

Tony Parsons on Life, Death and Breakfast



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SPECIAL PRICE FOR A LIMITED TIMEThe bestselling author of **MAN AND BOY** turns his acute eye and pen to the biggest personal issues that face us – as well as the annoying grit in the eye of everyday life. 'If a young lover breaks your heart, or if you fall off your Harley, if you make a fool of yourself, well, that is what men do, and what we have always done. That is not a mid-life crisis. It's just the latest in a long line of cock-ups.' Tony Parsons shows us why, as well as being a bestselling novelist, he's also one of the Britain's most popular journalists. This is modern life for men – explained. What the hell goes on in their heads, hearts and trousers, and why? It's about the sound of real guns and the feel of fake breasts. What to do when gobby jobs strike and you've got the kids in tow. About junk sex and performance anxiety; and how cars and football both went wrong.

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For Dylan Jones From the Roxy to eternity

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Introduction

When I was a washed-up music journalist, wondering what to do with the rest of my twenties, not to mention my life, the telephone rang.

It was a friend on a women's magazine. She wanted to know if I would write something for them. One thousand words on 'Commitment'. The man's view. Sure, I said, before she had a chance to change her mind. I was desperate for work, and the red bills were piling up.

And that phone call saved my life.

Because when I sat down to write about commitment for my mate on the women's magazine, I discovered my subject.

Sex. Romance. Fathers. Sons. Men and women-especially that-how we struggle to find love, and what we do with it when we find it.

The great game that never ends.

My subject had been music, but that had gone by the time I was twenty-five. The musicians I had known, and loved, and written about, had all moved on. Some of them were trying to crack America. Some of them were dead. Some of them were trying to hold on to their sanity. But nobody was where they had been any more.

I had joined the *NME* at twenty-two and it was what I did instead of university or National Service. I went in as a boy and I emerged as a man. Or, if not exactly a man, then at least a boy who had taken lots of drugs and met Debbie Harry. But it was never meant to last forever, and it didn't. By twenty-five I was out of a job, and penniless, and a father. By twenty-nine I was out of a job, and out of a marriage, and penniless, and a single dad.

So whatever way you looked at it, things were definitely going downhill.

I had dropped out of school at sixteen with wild, impractical dreams of being a writer. After years of low-paid jobs that ended with the night shift at Gordon's gin distillery, I landed that job on the *NME*. They hired me because I had published a novel called *The Kids*-exactly the kind of callow, feverish rubbish that usually remains mercifully locked in some teenager's bottom drawer-and, far more importantly, I looked quite good in a cheap leather jacket.

I was a writer at last. But in the music press, the only vocational training I ever received focused on teaching me about taking drugs with rock stars. How to pass a joint to Bob Marley. The correct etiquette at a Keith Richards' heroin bust. How to offer Johnny Rotten some of your amphetamine sulphate without making some dreadful *faux-pas*. When I was on the *NME*, the creative writing thing was far less important than being able to hang out with Iggy Pop all night. I really wanted to write-it was the only thing I had ever found that I was halfway good at-but after leaving the *NME*, I found I had lost my subject without even really serving my apprenticeship.

Until I got that phone call.

So I wrote my little piece on commitment. And then I started to get other phone calls. The same sort of thing. And I realised that I loved it. Writing about the great game. Men. Women. Family. Fathers and sons. Husbands and wives. Sex and romance and what happens when you can't tell the difference. And the happy days when there really is no difference. How we feel when it all comes apart, and how we never stop hoping that we will get just one more chance to get it right. Becoming a parent and watching your own parents age and die. Finding love and then misplacing it somewhere, or having it snatched away from you.

The money wasn't terrific, but it was a living, just about-and I hadn't been making a living for a long time.

Money had not been important when I was at the *NME*. After a night of rock and roll decadence, me and Julie Burchill-then my girlfriend, later my wife, and a bit later still my ex - wife - would often take R. Whites lemonade bottles back to the local shop, collect our tube fare, and go to work, giggling

like a pair of happy urchins who were exactly where they wanted to be. We didn't need money. Apart from the deposits we claimed on lemonade bottles to pay our tube fares.

But then I became a grown-up—with a wife, and a baby, and a divorce, and a broken heart, and a broken boiler, and bills that I could not pay. And money would matter from now on because I could never again pay my way in the world by taking back a few R. Whites lemonade bottles.

Don't you hate it when that happens?

I could have made the music thing last a few more years. I was still young. I still had my leather jacket. Ian Dury wanted me to go on the road in America, and Madness seemed like nice boys—but what would have been the point? I would have been faking it. The bands that I had really loved were else where—on *Top of the Pops* or fighting heroin addiction or recording their difficult second albums in New York. Staying up for three days and nights in a row loses its appeal after a while. And I had a little son. And going to America with a band could never have been the same again.

What I remember most about my days on the *NME* was going to the Speakeasy with an unknown, unsigned young band called The Clash ... and being turned away because we were not sufficiently cool. Not them. Not me. Not even the whole job lot could scrape together the cool quotient required to get us into the Speakeasy. Somehow I cherished that memory above the others. But those days were gone. And with them went my career.

That phone call from my friend on the women's magazine gave me back my career. It was the mid-eighties, and a great time for magazines, and for newspapers. Looking back, they seem like the last of the boom years. With the Internet still some years away, there was suddenly all this space to fill. And although my early gigs were all on women's magazines, or on the women's pages of national newspapers, soon there were all these magazines for men that were not simply about fishing, or football, or the new Ford Mondeo.

After the storming success of *The Face*, my old *NME* editor Nick Logan started *Arena*, the first British magazine for men, and that opened the gates for *Esquire*, *Loaded*, *FHM*, *Nuts* and British *GQ*—where many of the articles included here come from.

It gave me more than a living. It gave me confidence. When my mother was dying of cancer, and my little son was not quite so little any more, I felt totally poised between the generation that came before me and the generation that came after me in a way that I never had before—or since.

I sort of got it—the cycle of life thing. The way that, in the end, you lose everyone—your parents get old and die, your children grow up and leave you—and although it breaks your heart, it is the most natural thing in the world.

I knew I wanted to write something about all of this ordinary yet momentous stuff, something longer that maybe a few people would like—and even if nobody liked it except me, then I still had to write it. And that became the novel, *Man and Boy*.

I like writing about these things. About the way we break each other's hearts, sometimes without meaning to. It is endlessly fascinating. It is the most important part of our lives. It helps me make sense of the world, and my part of it.

My timing has always been a bit out. I was a young husband and father, and then I was a single dad for most of my thirties, and then I met Yuriko and got married at thirty-eight, became a dad again in my forties. It has been wonderful research, and I think that a writer can ask no more of his life.

As a reader, too, I always bought books that had something to say about the great game—even if I couldn't always finish them.

I think that there are a lot of people like me. We want to understand the great game, we want to make sense of our lives—what could be more human than that?—and yet we know there is no magic handbook that explains everything. We muddle on. We make it up as we go along. With husbands and wives, lovers and partners, parents and children, the woman next door and the man at the gym.

So this book is for the people like me, the searching souls who bought *Men Are from Mars*, *Women Are from Venus*—but only read the first fifty pages.

And the title? This morning I sat on the steps of a Caribbean hotel room with my seven-year-old daughter, watching a mongoose chase a lizard around the trunk of a palm tree.

It went on for what seemed like ages but was probably only a minute or two-the mongoose inches from the tail of the lizard, the lizard running for its life. You could not look away. It was like being David Attenborough.

And my daughter, being seven and gentle of heart, is very sensitive to anything that smacks of unkindness to animals. She is always telling me that fast-food outlets should only use chickens and cows that have died of old age.

'That's so cruel,' she said, shaking her head as the mongoose and the lizard bombed around the palm tree.

'No,' I said. 'The mongoose has to hunt to survive. It's really not cruel-it's life and death.'

She looked at me, unconvinced, and I saw that it was a lousy answer. Because I had described the enormity of the moment-and the mongoose was getting ever closer to the lizard-but not how natural it was, how this kind of stuff happens every day, and has no choice-it has to happen every day.

The mongoose caught the lizard. It was over in a moment. We watched the mongoose sitting alone, at the bottom of the palm tree, smacking its lips.

'And he has to eat,' I said. 'The mongoose can't order from room service.'

My daughter nodded.

'Life, death and breakfast,' she said, and she seemed slightly happier with that.

Tony Parsons, 2010

One The Mid-Life Myth

I was asked to go on one of those radio shows – you know, the kind where a bunch of middle-class, middle – aged pussies sit around whining about how hard it is for the modern male when his life approaches half-time.

The mid-life crisis – that hoary old chestnut. That complete fallacy. That shagged-out old cliché.

And I almost went. Because I felt like standing on the roof of Broadcasting House and screaming, What is wrong with you guys? Don't you know by now? Is it not as clear as the laughter lines on your face?

A man's life gets infinitely and immeasurably easier as he gets older.

Mid-life crisis? What mid-life crisis?

The mid-life crisis is a myth. More than this, the mid-life crisis is a lie. Life only gets better for men-better and better as the years roll by. Mid-life is not a crisis. Mid-life is when you are getting warmed up. When you have money in your pants. When you are doing a job you love. When you are an adorable combination of youth and experience. When you know how to find a clitoris without Google Earth.

So some thirty-nine-year-old man runs off with his secretary, or his neighbour's wife, or a Latvian lap dancer. So what? So some forty-four-year-old executive goes off on a business trip and ends up sampling more than the Toblerone in his mini-bar. So what? So a fifty-year-old guy decides he wants to trade in his Ford Fiasco for a Harley-Davidson. So what?

Every fifty-year-old man I know owns a Harley-Davidson. And they are all very happy. That's not a mid-life crisis. That's Me time. That's known as, for once in your life, doing exactly what you feel like doing.

What we call a mid-life crisis-it's tame stuff, isn't it? Changing your woman, changing your means of transport, changing your trousers ...

This is not to suggest that these things can always be done without pain and tears. That Latvian lap dancer might leave you, or you might wrap your motorbike around a lamppost, or your Diesel Viker straight-leg jeans may be a sartorial disaster-mine were-but, compared to the poisoned chalice of youth, this is all just a pint of mild and bitter.

Unless a man has led an extraordinarily sheltered life, the so-called crisis of his middle years-whatever form it takes-will be nothing much compared to the crisis he faced down in young manhood.

I look back at my youth and I see ... turmoil.

Drugs. Women. Fights. Drink. Ice cubes made from the tears of the broken-hearted. Often all in one lunch break.

And I remember friends dying. Not from the cancer and treacherous tickers that stalk us later in the unrelenting cycle of life but in all the raw violence of youth.

Dead in car crashes. Dead from drugs. My friend Johnny Thunders died in a New Orleans hotel at the age of thirty-eight-just when he should have been preparing for one of those mid-life clichés. If Johnny had lived, would he really have experienced a mid-life crisis? Would he have fretted about needing a size bigger in leather trousers, or why heroin didn't taste as good as it used to?

Whatever the middle years had in store for Johnny Thunders, it would have seemed pretty tame compared to the screaming insanity of what came before.

And hardly a crisis at all.

So it is for all of us. Youth is never a stroll in the park. It is almost always harder than what waits down the line. It is sad-tragic even-when a marriage breaks up, or when your hairline is receding faster than your career, or when love grows cold and beyond recall. But look on the bright side: is it really tougher than what you endured in your teens and twenties? Wanting a new car, or a new woman, or a new way of living- is it really such a crisis?

I would suggest not.

Where does it come from-this idea that a man reaches a certain point in his life when all is peaceful and calm? When there are no more irrational passions and unfulfilled yearnings, and no desire to-one last time-spill his seed on the passenger seat of some inappropriate ride?

‘Stop dreaming of the quiet life, ‘cos it’s the one we’ll never know,’ sang the Jam when I was young, and I have always cherished the wisdom of those words.

A man never gets to a point when trouble of some shade or another is completely out of the picture. The mid-life crisis is born of the illusion that nothing exciting should happen to you once you are in the far-flung corners of youth.

And it is just not true.

What has gone wrong since I became a grown-up? Oh, the usual. Divorce. Bereavement. Money troubles. Promiscuity. Coveting my neighbour’s wife. Coveting my neighbour’s car. Coveting my neighbour’s lawn mower. A bit more bereavement. A few more money troubles. Did I mention the coveting?

But none of these domestic nightmares-which began in my late twenties and went on for ten years or more-could be considered a mid-life crisis. It was all just ... *the stuff that happens in a lifetime*. And what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger-unless it’s a baseball bat or something.

In many ways, the middle bit of life is where we start getting it right. You get divorced-but then you meet someone lovelier, and you get married to her. Your parents die, but the years go by and you realise how lucky you were to have that woman as your mother and that man as your father.

You see that this is not a mid-life crisis at all. It is merely Mother Nature doing what she is obliged to do: kick you firmly in the testicles.

As time goes by, inevitably you have a lot more money than you had when you were seventeen or twenty-one. Yet that does not stop the money troubles of your middle years from being as real as a tumour. So you grit your teeth, you do good work and-eventually-good things start to happen. The best things.

Life is infinitely better now than when I wore DMs every day of my life. At twenty-two I lived in a bedsit in Crouch End where you had to sleep on the right side of the mattress when it rained because water came through the ceiling. Even if it all falls apart tomorrow, even if I forget my name and have fragments of jam sponge cake on my unshaven chin, I am never going to live anywhere as rotten as that again.

Youth is hard for most of us. It is different for girls, but boys are often lonely because the girls their age want older boys-boys with money, boys with cars, boys who know how to talk to them.

Youth is frustrating. You are rarely doing the job you want and, in your late teens and early twenties, life can seem as though it is slipping away far more desperately than it ever does in your thirties and forties.

Mid-life crisis? You mean doing the job you love? You mean a ceiling that doesn’t leak and a woman who loves you? You mean having a couple of quid in your pocket? You mean swapping the bus for a BMW X5-and then swapping that for a Harley? Sounds pretty good to me, this mid-life crisis caper.

The trouble is that society confuses being a middle-aged man with being a freshly made corpse. A lot of what gets put down to a mid-life crisis is actually just a man revealing the first signs of life that he has shown in years.

I would never suggest that a man should give his heart to the first girl he meets who is young enough to be his daughter. And it is not a good idea to start riding motorbikes without having considered the possibility that you might fall off. But if you do, then don’t beat yourself up. This is not a mid-life crisis-this is you, still breathing.

My father was a middle-aged man at twenty. He had killed many men and he had seen many men die. The top half of his body was a starburst of scar tissue. For the next forty years, until he died

at the age of sixty-two, he had hard, black, jagged bits of shrapnel from a German grenade worming their way out of his legs. Still a young man, he wanted nothing more than to work, raise a family and tend his garden.

But even my dad—who often gave me the impression that he had had his fill of the outside world—discovered a new passion in his middle years.

He took up sailing. Every year he went down to Cowes, where he impressed the posh boys with his nautical skills. Was that a mid-life crisis? No, it was just my father rediscovering his passion for the open sea, and messing about in boats, and sailing. It was just my father remembering that he was alive, but he would not be forever. And of course it was a lot less trouble than having him elope with a Latvian lap dancer.

This is not to make the case that age is inherently better than youth. There are many slings and arrows in your middle years—the closer proximity of death, the way hangovers last for days, the desire of GPs to give you a prostate examination every time you bend over to tie your Asics trainers.

But where did it come from, this idea that there's a point in life when a man should stop seeking fulfilment, stop looking for meaning and stop having fun?

And when did we get it into our heads that at a certain stage in life troubles melt away, relationships stop falling apart and our hearts are no longer capable of ecstasy, or of breaking? That only happens on the day we die and until then life is full of varying measures of joy and pain, and it doesn't matter a damn whether you happen to be sporting a six-pack or a family pack.

The mid-life crisis is a myth designed to keep men tame, neutered and in their place. It doesn't exist. Fight against it. Buy a motorbike. Learn to play bass. Trek the Himalayas. Buy a Porsche 911. Learn Mandarin. Fall in love. Give up your job. Actually, better not give up your job—the passions that come later in life are only made possible because you are no longer on the tight budget of youth.

And there are plenty of middle-aged women who fancy a change of direction—or the bloke who lives down the street. There are plenty of women who get sick of their jobs, or their shagged-out old husbands, or who want to dance the Tango in Buenos Aires before they die. And why not? Let there be fire in your eyes and flashing limbs. Dump the husband. Fly to Argentina. Enjoy every sandwich. You're a long time cremated.

But somehow it is only a mid-life crisis when a man does it—when he decides that, now he comes to think of it, he doesn't want to be a chartered accountant. He wants to kiss the face of God.

We should all be allowed to kiss the face of God, whether it comes in the form of a bigger bike or a younger lover or the rolling sea. How else to respond to our mortality?

There is no cure for death, no age limit for dreams, and no escape from who we are and always will be—mortal, fallible creatures, full of love and longing.

And if the young lover breaks your heart, or if you fall off your Harley, or if Buenos Aires is a disappointment—if you make a fool of yourself—well, that is what we do, and what we have always done.

That is not a mid-life crisis.

It's just the latest in a long line of cock-ups.

Two When Yobs Swear

Sooner or later you will find yourself in a situation. It may not happen for ten years. It could be tonight. But it is coming-be sure of that – and when it arrives you will have the choice between the only two buttons that really matter on your biological dashboard.

Fight or flight?

You might be in a bar. You might be in a restaurant. It could be at the end of your road or it could be on a tropical island. You might be standing outside your home. The location doesn't matter. This is how it will be: you will be confronted by in-appropriate behaviour that intrudes upon those you love. Effing and blinding and talk of a graphically sexual nature. You know the kind of thing. And, in an instant, you will have to decide – Do I say something?

Or do I say nothing?

This is the terrible thing. This is the heart of the matter. You will not be alone. You will be in company – with your girlfriend or wife, or with your children, even if they have yet to be born-people who look to you to protect them from the worst of this world.

And there will be a cackling mob of pimply cavemen, every other gormless word an expletive, talking about bitches and blow-jobs and easy birds. They will bring their world into your world and you will have to decide, in a terrifying instant, what to do.

Even if what you do is nothing.

You can get killed for saying something. Even a mild rebuke can get you the death sentence, effective immediately. Men die for speaking up.

But these lads are *loud* – too loud to be ignored. By you or your woman or your child. Do you want your kid to listen to this stuff? Or do you risk making him or her an orphan?

Yobs are so touchy these days, that's the problem. Yobs are more sensitive than they have ever been in yob history. They react to the mildest rebuke with murderous rage. The average hoodie is thin-skinned beyond belief, his self-esteem so fragile that any criticism is almost guaranteed to explode into physical confrontation.

One thing is certain: reasoning with them does not work. Appealing to their better nature is a waste of time – they don't have one. If, when yobs swear, you tell them to turn down the volume, you'd better be prepared to go all the way.

Because they will be.

Context is everything. I don't advocate going around telling every foul-mouthed moron to shut his filthy cakehole. It does not bother me at all if I am at a football match and the bloke in the seat behind me is shouting about 'stupid cunts'. The stupid cunts at football matches don't bother me. I don't much care what anyone says if I am alone. But if I am out with my family and it happens – in a restaurant, in a park, in a hotel bar-then that's different.

Nothing will get me to keep my mouth shut. And it is nothing to do with bravery. I just can't accept foul-mouthed strangers entering my daughter's world. And I am very happy to kick, gouge and claw while rolling in the dirt to make my point.

Stupid, really. I am not much good to my daughter if some psycho-chav buries his blade in my heart. And what a waste – to lose your life because you asked some pathetic piece of pond scum-and his mates, because they are invariably mob-hande – to watch his potty mouth.

But there is nothing rational about the flight-or-fight mechanism. It is not a debating society. It is not as though you carefully weigh the options and then go with one or the other. The moment you make your decision is here and gone before you know it.

And suddenly you are either bowing your craven head because safety is the wisest course of action, or you are confronting a group of leering teenagers-because sometimes the stupid thing is also the right thing.

And then you ask yourself: Can I take them? These leering strangers – will they put me in the A&E or the graveyard?

Almost certainly, all things considered, you can't take them. They are younger than you, stronger than you, and you are the one who is flying solo. They are what the media call multiple assailants.

But what gets you through is that – if you are mad enough to say something in the first place – you are inevitably a lot angrier than they are.

You come out of nowhere, seething with rage, right in their faces – they haven't been *trying* to offend your small child. You're ready to rumble, full of that righteous, blood-pumping juice where you just don't care what happens to you. And that might just be enough to make them back down and go away, despite their superior numbers.

If they don't kill you, that is.

They killed young Kevin Johnson. He was twenty-two years old, at home in Sunderland with his seven-month-old baby son Chase trying to sleep in his cot. It was the early hours of the morning. And down on the street, right outside Kevin's front door, a gang of lads was getting very loud. Kevin could have put the pillow over his head. He could have tried to soothe his son. He could have done nothing. That would have been the easiest thing to do. But Kevin went out into the street and told the gang – there were three of them – to keep the noise down. And they stabbed him to death. And Chase Johnson will grow up without a father because Kevin refused to take the soft, sensible option. Because Kevin Johnson was decent. Because Kevin Johnson was brave. Because Kevin Johnson wanted to protect his family. No doubt Chase will be proud of his father one day. And so he should be. Even if he will never remember him.

Entitlement – that's the great curse of our age. Every scabby little yob thinks he has the right to do whatever he wants at whatever volume he wants. Nobody has any responsibility to the wider community. And that's what it comes down to when you tell some foul-mouthed gang to cut it out. You are saying: I'm here too, I have rights too. A crazy thing to say in this day and age.

In *Brokeback Mountain*, Heath Ledger's character Ennis is at a Fourth of July party with his wife and two small daughters when a couple of bikers start making a loud comparative study of 'pussy' in Montana and Wyoming.

'Let's move, Ennis, let's just move,' says his wife, Alma. But Ennis is a man not a mouse and he quietly and politely asks the two drunken bikers to 'Keep it down – I got two little girls here.'

They don't just ignore him. They start loudly speculating about the last time Ennis had sex with his missus. They provoke him. They goad him. They are unrepentant in their obscenities. They can't get past the pussy. It's pussy, pussy, pussy with these guys. And they tell him to listen to his wife: if he doesn't like it, then go sit somewhere else.

Ennis goes wild. He kicks the first biker full in the face, knocking him out cold, and offers to put the other one's teeth in his digestive system. The conscious biker backs away, dragging his bloodied pal with him.

And what makes the scene a work of genius is that Ennis' wife and children are not grateful. Far from it.

They are all appalled at the violence that lurks inside this soft-spoken husband and devoted father. As several families pick up their blankets and move away – as if it is Ennis who poses a threat to civilisation, rather than the bikers – his children whimper and hide and his wife stares at him as if seeing him for the first time.

In my experience, that's just what it is like.

When yobs swear, it is very easy to end up looking like the bad guy. It is very easy to find your wife and child staring at you as if they have suddenly realised that you are, in fact, a gay cowboy.

This is how it was. We were in a restaurant. At the next table were three teenage lads. They were probably not so different to me and my mates at that age – although I don't recall sitting around

in family restaurants in my teens. And they were discussing the sister of one of the lads. ‘A right little slag’, apparently. ‘She was ready to give him a jump!’ This was said while gesturing at one of the group – presumably not her brother, though you never know.

I listened to this stuff for, oh, about four minutes, or possibly six, as my wife pretended to study the menu and our small daughter crayoned in her *My Little Pony* workbook.

Then I told them to shut the fuck up.

And I told them that I was only going to give them one fucking warning. And – red-faced with rage, ludicrously holding a knife and fork in my hand, as though I might eat them alive – I pointed at my daughter and said that she wasn’t going to listen to this fucking stuff about how your fucking sister was ready to fuck anybody, for fuck’s sake.

They were scared. They shut up and ate their happy meals as quiet as mice. And I know they could have beaten the living shit out of me with absolutely no problem. I would have had no chance whatsoever against multiple assailants of their age and size. But here’s the thing: it mattered more to me than it did to them. And I really meant it. If they had told me to go fuck myself, I would have happily kicked them through the buffet bar. Or attempted to.

As soon as I told them to shut up, they were not the problem. The problem was my wife. She pointed out – later, when we were alone, when that miserable meal was over – that our daughter had been so busy colouring in the *My Little Pony* characters that she had not heard a word they had said about the slutty sister. But – so my wife insisted – our daughter had heard every profanity spat out by her psychotic father.

When jobs swear, you sort of hope that your family will love you more if you make a stand. You hope they will be grateful that you are the kind of man who does not just turn his butt cheeks and say, Go ahead, world, fuck me up the arse.

You think they might even be proud of you.

Not a bit of it. Like Alma, the wife in *Brokeback Mountain*, my own wife was horrified by the level of rage I had to summon up before I could say anything. My wife was as appalled as Heath Ledger’s missus in *Brokeback Mountain*. And I am not even having a secret affair with Jake Gyllenhaal.

But the truth is, we do not do it for them. The brutal fact of the matter is that – if we are one of the fools who dares to speak up – we are doing it almost exclusively for ourselves.

Our women – those pragmatic girlfriends, those hard-headed wives – think that ultimately it is not worth it. Risking your life for a random bout of inappropriate behaviour? That’s the madness of the macho man. I personally think that men like Kevin Johnson are modern-day heroes and we could use a million more just like him. But his son will miss his father every day of his life, and at some point he will have the right to ask, *But was it worth it, Dad?*

Fight or flight? These two disparate instincts have the same function: to save your hide. But sometimes doing nothing, while saving your life, robs you of your soul.

Ultimately, the only argument that matters is about the kind of man you want to be. And when did we stop being the kind of men who want to protect the people we love? When did that go out of style? When did wanting to protect your family become old-fashioned?

My old martial arts teacher had a wonderful recipe for dealing with trouble. ‘Walk away,’ he would tell me, after hundreds of hours spent teaching me to kick and punch and block. ‘Walk away.’

Yeah but no but, I would say to him. But he had heard it all before, and he believed that none of it was worth killing or dying for. Someone spills your drink? Walk away. Someone bumps into you? Walk away. And it’s true – most trouble you can just walk away from. You can smile. You can apologise. You can put the pillow over your head.

But there comes a point when walking away means that you will think yourself less of a man. For most of us, that moment comes when some careless stranger is far too close to our women and

our children. And I don't walk away from that – whatever the wife wants. That's where I stand and I draw the line and I get ready to roll around on the floor of the restaurant.

I don't want any trouble. Honestly. Really. But it's just like Ennis says in *Brokeback Mountain*: 'You need to shut your slop-bucket mouths – you hear me?'

Three Dying Parents

If you only see two dead bodies in your life, then make sure they are your parents.

The death of a mother or father cannot be grasped from a distance. The phone call, the sealed coffin – it's not enough to comprehend that kind of loss – that twice-in-a-lifetime loss.

Inevitable it may be, but the death of a parent has an unimaginable quality to it. You need to see for yourself that they are truly gone, to understand that the ones who brought you into this world have gone from this world. So go look at the body. That is not the end of losing your father or mother. But that is where it begins.

Even as the numbing bureaucracy of death clamours for your attention – the funeral arrangements, deciding what to do with the leftovers of a lifetime, the surreal task of choosing a coffin-would Dad like the simple pine number, or the Napoleon job with the brass handles? – you have to force yourself to go and see.

To the hospital. To the undertaker's back room. Or – if they died at home, as my mother did – then to the master bedroom of the house where you grew up.

It helps. More than this, it is necessary. Yet viewing the dead body of a parent is a curiously flat experience. You feel it should be charged with emotion. There should be hot tears, and some final embrace, and Katherine Jenkins singing, 'Time to Say Goodbye'.

But the emotion comes earlier – in the cancer ward, in the hospital café, sitting by the death bed drinking endless cups of bad tea – and it comes later – at the funeral, or when you go through dusty cupboards, and your dead dad's clothes, or your mother's heartbreaking jewellery, or their photograph albums, and it takes you many strange hours to realise the obvious.

Everything must go.

Those are the moments for the spikes of emotion. But when you summon up the nerve to gaze upon your dead parent-as you have to, as you must – you hardly recognise them. You even feel a bit cheated. Mum? Dad? Where are you?

And it is not because the undertaker has weaved his crafty embalming magic, or that a mouth is set in a line that you never saw in life. It is simply because the spark has flown. The thing that made that woman your mother, or made that man your father, has gone forever. And you don't know if they have gone to a better place, or into black oblivion.

But that is not he. And that is not she.

You must look at the face of your dead parent not because it gives you a chance to say some last farewell but because until you do you will never even begin to understand that they are dead, and that you are alone in this world as you have never been alone before.

And even then it is hard. Even then it is next to impossible. Last month my mother had been gone for ten years. Ten years since the cancer overwhelmed her. Ten years since I returned to my home from her home to search for a hospice, leaving her in the care of an elderly friend, an ex-nurse – lovely Nelly, now gone herself-and got the call in the middle of the night to say come as fast you can. And it still wasn't fast enough. Ten years dead – and yet, here's the funny thing: I recently tried to call her.

I actually reached for the phone to relate some news that I knew would make her smile, and then I stopped myself, thinking – mental or what?

I got there not long after she died, and kissed her face, and saw an expression on that face that I had never seen when she lived, and yet it is still hard to believe.

Yet here is what you learn. There are two ways for your parents to die – quickly and slowly.

They go quick. They go slow.

But they go.

My dad was quick. My mum was slow.

My dad had lung cancer for a year and – being the hardest bastard in the universe – told nobody about it. His lungs were being eaten away and we never knew. Then one day he collapsed, was rushed to hospital and three weeks later we buried him.

A decade and a bit later, my mum had the same kind of cancer for the same length of time, but I was by her side and holding her hand when some busy NHS doctor told her there was no more they could do. And then she talked about it, and she weighed her chances of survival, and she confronted terminal illness with the combination of humour and grit that was peculiar to her generation of war brides. It was a very different experience to watching my dad go. But then she died too.

And I thought that the world should stop. Let me catch my breath. Acknowledge the passing of this woman – five feet nothing of bravery and jokes, even when the doctors were solemnly shaking their heads, and slyly looking at their fucking watches. It is only now I see the obvious.

Losing your parents is the most natural thing in the world.

And of course there are far worse things in this life than watching a parent die. Some people have to bury a child. Many people bury a spouse. Losing a parent is surely just another season, one more turn in the cycle of life.

Yet the world seems to change. First one goes, then the other.

‘You’re an orphan now,’ more than one person told me when my parents were both gone, and I thought that was a tad dramatic. I don’t see how a grown man can be an orphan.

It is completely natural to lose your parents. We all have our time. And then it’s up.

Then why does something so natural feel so completely and brutally unnatural?

You never know when they are going to go. Forget all that three-score-years-and-ten bullshit. I have a friend who lost his father before he was born. I have other friends who lost parents in childhood. I even have a friend who, when she was a girl, lost both of her parents in the same car crash – an incredibly common experience, as it turns out, because husbands and wives – fathers and mothers – regularly share a car.

Yet I have other friends well into middle age who still have both their parents living. And I have noted that the longer your parents live, the tougher it becomes to let go of them. You would think it would be the other way round – that spending almost half a century with your parents would make you more prepared to let go. But it doesn’t work that way.

And whenever they die – if your father goes when you are still in your mother’s womb, or if your mother goes when you see a middle-aged man you don’t recognise staring back at you from the shaving mirror – the world changes. There is nothing like the death of a parent to help you see the big picture, to truly get it, for the very first time. How could you have missed something so obvious?

Golden lads and girls all must. As chimney sweepers, come to dust.

When you bury your parents, you pull down the barrier between yourself and mortality.

When the first parent goes, the Earth shifts. When the second one goes, the Earth falls apart. When my father died in 1987, my mother left his suits untouched. She slept on her side of the bed. She stayed in the same house – for twelve years and one day – until her own death.

But when the surviving parent goes, the last link to your youth goes with her. Those strange hours spent wandering an empty house, opening drawers, peering into a vanished life, working out what to keep – what is priceless – and what to leave out for the bin men. It is the photo albums that do you in. Not because of all those familiar faces but because of all the faces that you do not know, as the memories of a lifetime dissolve like teardrops in the rain.

You don’t really know your parents until you watch them die. My father was the toughest man I ever knew, and then I saw him in that cancer ward, shot full of morphine, and he was afraid. I was shocked. I had never seen him afraid before, that scarred old soldier. I didn’t think he was capable of fear. That’s how little I knew him.

And my mum was a typical post-war housewife, as placidly faithful as a woman in a Tammy Wynette song.

Everyone thought she would just wither away with her husband gone, this man she had been with since she was sixteen and he was seventeen. And she didn't.

She discovered some inner steel. She realised she had an army of friends. She even learned that loneliness had its compensations. She could play her country and western records very loudly, without my dad shaking his *Daily Express* with irritation.

When your parents are around – giving or denying approval to boy and man, diminishing you with just one look or a few sharp words when you break a window, or drop out of school, or get divorced – there are powerful forces preventing you from reaching true maturity. You are still some kind of child until both of your parents are dead. You don't know them until they are dying and you don't know yourself.

For most of us, losing a parent is our first real contact with death. Until then, death is an impossibly distant prospect, and we kid ourselves that it can be kept at bay forever if we eat up our greens.

We live in a death-free culture. If you make it out of the womb you are likely to survive childhood. There are no world wars. Your fussy modern car scolds you if you fail to wear your seat belt.

You think you have time to burn until your parents are dying. Then for the first time in your life, your own death is undeniable.

When your parents are alive, you believe you will live forever. From the moment they die, you start counting the years that you have left.

The classic text on bereavement, *On Death and Dying*, by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, cites the five stages all men must stop at on their path to death.

First stage – denial and isolation.

Second stage – anger.

Third stage – bargaining.

Fourth stage – depression.

Fifth stage – acceptance.

What is true of the dying is true of the ones left behind. You get over it. You do. With time, scar tissue covers the deepest wounds. You become grateful that this man was your father, that this woman was your mother. You learn to feel blessed for what you had, rather than rail at what has been lost.

Yet you never really get used to it. In an unguarded moment – always some happy moment, when I have some small good news to relate – I am capable of reaching for the phone to call a woman who died in the last century.

Maybe she is watching down. Or maybe not. When I kissed the cheek of my dead mother – already cold, already departed, already truly not her – I did not know if she had gone to heaven, or simply gone. There were no clues.

Only when your parents die do you realise that the clock is running like the meter of a bent mini-cab driver – and it's running for you. And whatever comes after this short sweet life, be it heavenly hosts or a dreamless void or some great eternal kip, it will not be long until you find out for yourself.

Four Angry Old Man

You never argue at airport security. And then one day you do.

You never argue at airport security because those lethargic, blank-eyed men and women are the front line in the war on terror. You never argue at airport security because it is pointless, and they are just doing a job, and the stupid questions-Is this your toothpaste, sir? – and the dumb rituals – they find one shoe bomber and so all of mankind has to take off its footwear until the end of days – are the price we pay for pretending we are safe.

And then one day you snap.

For me it was Frankfurt, when they confiscated the entire contents of my toilet bag – yes, I bet that had old Osama trembling in his cave – and then gave me some insolent lip when I mildly commented that I had lugged all that stuff through Heathrow without anyone raising an eyebrow.

‘Ja,’ said the sausage-munching jobsworth. ‘But here ve haf rules.’

I gawped. I laughed. And then I pointed out that back in the sleepy little place that I come from – London town, Fritz, perhaps you’ve heard of it – ve also haf rules.

‘And the reason we have rules,’ I continued, ‘is because for about seventy years we have had somebody trying to blow us to pieces. Right now it is Islamic nutjobs, but before that we had thirty years of the IRA and before that – I hate to bring it up – it was the Luftwaffe.’ I cackled with derisive laughter. ‘But if confiscating my Gillette Sensitive Skin Shaving Foam makes the fatherland a safer place, then *bitte schoen*, be my guest.’

Oh, it was an ugly scene. I was too loud. I was too mouthy. But all the pointless bossiness that I have experienced at airports all over the world finally reached critical mass. And I blew. And as I walked away with what remained of my personal belongings – dirty socks and a pair of rusty tweezers – I realised that I had become something I never thought I would be.

I had turned into an angry old man.

We think of rage as being the province of the young. We think of youth as being the age of righteous, red-blooded protest. But the young are not angry any more. The young of the twenty-first century are a placid, bovine, docile bunch, sucking up the Arctic Monkeys on their iPods, dreaming of catching Simon Cowell’s eye.

They might fret about the environment, but they are not angry about it – not really. They might be a bit miffed about what we get up to in our distant wars, but I don’t see them marching to Downing Street or rioting in Grosvenor Square. They might get a bit trembly-chinned over Third World poverty, but they think that watching Coldplay in Hyde Park and flashing their student union Visa card will wipe away Africa’s tears.

The young are no longer capable of anger. If you want to see genuine fury at the way of the world, then look at a man on the far side of thirty. And as he gets older – thirty-one, thirty-two, forty, fifty – the anger builds. By the time I am sixty I confidently expect to be on the roof of a public building somewhere with a high-powered rifle while the neighbours reflect, ‘Well, he was always a bit of a loner.’

Nothing makes a young man angry.

Everything makes an old man angry.

I can no longer go to the cinema. I just get too angry-angry at the sound of some barnyard pal chewing cud in the seat behind me, angry at the dozy bastards staring into the wintry glow of their mobile phones, as though they would vanish in a puff of smoke if they turned off the Nokia for two hours. And talking during the movie – well, that puts me in a state that is somewhere beyond mere anger. If you ever saw someone in a cinema suddenly shove his face into someone else’s face and scream at the very top of his voice, ‘SHUT THE FUCK UP!’ then that might have been me. I know you are meant to clear your throat in a disapproving fashion, or mutter a sharp, ‘Sssh!’ But I

can't seem to do any of that. I wish I could. But there's too much blood pumping through my veins for a quick, 'Ssssh!'

I scream. I rave. And if the barnyard pal is sitting directly in front of me, then I kick his seat with the heel of my boot as hard as I possibly can, and when he turns around I scream, 'SHUT THE FUCK UP!'

Then of course you have to be prepared to roll around in the aisle of a cinema, sticky with popcorn and spilled soda pop. There are twenty movies that I have paid to see that I have no idea how they ended. Because I was waiting to be joined in mortal combat.

But what can I do? I am an angry old man.

So no cinema for me – and countless nights out ruined for my loved ones, because something – cud chewing, mobile gazing, mindless chatter in the darkness – set me off.

But I am not a single-issue angry person. Almost everything makes me angry these days. I am angry at people who litter. Yet I am also angry at people who want to force me to recycle. I am angry at people who have no manners, and I am angry at people who swear around children, and I am angry at people in Smart cars, who inevitably drive in an incredibly stupid fashion. People, really – I am angry at people. Any kind of rudeness, finger wagging or ignorance is liable to light my blue touch paper.

Sometimes I think of Terry in *The Likely Lads*, who did not like foreigners, or southerners or – now he thought about it-the bloke next door. But the anger that comes to us all with time is not mere misanthropy – this is not anger for anger's sake.

It is hard-earned, clear-eyed and horribly justified.

You have seen too much. You have lived too long. You know the way things should work, and you are maddened by the yawning chasm between your expectations and the grim reality of the workaday world.

I don't want to be this way. I want to be happy. I want to be nice. I want to be like the kid I was as a young journalist, who was so happy to be flying to America to go on the road with Thin Lizzy that he truly didn't care that the plane sat on the runway at Heathrow for six hours, and didn't care that he was in economy. I didn't even know that I was in economy. I wasn't aware that planes had a class system. To me there were only seats on planes, and they were all good ones.

As my legs throbbed merrily with Deep Vein Thrombosis, I didn't care about anything at all apart from the fact that within twenty-four hours I would be immersed in the fleshpots of Philadelphia. Will I ever be that carefree and giddy with happiness again? Probably not. There is too much anger in me now. If an airline had me sitting on the runway for six hours today, my head would explode. They wouldn't be able to placate me with some savoury nuts.

My family stayed at the hotel that featured so glamorously in the James Bond film, *Casino Royale*: the One and Only Ocean Club in the Bahamas. And I say – be thankful there's only one of them. What a dump. It took us hours to check in and, you'll never guess, but that really made me angry.

Because I know that if you stay at the Sandy Lane in Barbados, or the Ritz-Carlton in Hong Kong, or the Jalousie Plantation in St Lucia, or the Conrad in Tokyo – or any other world-class five-star hotel that is worthy of the name and those five stars – they will check you in up in your room. Not the One and Only in the Bahamas. With our jet-lagged nipper in tow, we waited for literally hours to check in.

'You're always angry,' my wife told me. 'Why are you always so angry?'

'Because I know how things should work,' I replied, through gritted teeth.

And that's the problem. When you are young, you have no idea how the world should work. For most of my twenties, I thought that a mini-bar was the height of sophistication and luxury. Of course I was never angry – I was too grateful to be on the loose in the world, and I was too stupid. Anger comes with experience, anger comes with wisdom. What's true is that – righteous and justified though it may be – anger spoils everything.

‘Why can’t we just sit here and enjoy the sunset?’ asked my saintly wife, as she cradled our exhausted daughter, and the staff of the One and Only Hellhole Bahamas gave us some more feeble excuses about why our room wasn’t ready. ‘It’s such a beautiful sunset,’ Yuriko said. ‘Why can’t we just enjoy it?’

Why not indeed? Why not contemplate the lovely sunset and count our blessings? Why bother to burst a blood vessel because of the failings of the international tourist trade?

It is a male thing. This dissatisfaction, this anger, this railing at the sloppy and the stupid and the sub-standard – it comes with your biological hard drive. It is wired into us, this rage to make right the world – or at least get dummies to stop looking at their mobile phones in the cinema.

It is the impulse that helped our species to crawl out of the primordial swamp. It is the reason the human race survived. It is the life-affirming core of everything.

No point in giving yourself a heart attack because some airport security dimwit who couldn’t make it as a traffic warden confiscates your eye drops. No point in having an aneurysm because some gum-chewing simpleton is texting on his mobile during the third act of *The Departed*. No point in having a brain haemorrhage because you arrive at your hotel and your room doesn’t have a chocolate on the pillow.

But only young men fresh from having their laundry done by Mum have any excuse to tolerate the world in all its venality and stupidity. The grown men know better – they have been around, and seen it all before, and we know that if you save up and splash out for two weeks in the One and Only Ocean Club, Bahamas, and your room is not ready when you arrive, then you have every right to blow a gasket. In fact, you are showing exemplary restraint worthy of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King by not smashing up their lobby. I will never again be that twenty-two-year-old, stunned by the sight of an economy seat and a mini bar, excited by the thought of seeing Thin Lizzy in Philadelphia, and I can’t pretend otherwise.

The trouble is, there’s no end to the anger. You get in your car – and you want to kill someone. You go through airport security – and someone who has never actually made anyone more secure starts bossing you around. You go to the cinema – and then one day you can’t go to the cinema any more.

When does it end? It doesn’t. The rage comes as youth goes and we shall never be free of it. It feels like an ancient emotion, a hereditary anger – something that has been handed down through generations of men, a bug-eyed fury passed down from angry grandfather to angry father to angry son.

I can’t help feeling that the anger is somewhat wasted on the generations born in the second half of the twentieth century. I can’t help believing that this rage was used for more constructive purposes in the past – to fight for survival, to free the world, to build better lives for people with nothing.

Perhaps male rage will die out with time. Perhaps decades of peace and prosperity will make the anger fall away, like a coat of fur on Neanderthal man, or a set of fins that are no longer needed on dry land. Perhaps angry men will disappear into history – like men in hats, and men in uniform. But not yet. And not for you and not for me. For us there can be only one honest response to cruelty and wickedness and stupidity, and people who don’t say please or thank you.

Grumble, old man, grumble.

Five Fear of Fake Breasts

Until a man has actually made love to a woman with fake breasts, he can never really know what they are like.

Round, juicy and tempting they may be.

But then so is a bowl of plastic fruit.

For no matter how good they look, the spell is broken the moment they are touched by human hands. The real things somehow manage to be both firm and soft, they feel undeniably human, they move, they are alive.

In comparison, counterfeit breasts feel as though they have been stolen from the morgue. Replicant breasts are so hard. Bogus breasts are so numb, so lifeless, so dead. Once they are outside the two dimensions of celebrity magazines, a pair of phonies are suddenly a million light years away from the objects they seek to imitate.

And real breasts are warm. The fake breasts I have encountered have always seemed cold to me, but that may have been my appalled imagination. Certainly you will get the best out of them if you look but don't touch.

But then that's almost the point of fake breasts. They are not there to be fondled, kissed or felt, they are there to be admired, discussed, lusted after and photographed.

The moment they are touched – and I mean in the heat of passion, rather than out of curiosity or in the interests of scientific research – then the spell is broken. And this is true of all fake breasts, no matter how much money has been spent on this act of female self-mutilation.

Some women have reconstruction forced upon them. I watched my wife's mother die of breast cancer. The battles that women like my wife's mother have fought are insulted by the pumped-up twiglets on the cover of *Heat*.

The women who survive breast cancer – and even today, only lung and colon cancer kill more – are faced with hard choices. A lumpectomy – breast-conserving surgery – has to be followed with radiation treatment. A mastectomy – total removal of a breast – can be followed by reconstruction. But that means yet more surgery. These are all devastating choices for any woman.

But the overwhelming majority of women who have breast enhancement do not do it because they have fought cancer. They do it because of vanity. They do it because it has become a fashion option. They do it because they have an IQ somewhat smaller than their bra size.

And the brutal irony is that breast enhancement – boob jobs, in the baby talk that portrays it as akin to a getting a spray-on tan – makes everything from a benign lump to a malignant tumour infinitely harder to detect.

You would think that would be enough to put anyone off. And yet somehow it isn't.

In a bar at the end of the world, there was a story they told of a man who loved a dancer although the dancer could not love herself.

She was a great dancer, and most nights of the week, if you were in that club at the rough end of a rough street in that rough city, you might see her. And if you saw her dance once, then you would never forget her.

Physically, there was not much of her. She had the natural-born dancer's lack of waste. This man loved to look at her, and he thought that she was an undeniably beautiful woman. But-like many women who are told they are beautiful by men who have only just met them – she disagreed. The dancer had what a head doctor would call 'body issues'.

She was small-breasted. That was the heart of her complaint about herself. The man had always liked her exactly as she was, and thought she was perfect – but these small breasts were a big thing for her, an insurmountable barrier between her and true happiness.

She had great legs, a great little bum, a lovely face-but in her mind it all added up to nothing because of her small breasts. She started talking about her breasts more and more – how she would have more confidence if they were bigger, how she would dance better, how she would finally reach a point in her life when she felt good about herself.

She wanted surgery.

Naturally, he told her that he thought she looked great already. And he meant it. But it became clear that what he thought really didn't come into it.

She wouldn't be doing it for him.

She would be doing it for herself.

And he thought that made sense – it was her body and she was free to do what she liked with it. And also he was young and dumb – he didn't realise how the surgery would change everything between them.

So he got the money and gave it to her. He did it because he loved her. Then he went away. And when he came back to her town, he watched her dance and he drank his San Miguel and then he held her hand all the way home.

And – how stupid was this man? – he only realised that he was having sex with a woman with fake breasts after the moment of penetration. He had not noticed them when she was dancing.

But now he noticed them, because he could hardly miss them. They did not feel even remotely real. They felt as in-authentic as alcohol-free lager or sugar-free sweetener. Even faker than that – because they were no substitute for the real thing. They were impostors.

How unnatural those breasts felt in his hands and mouth, how bogus on the tip of his tongue, how *hard* pressed against his chest – that's the thing that shocked him most of all, the knock-on-wood hardness of the bloody things.

She had ruined herself. Really, he could not think of it any other way. Her silhouette now had something of the pouter pigeon about it. It broke his heart to see what she had done.

He did not stop loving her.

But they never made love again.

Why aren't there armies of thinking women protesting about the grotesquely booming trade in bogus breasts? Why don't women's magazines stop slavishly printing pictures of pumped-up stars with their pathetic plastic tits sticking out? Is it because to really and truly know how rotten fake breasts are, you have to be a heterosexual man?

Buying off-the-peg breasts is becoming as acceptable as a woman colouring her hair or whitening her teeth. But it is of a totally different order. There is something obscene about seeing healthy young women mutilate themselves by stuffing two plastic bags full of gel into their breasts. Having a 'boob job' – society's coy euphemism that hides the scarring, the risks to long-term health, and most of all the way good breasts get so casually traded for bad – is far closer to female circumcision than it is to any kind of cosmetic surgery.

But they look nice – right, girls?

'There are so many images of women with amazing fake boobs, I didn't think mine were good enough,' said Jodie Marsh, at the grand unveiling of her new, allegedly improved 32GG superboobs. 'I think society has forgotten what real boobs look like, and women like me end up thinking our boobs aren't nice because they disappear into our armpits when we lie down.'

And now Jodie's 'boobs' can point at the chandelier until the end of days. And I ask you – is that really better than breasts that can move around of their own free will?

Some of the most written about women in the country-Victoria Beckham, Jordan and Kerry Katona – have given Mother Nature a helping hand in the breast department. No doubt this love of fake breasts among the rich and famous (not to mention ageing and constantly photographed) is directly linked to a record number of teenagers having breast-enlargement surgery.

They don't know what they are letting themselves in for.

There are plenty of female celebrities with healthy breasts that do not feel like a sailor's wooden leg – off the top of my head, I think of Kate Moss, Sienna Miller and Leona Lewis-but unfortunately no operation exists to artificially inflate an insecure young woman's self-esteem.

'My boob job made me feel better,' says *EastEnders* actress Lacey Turner.

What she means is that the operation made her feel better *about herself*. Trust me on this one, Lacey – no boob job ever made a woman feel better.

Don't do it, girls. Renounce all breast enlargement. Turn your back, and your breasts, on that surgeon's knife. If not for your man, then for your health. These breast-job babes blow my mind – these are women who would not dream of smoking a cigarette or going to the beach without sun block, yet they willingly undergo surgery that practically guarantees a health hazard in coming years.

Those vain – or insecure, or neurotic, or self-loathing – women willingly risk infection, breast pain, changes in nipple sensitivity, visible wrinkling, complications with breast feeding and asymmetric appearance (i.e. breasts so completely different that they resemble the brothers played by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny de Vito in *Twins*).

And what they never tell you in the celebrity rags is that off-the-shelf breasts can rupture.

You can give it a fancy name like mammoplasty enlargement or augmentation mammoplasty, but in the end it is just a bog standard boob job where a silicone shell is filled with either gel or sterile saline liquid and stuffed inside a woman's breasts via various types of incision.

Inframammary incisions are inserted under the breast, and make a woman look like she has had some terrible domestic accident. Periareolar incisions go in through the nipple, which leaves less scarring but increases the risk of capsular contracture, when the body's immune system tries to repel what it sees as a foreign invader.

There are other incisions – the transaxillary goes in through the armpit, the transabdominoplasty through the stomach and the transumbilical goes in through the navel.

They all hurt like hell.

I have never met a woman who did not find breast enlargement the most painful experience of their life – including childbirth and watching their boyfriends dance at weddings. But this initial pain is likely to be just the start of her problems.

Those silicone shells can break, leak or slip. A woman can be left with her nipples pointing in different directions. Breast sensitivity often goes out the window when a woman goes for the fake boob option. The pain she feels after the operation can endure for years – perhaps forever.

It spoils sex for the man. And for the woman too.

So that's sex spoiled for everyone then.

But last year in America alone, nearly half a million women had breast-enlargement surgery. I would suggest that not one of them is the woman they were before – imperfect perhaps, but with a natural beauty that no plastic surgeon could ever improve upon.

And speaking purely from the male perspective, sex with a woman wearing replicant breasts is no fun. That's the vicious punchline – there's this mirage of perfection, this pert promise of ultimate pleasure, and the vision evaporates the moment you reach out to touch them.

Fake breasts are the cock-tease from hell.

The dancer's breasts were well done. On an objective level, the man could see that the surgery had been efficiently performed. There was none of the horrific scarring on the underside of the breasts that he had seen elsewhere. And yet they repelled him.

As well done as they were, these fake breasts did not belong on a real woman. They were artificially created monsters from some doctor's menu of butchery.

In the cold light of day, she looked like a porn fantasy-sporting replicants that were there to attract, to be looked at, leered over, lusted after and remembered. But they were not really there to be touched.

They were not there for any man who might love this woman, or for any baby she might give birth to. It felt like those breasts were there for the rest of the world.

Don't do it, girls.

Love what God gave you, no matter how much or how Double-AA. Small can be fun. Medium can be lovely. Large can be grand. Those hard, fake things are always awful. Do you really want to present those lifeless objects to the man you love? Do you really want to shove some surgeon's rock-hard creation in your baby's face?

Fake breasts desecrate a woman's body. Fake breasts take the joy of sex and pump it full of lifeless gel. Fake breasts look bad, feel bad and will one day make you sick. And they are so horribly, unforgivably dangerous.

Keep your health, keep your self-respect, keep your man. It should not take a man to tell you – learn to love yourself the way you are.

Keep them real.

Six Humiliation

In my first year at school, my little chums played a wonderful joke on me. ‘I know,’ they giggled. ‘When we get changed for PE, let’s get Parsnip’s grey flannel shorts and hide them behind the toilet.’ And so they did.

And when the rest of my class had changed back into their school uniforms, there was I, searching the locker room in my baggy *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* underpants.

Hilarious – for them. Humiliating for me. Especially when I entered the classroom in my pants, gulping back the tears and holding a trembling hand in the air. ‘Please, miss,’ I gulped. ‘I can’t find my trousers’

How they roared. I remember every excruciating second. The glee on their faces, the choked-up feeling in my throat. And it was my first experience of that brutal, shameful, cheek-burning, eye-stinging dip in self-esteem that makes you wish you had never been born – or been born, but never lost your trousers.

It would be nice to think that we outgrow the world’s ability to humiliate us. It would be comforting to think that when we leave schoolbooks and playgrounds behind, we say good riddance to all that. And then one day – decades after the vicious japes of childhood are past – the terrible truth sinks in.

Someone is always hiding your trousers.

How can a grown man be humiliated? Losing something you were planning on keeping – your wife, your job, your underwear – these are the classics.

In the personal realm, being dumped by a woman you love immediately makes you feel as though you are five years old and some snickering bastard just stashed your short trousers in a secret hiding place. In the professional realm, losing your job is an infallible shortcut to humiliation.

Those two million unemployed will one day forget the sickening practicalities of unemployment – struggling to pay the bills, and confronting a cashpoint machine that has learned to say no. But they will never ever forget the feeling of not being wanted. They will never shake off the shame of being surplus to requirements. Bills get paid and bruises fade. A good woman can be replaced by a better woman. But the sting of humiliation stays with you forever.

Yet we are so ill equipped to deal with it. Humiliation – the ability of the wicked world to steal our trousers – always seems to sneak up on us.

The hard knocks of the working world, the fickle nature of romance, even the subtle betrayals of our body as we age—we see all these coming over the horizon and slowly marching towards us. But humiliation always feels box fresh.

At the end of an American book tour I sat in a radio station in California listening to the most loving introduction I had ever heard in my life. ‘Tonight,’ said the DJ, ‘we have a man in the studio whose work has touched the lives and the hearts of literally millions ... a man who is just a man and yet – through the power of his work – unlike other men ... Yes,’ he said, ‘Michael Douglas is coming into the studio later. But first ... someone called Tommy Perkins.’

The cliché of the American book tour is that they have not read your book. The humiliating reality is that they rarely know you have written a book. From sea to shining sea, I have had hundreds of witless, white-toothed morons in assorted American radio and TV stations ask me, ‘What’s the item?’

They usually ask you about ten seconds before you are live on air. It means – Why are you here, dirt bag? And exactly why were you born?

You may fret about the night you could not get an erection, or that unfortunate flirtation with premature ejaculation, or when your mum caught you masturbating over the bra ad in her Littlewoods

catalogue – especially if it was all on the same day – but you have not really taken a masterclass in humiliation until you have been on an American book tour.

I once did an event in Boston where, in the middle of a crowded, bustling book shop, I faced row upon row of empty seats. Only two people came – and one of them was a homeless person who woke up the moment I started speaking and spent the rest of the event trying to sneak out without hurting my feelings. It was very thoughtful of him. But it was far too late. This was gold-medal humiliation – mortification as an Olympic sport.

And I was humiliated again when only one woman turned up in Dallas. And I was humiliated when the only books I shifted in Atlanta were the dozen or so that were stolen by the same smiling young man. And I was humiliated in Chicago when the only question from the audience was from a mental little old lady who was obsessed with the British Royal Family.

‘Do you know Prince Philip?’

‘No, unfortunately I have never met the Duke of Edinburgh. Anyone else? Yes, the same lady ...’

‘How about Prince Charles?’

And so it went on – from the next in line to the throne all the way down to the Duchess of Devonshire. And it was ... humiliating.

But not quite as bad as being eleven years old, and realising that there was a girl in my class that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

Far too shy to actually talk to her, I cunningly waited until Valentine’s Day and then left a soppy, heart-covered card on her desk, with my name written in big black letters. And when I walked into the classroom on the morning of 14th February, there she was, holding my card, surrounded by her friends – and my friends too! – and they were all wetting their regulation school knickers, pointing at me and laughing themselves sick.

From the womb to the tomb, from the cradle to the grave, the humiliation just keeps on coming. And it often kicks you right in your wedding tackle just when you were starting to think that you have the hang of this life thing.

Humiliation is life’s way of telling you that, somewhere deep down inside, you will always be that scared little boy who couldn’t find his trousers, or who was so naïve that he gave his Valentine card to the class heartbreaker, or made the terrible error of not being Michael Douglas when he was passing through California.

You think you grow out of being humiliated, but you never do. The job goes. Or the woman. Or perhaps you keep the job and the woman but somehow misplace your dignity – and that can hurt as much as all the rest.

TV is ripe for humiliation. I have seen people go on *Question Time* and shake so much that I hid behind the sofa. And I have seen people appear on *Have I Got News for You* and be so terrified that they never managed to say a full sentence – let alone exchange cutting, Oscar Wilde-level banter with the regular presenters. And then there was the poor sap who went on *Mastermind* and only managed to get two questions right in his specialist subject. How the world howled at his humiliation! The *Daily Mail* had a double-page spread on the humiliated thicko – AND YOUR SPECIALIST SUBJECT IS ... PASS!!

I have done my unremarkable stunts on *Question Time* and *Have I Got News for You* and *Mastermind*. And every time I left the studio I heaved an enormous sigh of relief. Because-while I had hardly set the world on fire with my wit, or intelligence, or knowledge – I had managed to avoid being totally humiliated.

And yet it comes to us all. It doesn’t really matter if you never know the horror of the American book tour or finding yourself unable to stop shaking on *Question Time*. Life will humiliate you elsewhere. Humiliation is wonderfully democratic like that.

I remember the first public speech I ever made. Those who know me as an accomplished after-dinner speaker, always equipped with a stream of gags and an amusing jar of cock rub, would have been shocked to see my total humiliation on my debut speaking engagement.

It was the last century. George Michael was twenty-four years old and so naturally it was time to write his life story. George and I were doing the book together. He talked and I tarted it up. Our publishers threw a big party for us at the Groucho Club. And I was asked to give the keynote speech. And it was one of the most humiliating experiences of my life. Because my speech stunk the place out.

I did not realise at the time that you can't just write a speech and then read it out loud. I didn't realise that if you do that then every single time you look up, you completely lose your place. And have to find it again. And then you stutter, and sweat, and feel like crying as George Michael and all these publishing big shots look at you but can't meet your eye, just in case humiliation is contagious.

These days, I can speak in public until the audience soaks their Tiramisu with tears of mirth. And if we are ever in a changing room together, don't even think about hiding my trousers because I never let them out of my sight.

But so what? Life will find some other way to humiliate me. We all get humiliated. The question is – what are you going to do about it?

Humiliation can be a springboard to greatness. When Muhammad Ali fought Joe Frazier in Madison Square Garden on 8th March 1971 they were both undefeated, and those of us who had grown up watching Ali firmly believed him to be unbeatable. Ali no doubt believed it too.

But Smoking Joe not only beat Ali – he broke his jaw. Joe quite literally shut Ali's big, mocking mouth – the mouth that never tired of talking about how ugly Frazier was, and what an Uncle Tom he was, and what an inferior black man (despite Frazier's skin being far darker than Ali's). Ali was abjectly humiliated in Madison Square Garden that night. And yet somehow his greatness springs from that moment.

'Everybody loses,' he said thoughtfully. 'Probably be a better man.'

And so it proved.

And as Ali digested the humiliation of his first defeat, his face broken and swollen, those of us who loved him had never loved him more. Because he faced down humiliation like a man.

Frank Sinatra was the official photographer for *Life* magazine at that fight because he could not get a ringside seat. You might think that would be demeaning for one of the biggest stars in the world, but Sinatra's legend is built on the way he dealt with humiliation after early success.

Before Sinatra landed two contracts – to play Private Maggio in *From Here to Eternity*, and a recording contract with Capitol records – he was all washed up. What we think of when we think of Sinatra – the concept albums with Nelson Riddle, the Oscar-winning acting – only came after the world had humiliated him. In 1952, after being dropped by Columbia and MCA, Frank Sinatra did not even have a recording contract. Humiliation indeed – but greatness was just two contracts away.

It would be comforting to believe that humiliation is invariably the gateway to glory. Unfortunately, losing your trousers – literally or metaphorically – is rarely the cue for winning an Oscar, or beating Smoking Joe in Manila. Despite all the humiliations that life brings, true greatness eludes us. But deep down inside the lowest moments of all is where you know yourself at last.

It never really ends. If childhood is ripe for humiliation, then so is puberty. And young manhood is stuffed with humiliating moments – losing a fight I remember as being particularly humiliating. It might not have been the Thriller in Manila, but it mattered desperately to me. Yet being beaten physically is nothing to the damage you receive psychologically. Sticks and head butts can break your bones, but it is the abject humiliation that really hurts.

What must old age be like? An endless series of doctors peering up your back passage and asking you to cough and telling you to put your trousers back on.

But you can't!

Because the doctor has hidden them!

Seven Tough Guys Get Facials

In the never-ending battle to be the best a man can be, the twenty-first century male is confronted by the same question again and again – where to draw the line?

Laser surgery to correct imperfect eyesight, cosmetic dentistry to give you a perfect smile – this is now the kind of routine self-improvement that we get done in our lunch break. But-where does it end? Or doesn't it?

Over the last year I have had two red-blooded heterosexual males inform me that they plan to invest in a bottom-lift – which is exactly the same as a face-lift, but south of the border, down Mexico way. And to me – sorry – that just feels like a self-improvement too far.

Yet there is no denying that men are missing out on a lot of the things that women take for granted, and that make them healthier, happier and lovelier. And don't men have the right to be healthier, happier and lovelier too?

What about the facial? To many men – for example, me – the facial has always been on the dark side of what is acceptable for a man. A bit too poncy. A tad too girly. Which just goes to show how far men still have to go.

Your dad and uncles would have reacted to a man-facial with distrust. Well, I have been to the mountain, and I have had a facial – and I see at last what I have been missing for years.

This just in – real men get facials.

As fallible, neurotic, profoundly messed-up human beings, we all have an insatiable appetite for self-improvement.

Or is that just me?

I am shocked and disturbed to discover that for every Penguin Classic or slim volume of poetry on my shelves, I seem to own many more books on getting rich, getting laid, getting fit, losing weight, winning fights, raising daughters, stopping smoking, starting a language and treating your own knees. I am a sucker for self-improvement, a junkie for self-help, a crack whore of self-motivation.

Or is that just my library?

But everywhere I look there is evidence of a pathological obsession for being richer, tougher, thinner, smarter, fitter and – above all – better.

There are books by world-renowned experts here. Captain W.E. Fairbairn's 1942 martial arts classic *Get Tough! How to win in hand-to-hand fighting as taught to the British commandos and the U.S Armed Forces*. And oh look – there is the babe-magnet bible, *How to Get the Women You Desire into Bed* by sex guru Ross Jeffries. And right next to it I see *How to Get Rich* by Donald Trump. There's *The Prince* by Machiavelli and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, books about Neuro-Linguistic Programming and Creative Visualisation and how to end a street fight with just one blow.

But do I really need this stuff? And has it done me any good? Does it do anyone any good?

Not all the self-improvement texts I own are by some certified genius in his field. I also have a large collection of books by charlatans, nutjobs and nobodies. I own books about getting rich by people who are not rich but in jail. But when it comes to improving myself, I seem disturbingly willing to suspend belief. I am like a country hick queuing up to see the bearded lady, the mug punter who can't see when the cards are marked, a sucker for that snake oil.

I am even starting to doubt the experts. Captain W.E. Fairbairn invented the Fairbairn Commando knife and is the father of modern hand-to-hand combat. Anyone with fire in the blood should own a copy of *Get Tough*

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