally it was painful, but somehow it was the melodrama and humiliation which was the most degrading. The requirement of thanking the chastiser and next day showing your stripes to your contemporaries was nothing compared to the guilty anticipation and the ritualised procession down the stairs.

Although much of the daily discipline was imparted with relish by other children – the prefects – particularly at public school, it was the headmasters and housemasters who were responsible for the ultimate sanctions. These were either serious beatings or expulsions, which they would carry out with unflinching dedication to duty. I cannot remember an incident which did not involve some punishment. At the same time, these father-figures were the same ones who encouraged the children to come to them with any problems, who preached the Christian virtues of turning the other cheek, forgiveness and loving thy neighbour. We were left to form our

own conclusions that authority figures were hypocritical and merciless. Small wonder then, that many a boy would find his relationship with his own father difficult, and in consequence his own image of himself as man and father, deeply problematic.



## Fathers

Perhaps it is fair to suggest that the Father, although dominant in our culture, is at the same time an enigma in family life. For how many boys, or girls, can say that they really know their fathers, or that they have been close to them? At a certain point in our workshops participants are invited to experiment by role-playing their fathers, to see if they can discover what it was like for them when their sons or daughters were sent away. We find that this can be a very difficult exercise for boarding school survivors. Often what emerges are stereotypes, because the father is not really known. Even had the child remained at home, he may not have seen much of his own father. My own father went to 'the office', a magical world to me as a child, in which I had no idea what he did. When he was at home he would often be hidden in remote but somehow sacred isolation, behind the newspaper, playing golf, or mowing the lawn.

The German psychoanalyst Mitscherlich, whose work has been drawn upon by poet and mythologist Robert Bly, says that if a boy does not know what his father does then a 'hole' will be created inside him.<sup>5-6</sup> And because nature abhors a vacuum, into this hole rush 'demons', or fantasies. This hole, or absence, is created both by the father being 'out' at work, but it can also be made by him being at home, but emotionally withdrawn. When I was a boy, my father's life was a mystery; on his return from the office he was usually tired and irritable. In my thirties, I discovered from a friend, who had worked in the same company, that his role was perceived as that of being everybody's Good Father. I was shocked, and riven with envy. But I was still lucky, for when I was at home I did have a father in residence, and that was an asset, for he was like a

permanent backstop and could be relied on in times of trouble. For the growing child a resident father is important: even if he is not overtly supportive he is someone to struggle with, to come up against, even to get angry with. These things count.

We have discussed the crucial importance of mother's interest, care and physical presence to the small child. Father is clearly vital, too, but in a different way, especially as the child grows older. Parental roles may be interchangeable in early days and under very flexible social conditions, but there does seem to be some commonsense demarcation of tasks. If mother through her holding helps a child to hold together with a good inner core, then father helps the child to come out and discover the world. Additionally, father provides a sense of boundaries and limitations for the family, as well as protection from the outer world. He is able to demonstrate the accumulation of useful skills and is a role model for his growing son; at the same time he teaches his daughter about the different 'species' men, while he safely reflects back her emerging femininity and sexuality as something good, and precious, to be both desired and honoured.

It seems fathers have particularly important tasks during the teenage years. For the boys it is to be what Robert Bly calls their 'Oedipal Wall'. By this I think he means that a father should be like a wall for the youth to come up against, to argue with, to dispute with, in politics and ethics, to exercise his unintegrated but passionate nature. That way the boy will feel himself at a wall of contact. He gets a sense, from that clear contact, of what he himself is made of, in relation to another who cares about him. The father should be not so strong a wall that the boy is smashed when he comes up against it. But he must also not be so soft, or absent, or compliant and permissive that the boy has nothing to push against.

This means that father has to be both physically and emotionally present, good willed, and subtle enough to be able to think beyond the surface meaning of a boy's behaviour. A father can do excellent developmental work when he allows himself to 'muck about' or 'rough-house' with his son. In their mock combat the pair enact all the trials of strength they need to, they flex their

muscles together, they learn to have boundaries about what hurts and what is appropriate, but above all they get great contact. The boy gets, as it were, the smell of the father embedded in his psyche, and this is a major part of his education. But the father cannot do it all. Eventually the rivalry between sons and fathers can become too much for both, and the boy will need the presence of other older men. But this is not until his teenage years, and he will certainly not want to be sent away from his father at seven.

Being a 'good-enough' father is no mean task, and many men have a tendency to avoid the responsibilities that being a good enough father entails which go beyond earning the bread. The principal avoidances in fathering are the retreat positions of absence, physically or emotionally, or the patriarchal style, which leans towards despotic tyranny. The latter was the most popular style in the pre-war and Victorian periods, but in recent years the western world has been developing the absent-father syndrome in epidemic proportions. Recent reports from America indicate that less than 30% of the poorest households have a dad on the premises. This is a time bomb for future social problems.

To sum up, missing out on the kind of contact with father which we have been discussing is a great loss to a growing child, even if having any father around is becoming a luxury. Moreover, sending children away to boarding school can create a sense of the absence of both mother and father, unless the parents are extremely successful in keeping the emotional channels open with their child. Whether fathering is at all possible from a distance is questionable, particularly when the father is 'out' at work and the boy is 'away' at school. Most likely they settle for a kind of emotional distance between them, which is a familiar thing for men. Men may feel that 'distance' both inside them and between them. Later in life, the anger which men feel towards their fathers can with awareness be recognised as a longing for him. Even recognising this longing starts to heal the inner void. Fathering from afar may, however, become a skill which current divorce rates make it imperative for men to learn. I was impressed to see Nelson Mandela talking to Arthur Miller on television, shortly after his release from twenty-seven years in gaol, describing his efforts to father

children he had barely known or touched, imparting guidance, boundaries, and love.

## Mothers

Daddy may be absent at home, but in the boarding school the Archetype of Father is a strong symbolic presence. On the other hand, Mother is distinctly missing from the boys' school, even symbolically. The difficulty of visits and phone calls home make her loss worse, and the need to be self-sufficient more critical. One of the grotesque advantages of the BBC *40 Minutes* film was being able to see how these things are dealt with by mothers and children today, and how rapidly the children adapted and compensated. In the film, young Harry's mother thought phone contact in the first three weeks of her eight year old son being away undesirable. She explained:

If they can phone they can say "Can I come home, I'm so unhappy, when am I going to see you again?" But they're not unhappy at all. It's just the obvious thing to say.

Next we see a little boy on the film, looking tiny in his room-for-growth trousers and sports jacket, in the absence of his mother arguing the case for self-reliance:

When I'm a businessman ... when I'm about twenty or something ... I have to be able to manage on my own.

Behind this mother's collusion with the abandonment of her son is, of course, our old friend, the British attitude to children. A special place in the attitude is reserved for our horror of the 'spoiling' of children. Normally this is meant to guard against overindulgence, but the 'fear-of-spoiling' syndrome can be used to rationalise lack of care, or downright neglect. Historically, it is connected with the male fear of having the boy child contaminated by the mother, and seduced into a world of softness and emotionality. What truth there may be in this idea is grossly distorted by applying the 'un-made child' paradigm.

Clinically, psychotherapists know that there are times when a child does need to be

protected from over-zealous mothering, in the same way as he needs protection from over-disciplined fathering. A mother can readily become excessive when the father is physically or emotionally absent, and especially when he is not relating with his wife. A tendency to psychologically hang on to her child, who was once a part of her body, is meted against by father's presence. Otherwise she may find it hard to let the child out of her psychic world. In such a case she runs the danger of spoiling a child's sense of autonomy. It is important to distinguish whether this is indeed the case, or whether the child is going to be sacrificed to appease the family's fear-of-spoiling.

Children in real danger of being 'spoiled' need distance from a dangerous psychically exploitative mother. Then they do desperately need a father to protect them from her excesses. Similarly, a mother can do something to shield a child from the tyrannical nature of her husband. But these counter-reactions easily produce over-reactions. The father who recognises the problem of the over-indulgent mother usually thinks that more harshness is called for, and comes down more firmly on the child. Sending these children off to boarding school can be a disaster for them. If they have had a mother who cannot authentically meet another's needs they can become targets for bullying, and can get crushed. The child of an overwhelming mother needs lots of love, as well as autonomy. Popularly, we use the word 'spoiled' rather harshly, as a put-down. The reality is that such a mother can set the scene for a lifetime of humiliation and defence for her child. As one man who clearly had such an overbearing mother poignantly told me in my consulting room:

People have been telling me all my life how spoiled I have been, when in reality no one has ever had a good word to say about me.

If mother is missing, which is a given for the boarding school child, she is also subject to replacement, whether in actuality or fantasy. As for replacement mother figures, there are precious few at school apart from Matron. What resonance this word has: it is as if Mother had been slightly altered to become an institution. I remember how the word would come up in Latin lessons, and I would imagine

the Romans in the Senate or in battle; how odd it seemed that they too had matrons, how stuffy I imagined them to be. In my public school house, Matron was a middle-aged woman who had a remarkable curt efficiency with all matters connected to that temple of temptation, the body, such as laundry, name tags and minor ailments. She gave off an aura of almost imperceptible sadness, but I guess she must have been terribly isolated, living in that old place in the middle of nowhere. One of the great pleasures was to be allowed on rare occasions to toast bread on the end of a fork in front of the gas fire in her work-room. Matrons were mainly a replacement of the Mother-who-does-the-chores, and certainly tended to reinforce the gender stereotypes which male boarders would be prone to pick up. It is hard to imagine what their lives would have been like – often pretty dismal I imagine, in those regimented and funless places.

Next as potential mothers were the wives of masters and housemasters whose presence lent a deceptive sense of civilisation to the premises. Importantly, these women were someone for your mother to talk to at the initial meeting for new boys and their kin, when your parents were respectfully treated as the customers they were. These women were generally paradigms of home-counties middle-classness. We only rarely saw them. We practised our charm on them, hoping in some vague way that the good impressions we might make with them, would somehow percolate through to their husbands and influence them to be favourably disposed to us. I suppose we needed to use them to work out some of our Oedipal issues, which we could not otherwise do, because we were not at home.

There were also women connected with the only legitimate way of getting temporary respite from the rigours of boarding life – being ill. In the prep schools there might only be matron, but in the larger schools there would be nurses and even sisters. In crisp white uniforms, they rustled and bustled, and had the legitimate power to forbid you to take part in the normal daily routine. Hooray! Even if the price was starvation with kaolin and morphine, the regular antidote for upset tummy – a common complaint – it was worth it. I remember the sense of security of being in the 'Infirmary', with its privacy, beds, radios, glasses of squash, and women to ask how you

were. I also remember at my prep school, quartered in the 'wet' dormitory (unjustly, for I was 'dry') being dimly aware of the young nurse who would rustle in at midnight to awaken or change those poor fellows who could not hold their pee. This memory is coloured by a delicious sense of safety. There is clearly plenty of room to speculate here on the effect of this set up on our sexuality. How readily might we build on this to make women, who were already becoming unfamiliar, into fantasy figures, whether goddesses or servants. Their absence was the greatest possible stimulus for fantasising, behind which there could be a vague fear that women might always let us down. Here is John Le Carré, in *A Perfect Spy*, telling us how Magnus Pym dealt with the loss of both his mother and her successor, while he was at prep school:

Her demise entrenched him as a self-reliant person, confirming in him his knowledge that women were fickle and liable to sudden disappearances.

Such unrealistic ideas of women were to be expected, given their scarcity and the enforced spartan manliness of the schools. Our longings for rescue and comfort were mixed with those unaccountable stirrings in our loins. The official line which made sex dirty and to be feared was mixed with the peer group attitude that it was a passport to heaven. This concoction had the combined effect of ensuring that we would emerge without the slightest realistic idea of what a woman might be. As mother goddesses they would inevitably disappoint, for marriage and relationship actually means that you have to learn to get on with a real person, a real live woman, with her own feelings, wishes, moods and limitations, who may not be entirely focused on serving you. As erotic tramps, or eternally ready sex-objects, the other favourite male fantasy, women would also disappoint, for exactly the same reason. We will think more about the complexities of boarding school's sexual conflicts in the next chapter.



## Growing up in Community

From what we have been discussing it could be argued that the ideal would be to bring children up in the two parent nuclear family. However, if enormous difficulties and stresses of parenting are not shared out and relieved in the wider community, as they might have been in the old extended family, or in Liedloff's tribe, for example, then nuclear families are far from ideal. African shaman and writer on ritual and community, Malidoma Somé, himself a survivor of fourteen years at boarding school, says that it takes a village to bring up a child. This seems to make complete sense to me. But farming-out parenthood to professionals in institutional communities, and thereby subcontracting the work, responsibility, and the care will not do either. This is true whether it be to social workers or boarding school staff.

If boarding schools accept that children are left with them, in loco parentis, as a contractual duty, how can they possibly succeed? The ratio of say 30 or 40 children to one housemaster is far too high. Anyone who has been a parent will testify that two children will test you to the limit. This is as true today as it was 30 or 50 years ago. Boarding schools compensate for the scarcity of parents by delegating authority roles to older children. It is said to encourage social responsibility, but there is no guarantee. It can also foster élitism and increase the children's fear of each other. Government by divide and rule may be powerfully effective in schools as in nations, but it is not a recipe for health or longterm stability. Besides, there is, I believe, a natural law that states that children should not be brought up by other children. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, ironically, deemed important enough to study when I was at school in the early sixties, is a testimony to this. The children end up scapegoating and killing a fat child, who becomes the sacrificial victim, symbolising their own lostness.

Public schools have traditionally made loud claim for the value of their community life. But a community life built at the expense of caring and belonging needs satisfied by self-betrayal, is unlikely to be wholesome. In the case of the public schools the dynamics of power are weighted in favour of rigid hierarchies of seniority. The complexities of custom, as well as the many forms of authority in a boarding school, are virtually impenetrable to the outsider. Children cannot hope to share

what this experience is like, even when safely back at home. While at school, they have to cope with demands on their loyalty from a multiplicity of sources. The teachers have far more power than they would at a day school, while at the same time being oddly discounted by the children, because they are not part of the crucial world of the peer group. Here is Lambert attempting to explain these bizarre power dynamics.

The staff in the boarding school is a world of its own – and one where the conventions of behaviour and attitude, the controls used and the system of status may differ markedly from that laid down by the official system, and with considerable effect on it for good or ill. The children always have their own society too – with its own unwritten codes of conduct and values, handed down to each new generation and modified by each generation; its own system of controls for enforcing these codes; its own pecking-order of power and status (which may conflict strongly with that of the school – a boy with high power and status among his peers often never attains it in the official school hierarchy); its own élite groups, outcasts and divisions; its own culture, rituals, subterranean activities and private language; its own compensations and way of regarding and even using the staff and that other, official, world for its own purposes.

Despite his clarity, I still suspect that what he is talking about is only accessible to someone who has been through the system – which Lambert, all credit to his skill, apparently had not himself experienced as a child. Such mysterious internal workings are the special territory of institutions, and especially of those which may lie in store for the ex-public school man: the regiment, the bar, the House of Commons and the gentleman's club. It will come as no surprise to readers that many of these institutions are themselves terribly old-fashioned and beset with an idiosyncratic conservatism which amuses foreign onlookers.

They are of course the homes from home for ex-boarding gentlemen, and peculiar to Britain.

The major difficulties in community life are the lack of privacy, and the tendency for the group to indulge in scapegoating. The deprivation of privacy is arguably worse for children who grow up in the west where there is a strong tradition of privacy, compared to those who grow up in tribal or village communities where privacy was never on the agenda. Some boarding school survivors find their solution to the problem of privacy by eschewing communities ever after.

In the next chapters we look at what happens when the lack of privacy – particularly in a single-sex school – collides with the exhilaration of puberty, and with the prevailing repressive attitudes towards sex, the body, and vulnerability. It is time to think more closely about sex, sexual abuse, and bullying.