

essay
MAMA'S BOY

The scene is the kitchen/dining room of my sister Sheila's immaculate and spacious Victorian house in a small town outside of Hamilton, Ontario. The date is Mother's Day, 1997. The family (my father, mother, sister, Great Aunt ma — and she really is a great aunt, by the way — and my maternal grandmother Lii whom I still call Grandma, though she wouldn't bat an eyelash if I called her Lii) have just finished a very nice dinner and a... certain amount of wine. David Groenewegen's letter is on my mind. I'm still wrestling with the idea of answering it in an upcoming issue, but the answer is looking more like an essay all the time. Since my mother had stopped reading *Cerebus* through the course of *Reads* and I had only recently (when that fact came to light over another dinner) persuaded her to finish it and read *Minds* (ahem), I was wary of an essay of that kind just arriving in the old mail box of the old homestead. Since it was a family get-together, I didn't want to get stuck on the subject and end up monopolizing the conversation, but I did think that notification was- in order.

I paraphrased the gist of David's letter and told Mum that I was thinking of answering it with an essay called "Mama's Boy." Now, whether she answered "Ohhhh, dear"- or "Dear Sister" or just Mmmm'ed her "Mmmmm" that rises up at the end and signals a kind -of simultaneous interest in and dread of the future course of the topic at hand... I couldn't say. It was one of those, anyway.

Still in expediency/sound bite mode, I plunged in: "The first thought that I had about being a mama's boy was the 'cry-baby' thing. You know, Cliff and his broken little finger."

Now, I have to interrupt myself to explain this little piece of family lore. Cliff is my Uncle Cliff, my mother's younger sibling and only sibling. Symmetrical it was that the same structure existed between myself and my sister. Two kids. Older one a girl, younger one a boy. Now, I don't have a clear mental picture of myself before the age of, say, ten, except that I was a mama's boy and a crybaby. That is beyond dispute. My mental impression of myself is of a boy who simply started crying at birth and stopped only intermittently until he was about eight or nine years old. No, that's an exaggeration, but it's hard not to exaggerate when you consider reality through infant memories. I cried too much for a boy, that much was true. Big boys don't cry. My crying and the little traumas I cried about were well over into the girlish range (such distinctions being allowable back when the earth was still cooling in the early 1960s). Anyway, I have a very vivid memory of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." You know, he cried wolf so often that eventually the villagers didn't believe him, and when 'the real wolf came no one came to help him and he got -eaten. This had a particular resonance in my mother's family, since we had the more immediate example of "Cliff's broken little finger" which had the same high moral outcome as "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." Uncle Cliff was a cry-baby too, you see. And he cried at the least little trauma, so that when, one day, he broke his little finger, no one

believed he was hurt for (some period of time — part of my mental block — a day? two days? a week?). And then they took him to the doctor and, lo, verily, the finger was broken.

We return you now to the Victorian kitchen/dining room.

“His arm!” my mother, father, and grandmother said in unison, laughing.

“His arm?” Something convulsed inside of me-in that moment, I have to confess. -And then I laughed.

“You mean to tell me that a little boy had I broken arm, and *no one* believed him and the only,” I was really laughing now — it was quite a punch line, “the only moral you could draw from it was ‘you shouldn’t be a crybaby?’”

That cracked up the room, let me tell you.

“It served him right,” said my Dad in. his mock serious tone by way of emphasizing the fundamental (albeit somewhat *grim*) humour of my observation, and we all cracked up again.

“Served him right” It was a great line that was-taken two ways at that Mother’s Day table. Black, black humour for the women and an exaggeration of the soiling out process for my Dad and myself. “It served him appropriately” is the other half of the double meaning. A cry-baby is stuck, between the baby state and the intended boy state. A broken arm served as a wake-up call that there are things that are worth crying about and things that are not worth crying about. It moved my Uncle Cliff along. It not only served *him* appropriately, it served *me* appropriately — years and years after the fact. Served me so well that I didn’t need to have my arm broken to know I had to get past where I was. I think the essential moral is pretty sound, constituting how things work best on the masculine side of reality (what there is left of it, anyway).

Baby, boy, man.

Two easy steps—or at least they used to be. The baby was expected to become a boy, and the boy was expected to become a man. The baby was expected to aspire to become a boy, and the boy was expected to aspire to become a man. If a boy isn’t “measuring up,” the other guys are going to call, him a baby. It can be mean, sure — it’s an icon of literature written by and for “mama’s boys.” “They all-called me a baby and I went home crying.” Well, *duh!* But it can also be a friendly bit of cajolery: “Don’t be a baby.” Don’t cry so easily, don’t give up so easily, don’t sulk or throw a temper tantrum when you don’t get your own way. In short keep moving, keep progressing. Stop being a baby and become a boy, a guy. Pain is a big part of it. There are three ways to deal with physical pain: one, behave as if it hurts more than it does; two, behave as if it hurts just as much as

it does; three, behave as if it hurts less than it does. You know? Strength? Become better, learn to take it, walk it off, spit on it, and run a few laps. Reaction to pain constitutes a significant conscious decision. If someone cracks you on the ankle with his stick while playing road hockey, and you drop to the ground and roll around clutching the ankle and it doesn't hurt — but it looked like it hurt — well, the guys aren't going to know. You can milk it for sympathy. and theatrically limp around for a minute or two, but you've really made a conscious decision to stay a baby inside even though you're a boy outside. It's just as... unprogressive?. . .to milk sympathy out of the guys (okay, attention and maybe concern) as it is to run home to mama crying. It's a -bad interior choice. The right interior choice is to widen the gap between the pain and the reaction. As little exterior reaction to as much interior pain as you can manage. Shorten the reaction. Wince and hobble when, you know, that's really all you can do. The moment you can look okay, look okay. In the “sorting-out” process, once you get into the bad habit of imagining pain, anxiety, fear, and all that stuff, you've really set a self-destructive pattern. You never properly jump from baby into boy, so the odds are not good that you'll ever make the jump from boy to man.

Unable and/or unwilling to make the jump from baby to boy, the “mama's boy” misinterprets cajolery — and the fact that very, very quickly in the boy stage, everyone else is getting sorted out. There are guys who are natural leaders, natural athletes, natural everything. There are guys who are fair, good, okay, and better than okay in all the same aspects. But the key thing is not just athletic ability or popularity or whatever. It is being a guy: And a big part of being a guy is accepting who you are and where you are in the pecking order. To the “mama's boy” the world is full of bullies and mean guys who make fun of him and pick on him. They exist, but a lot fewer of them exist in the “mama's boy's” world than exist in the “mama's boy's” mind. The “mama's boy” takes himself too seriously. He sees himself the way his mother sees him: fragile, special, better than most if not all. Self-importance is a no-no in the guy's world. That's where the “ribbing” comes in, “taking the piss” out of someone. Just like physical pain, you've got to be able to take it. Not take it and sulk, or take it and lash back, but take it good-naturedly, take it as if you put your pants on one leg at a time in the morning same as everyone else. Not take it as if Mother's Little Prince just got a footprint on his coronation robe.

Super-hero comic books are tailor-made for “mama's boys.”

Much has been written about them as “power fantasies” and as “wish fulfillment,” but (at the risk of being really offensive) most of what has been written has been by “mama's boys” for “mama's boys.” And I think, naturally enough, that they miss the point. Super-hero comic books interpose themselves in the jump from baby to boy and from boy to man. The “mama's boy” misses the point out on the playground when he is seven or eight years old. He has an inflated opinion of himself. He sees himself through his mother's eyes. He takes to super-hero comic books because he has to retreat into a world where he can make the jump from baby to boy without abandoning his high opinion of himself. He misses the sorting-out period when the babies who are turning into boys figure out who is who in the pecking order. Choosing up sides for a team sport, he obsesses about the fact that he was picked last when everyone else just wants even teams and a good game. Once

the game is on (say, road hockey), he obsesses about the fact that no one will pass him the ball, that he hasn't scored, that someone else scored. At no point does it occur to him whether his team is winning or losing; he is just obsessed with how he is doing. If he misses scoring a goal or lets in a goal the only thing he thinks about is his personal humiliation, the unacceptable disparity between his performance and his self-image as Mother's Little Prince.

Super-heroes feed into the misapprehension of the baby who refuses to become a boy. If he could just get bitten by a radioactive spider or get hit with some gamma rays, he would become the biggest, strongest boy. Not only would he score a goal, he would score all of the goals. He could beat all of the boys on his own without breaking a sweat, and his performance would match his self-image as Mother's Little Prince. He just completely misses the point He would not become popular by beating everyone. Any guy worth his salt wouldn't let him play because it would be too uneven. Uneven equals bad game. It removes the point of the game.

Choosing up sides is a perfect example of the masculine dynamic that is at work in changing a baby into a boy and a boy into a man. Know who and what you are in the pecking order. Play for the team. Get into the spirit of the competition. Play as well as - you can. Work hard. If you suck, work hard so that you don't suck as bad.

But to the "mama's boy," choosing up sides exists purely to humiliate him and any kid who is picked last. It makes him feel unloved, which is a very, very strange emotion to drag into a mad hockey game. If the object were to humiliate guys who suck, you would just say, "Okay, everybody who sucks down at that end. We're going to blow you to shit, beat you 150 to nothing."

He just completely misses the point of the masculine dynamic. He has no interest in finding out why and what he is. If he can't be the top one, the best then he wants to quit. In the masculine world that's a giant step down. Nobody sucks as bad as someone who quits. A dead guy is better than a quitter. A dead guy you could lean up against the crossbar and he'd stop a few shots just by being there.

I was never really that bad. Once Uncle Cliff's broken (gulp) arm dried up the waterworks, I had a pretty good idea where I stood. About a half a foot shorter than everyone else. Not athletic, not popular. But I had made the leap from baby to boy. I learned not to act as if I was entitled to more than I had, I learned not to sulk, I learned how to try and fail and forget about it.

Yes, Cliff's broken...arm (gulp) did the trick. Did it pretty well, because I remember it occurring to me around the age of twenty that I could not remember the last time I had cried. So not only hadn't I cried in a decade or more, I hadn't even been *aware* that I had not cried. What brought it to mind? Funny you should ask.

Two things: feminists started turning the world upside down in 1970, and I had my first girlfriend, Deni. The opinion had spread very far and very wide and very quickly that it

was Okay For Men to Cry. In pretty short order (as things moved closer to full upside down position), that became It's *Good* For Men to Cry. At full 180-degree out of whack, but perpendicular, that became It's *Mandatory* for Men to Cry with the undertone of *Good Men Cry, Bad Men Don't*.

Well, I gave it the old college try, let me tell you. And for a period of time (maybe a year? probably less) I was capable of crying if I was sufficiently frustrated, angry, or unhappy. There was a sense of . . . weird achievement. . . I guess I would call it: "Getting with the Program." There was just one small problem. I didn't like it. Whatever it was that women got out of crying wasn't there for me. I didn't feel as if I was letting it all out." I was still frustrated and angry and unhappy, except now my eyes were all red, I was all "squishy," and my stomach and brain were tied up in a knot.

In theory I will accept the proposition that I just didn't go far enough, that I had to work at it more, dredge up more unhappy memories and reasons to feel sorry for myself to really get the waterworks pumping, but "in theory" is as far as I'm willing to go. In retrospect it was a stupid regression from man to boy to baby, to no good purpose, and fortunately, from my standpoint, it didn't "stick."

Having opted out of the "sorting-out" process, the "mama's boy" is unable to distinguish this kinda guy from that kinda guy and just divides the world into "mama's boys" and homicidal maniacs. He uses the term "cool" and has no idea what it means (i.e., "Dungeons and Dragons is cool!"). "Cool" is what the sorting-out process is all about. Mother's Little Prince is not cool. A quitter is not cool. The guy who scores the most goals is not *necessarily* cool. The guy with a sports car and a different girl every night of the week is not *necessarily* cool. The first one could be a "hotshot" — someone who is good but thinks he is much better than he is and acts like it. If he is stupid enough to say it out loud, he is an "asshole." "Hotshots" and "assholes" are not cool. Nice ones are funny and good to have in your corner when the cutting gets close and there is not too much at stake. Then they are sort of cool or off-and-on cool. The second guy is cool if he isn't scooping other guys' girlfriends and wives, and as long as he knows who he is and who he is okay. If he thinks he is his sports car or he thinks he is the best-looking women he goes to bed with, then he's really no different from the "mama's boy" with his super-hero comic books. He is filling up the gap between who he is and his self-image with a sports car and sexual conquests. He is not cool.

The sorting out process worked well for years and years. Probably centuries. You ended up with guys who knew who they were and guys who didn't know who they were. And the guys who *knew* who they were knew *which* guys *didn't* know who they were. Whatever the game, the quitters, the hotshots, the assholes, the bullies — all of them became apparent in any environment to guys who knew who and what they were. There were losers, but a loser used to be someone who was just relentlessly self-destructive. The hair-trigger-temper types, the finks, the snitches, the weasels. The sort of guy who would hit a woman. Only a loser would hit a woman. The concept was that they were losing, bit by bit, one episode at a time, everything that meant anything. It seems to me that it is a mark of how degraded our gender-merging civilization has become that even the term

loser has no specific meaning. Once women picked it up, it was used for anything from a serial killer to someone with a bad haircut and plaid pants. Someone they wouldn't go out on a date with.

The “sorting-out” process worked well because there were no rule books attached to it so an asshole or a hotshot of a loser could study how to pass for a guy. Things like “choosing up sides” — there are probably a million of them that are just part of baby becoming boy becoming man.

The fact that I have to coin the term “sorting-out process” indicates how much of what I'm attempting to discuss was just “the way it is” for many years. You didn't discuss “mama's boys” or quitters or hotshots or losers or assholes with guys who *knew* who and what *they* were. You didn't discuss the pecking order. You knew your place. You stuck to being a guy who put his pants on one leg at a time in the morning just like every other guy.

So there were really no words when everything started turning upside down. “Male bonding.” I can't think of a guy whose stomach didn't turn over when he heard that one. But there was nothing to answer it with. “Oh, yeah? Well, what do *you* call it, then?” Uh. Hanging out? Shooting the breeze? Going for a beer? Sure didn't sound as...scientific as “Male bonding.”

In retrospect it was a perfect bit of archery on the part of the long-delayed (but inevitable) alliance between “mama's boys,” quitters, girls, and women. It turned out that they all had the same complaint. Guys were mean. Guys were bullies. Guys *excluded* anyone who wanted to “play” and wasn't a guy. “Male bonding” — and its even *more* stomach-turning psychiatric term: *homoeroticism* — left every guy gasping for air. Bullseye, girls. That one really, really hurt.

Since there was no terminology, it was very hard to make a case. *Why* couldn't others play? The most accurate answer was “he or she doesn't know his or her place,” which sounded awful, because someone who didn't know what was meant by it saw it as oppression, clear and simple. In a masculine sense, it was not intended that way. What was meant was: everyone has been sorted out in this particular context of “Us guys.” Another guy could come along and as long as he kept his mouth shut while he figured out who was who and what was what, he would do fine. You don't mouth off. You remind yourself that you put your pants on one leg at a time same as all these other guys. If somebody asks you what you do or where you come from, you answer him and then you expect to get kidded about it — expect the guys to make a joke out of it. Take it with a smile and a self-deprecating remark, and you're on your way to finding your place. Keep your answers short and pay attention. Stand your round if you're drinking. Don't be a know-it-all. Even if you have an encyclopedic knowledge of what is being discussed, keep it to yourself until you know who is who and what is what. “Mama's boys” are easy to spot because they shut up and they never care to whom they're mouthing off. Nothing Mother's Little Prince enjoys more than proving he knows more about any given subject than the person he is talking to. He. Doesn't. Know. His. Place.

Next issue: “Mama’s Boy” part two.

part two
MAMA’S BOY

“Mama’s Boy” as a term of derision implies no derision against mothers.

A lot of mothers — I suspect, mine included — tend to disbelieve that. Any guy could tell you that it is true, however. A “mama’s boy” is not something that any guy would want to be, but that is up to him to decide, which is what the term “mama’s boy” is really all about.

A mother is a mother. In the course of writing *Mothers and Daughters*, I had a lot of time to think about the nature of a mother, particularly when I began investigating the underpinnings of the obsession with safety that, it seems to me, is at the very core of every mother.

Let’s take, as an example, a very high place without railings or barricades. Let’s say, twenty-three floors up. Now, how close would you allow yourself to get to the edge? Sheer drop. Twenty-three floors straight down. Splat. The odds are your answer could be measured in feet, not inches, yards not feet, possibly “Are you kidding? Get me down from here,” and not yards. Even the bravest souls are going to be lying if they say, “Right up to the edge.” Even if they’re not lying, they would have to add: “On my hands and knees and very, very carefully.”

Now. Why is that? My own personal theory is that it has to do with the part of our brains, a separate self, whom we do not trust. In observing our own behaviours over the course of our lives, we have seen that separate self, that stupid self, do way too many stupid things to trust him (or, perhaps in your case, her) that close to a sheer drop of twenty-three storeys. The same reason a lot of people can’t stand anywhere close to the edge of a subway platform, whether the train is coming in or not. I would also maintain that the more things that you do which are self-destructive and inexplicable to yourself, the more you are apt to suffer from this condition and the further you want to be away from the edge of any sheer drop. I would suspect that women suffer from this condition more than men do, but feel free to disbelieve that last part if you’re a big Xena fan.

The part of our brains that we don’t trust would seem to be founded on pure experience and speculation on pure experience. It is an irrefutable fact that plunging from a height of twenty-three storeys would be a remarkable experience — seeing the ground rushing up at you, experiencing the adrenaline rush of hurtling through space at superhuman speeds. To quote Bob Burden, “I know how to fly, even if it is straight down.” I think any mother could tell you that the part of the brain that seeks out pure experience is well-developed before any issue of safety or caution enters into the equation. It is really up to the mother to develop that sense of safety and caution in a small boy which doesn’t naturally exist. The most effective way to do that is with fear, to make him afraid, to introduce

consequence as a contributing reality in human existence and — where necessary — to magnify consequence as a way of reinforcing the lesson.

“Come down from there — you’ll break your neck,” “You could’ve been killed,” etc., etc.

I think it is very easy for a mother to lose any sense of degree in her concern for safety as an absolute. That is, I think many mothers do such an effective job of using fear to modify behaviour that they end up creating boys who are unreasonably fearful of virtually everything. They are afraid of germs, afraid of bullies, afraid of dogs, afraid of heights, afraid of being alone, afraid, afraid, afraid. They are bound with cast-iron apron strings. The boy becomes afraid on his mothers behalf, as well. He is aware that he is the mere custodian of his physical body, that his mother has entrusted it to him, and that if any physical harm comes to it while he is in sole custody of it, he will have let his mother down, wounded her, and *that* becomes one of his biggest fears.

In the masculine world you are (or *were*, anyway) expected to get past that. Boys who aspired to be men took it as a given that their mothers were overly cautious. They all loved their mothers very, very much. The fact that you knew not to drag the other guy’s mother into an exchange of insults — unless you were prepared to escalate the exchange into a physical fight — was evidence of that. In the sorting-out process, however, adhering to every one of your mother’s prohibitions was proof positive that you were a coward — you were *too* afraid. You were using your mother as an excuse to not be brave, braver, or at least less afraid. Everyone was in the same boat if there was a challenge to be met: jumping from a little too great a height or over a greater expanse than usual. *No* one’s mother would be happy seeing her son do it. It is the whole point of the exercise: to prove that you have a level of individual bravery, an ability to take a calculated risk, to meet a challenge. Another step-on the way for a boy becoming a man.

What separates a boy who will become a man from a “mama’s boy” who will stay a boy has a great deal to do with the extent to which he can overcome the fear that she has instilled in him. To most mothers — to most women — bravery is synonymous with stupidity. If there is no discernible reason why you should jump from too great a height or across a greater than usual expanse, then it is just a stupid thing to do so. To a boy who wants to be a man, the risk of getting a little banged up, twisting your ankle, or getting a nice big bruise is more than outweighed by your willingness to take the chance, to put yourself in harm’s way to a small degree to prove to others — but primarily to yourself — that you have what it takes, you have the right stuff, or, at the very least, you are building an inventory of “challenges met” which will serve you in

good stead if a real challenge should come along. No question a lot of guys go too far in trying to prove that they are the bravest of the brave. That’s part of the sorting-out process as well — finding out for yourself where the borderline between bravery and stupidity exists, where you exist in the spectrum between “coward” and “fool.”

Which brings me (finally!) to David Groenewegen’s question about “what would a generation of Communist-era men be like?” I think many of the examples that he used

point up the inadequacy of the blanket supposition. From what I have read of John Lennon, he was indeed a “mama’s boy,” very much attached to his mother, Julia. He was also a “toff.” He certainly did not shy away from the demands of the sorting-out process. Nor could he have, considering what sort of an environment Liverpool was and is. I think most of David’s examples — most examples of the overachiever “mama’s boy” — would fall very much into the conventional masculine pattern. They loved their mothers, revered their mothers, but knew very quickly that they could not conduct their life in such a way that if their mother was watching what they were doing minute by minute, she would be completely at peace with it. Even the most extreme example of a “mama’s boy” anytime before 1970 (let’s say) would still have been subjected to and willingly participated in the sorting-out process. There simply wasn’t any other choice. He would either be brave to one degree or another, or he would have bravery thrust upon him in the form of a challenge from the bigger boys.

I think the danger that I see most often in this day and age is that it has become far more possible for a boy to grow up essentially and completely feminized. I think this is particularly true of day-care centers and a school system that has so completely abandoned any notion of discipline (at least in any definition of the term that I would acknowledge) that such feminization seems inevitable. It seems to me that there has been an extension of “safety über alles” to a ridiculous extreme. I certainly can’t fault the nobility of the motive. I think it springs from an opposing view of the nature of a human being. A maternal-dominant society is going to see babies as immaculate, beatific, intrinsically noble and good creatures. If they can be kept safe from anything that is not immaculate, beatific, intrinsically noble and good in the course of their upbringing, voilà, you end up with an immaculate, beatific, intrinsically noble and good adult. I think any Saturday afternoon spent at the mall or a family-values environment will refute the argument. What you end up with are undisciplined, willful, noisy, destructive, self-obsessed little balls of Id protoplasm. Safe as houses, to be sure. Not only in no danger of being struck by a parent, slapped by a parent, spanked by a parent, but in no danger of being chastised by a parent, of hearing a word of discouragement from a parent. In point of fact, the only danger of bruising seems to come from being pled with, reasoned with too earnestly. Having asserted the maternal-dominant theory society-wide that children are in no way, at no time, and under no circumstance to experience any kind of physical pain directed at them by a parent (with which I agree), society seems to me to have hurtled along a trajectory from the point of that decision. Yelling is out, since it can bruise infant sensibilities and instill life-long traumas. So the children yell and the parents talk in hushed and modulated tones, “reasoning with” a bundle of Id protoplasm that is hurling itself bodily to and fro and shrieking at the top of its lungs. Of course in my experience, the parents are not usually *reasoning* with the child at all. They are either threatening it or bribing it with material possessions or privileges. So, it seems to me that the philosophical undercarriage comes off the vehicle at that point. The child is not learning reason, it is learning bribery and threats. A beloved toy will be taken away for a period of time or a trip to a favoured environment will be postponed. Materialism unviolated becomes evidence of good behaviour. Materialism divided becomes evidence of bad behaviour. But the focus is on material possessions, instead of the development of a sense of right and wrong. It is right to accurately perceive yourself as just another

human being who is expected to be well-behaved. It is wrong to perceive of yourself as the centre of the universe whose willfulness has to be catered to.

I see this as being extended into the education system. Failure is traumatic, so the choice has been made to eliminate the likelihood of failure. “Grading against the curve” to me is a polite euphemism for “eliminate all standards.” A good high-jump event is one in which the bar has been lowered to a point where everyone can clear it. A good curriculum is one whereby everyone gets a passing grade and the majority are judged to be excellent. If the class troglodyte can get a 95, you’ve really accomplished something.

I don’t think the net effect has been what was hoped for. Far from having a world made up of immaculate, beatific, intrinsically noble and good adults because they have been kept safe from any trauma — physical or emotional or spiritual — every step along the way, I think we are producing and continue to produce a world of adults who are obsessed with the fact that they “feel bad.” What a conundrum! When you engineer a society whose primary purpose is to make sure that no one is made to “feel bad” ever, the vast majority end up “feeling bad”: materialists unsatisfied with their material goods, secular humanists who either believe in nothing or who eventually believe in everything sequentially, one belief at a time, compulsive “careers” whose caring is the source of profound emotional pain, adults kept safe, safe, safe throughout their upbringing and who are terrified, terrified, terrified. Bravery having been dispensed with, belittled out of existence by the least-brave who have labeled anything short of absolute safety to be absolute stupidity, I think the result is inescapable: profound societal terror, the magnification of apprehension into anxiety, anxiety into fear, and fear into terror. With no sorting-out process, no incremental challenges met, no inclination or ability to push individual limits of endurance and capability, whole generations of males haven’t the first clue as to who or what they are, since they have grown up in a structure where their only measure of themselves is in female terms: how sensitive, how caring, how compassionate, how environmentally aware, how safe they are. Every other measure of maleness — forget masculinity — is deemed irrelevant and stupid. The only thing that can possibly fill that vacuum, in my view, is apprehension, anxiety, fear, and terror in varying degrees of severity.

Well, not the only thing. The problem of course is that I find it very difficult to discuss these issues without looking at where and how they have permeated so much of society outside of the home. I am sure that there are many good and effective day-care custodians abroad in the land, most — if not all — of them women. I’m certainly in no position to judge their performance sight unseen (and! do fervently hope that it remains an unseen sight for myself). I’m sure that if the sorting-out process has not been eliminated, it has certainly been curtailed in the interests of safety. I can’t say for certain that whatever has replaced it is wholly and completely inadequate. But I would be willing to bet that whatever system (or systems) has been introduced would be, at the very least, peculiar, having as its underpinning the interchangeability of the male and female genders. Doubtless little girls are being raised to be little boys to the same extent that little boys are being raised to be little girls with much resultant confusion all the way around with

the possible exception of those little boys and little girls who are genetically predisposed to the borderland areas of genders (as it were). If little boys are being raised to be safe, to not take chances, to know nothing of their place (apart from being Mother's and Surrogate Mother's Little Prince), to be terrified of much that warrants smaller fear, and to be fearful of much that warrants no more than mild apprehension, well, they at least find themselves in a world better suited to their nature. Since bravery is not, for the most part, necessary, it would seem that an exaggerated sense of fearfulness is not the most helpful bit of baggage to be carrying around in a world which has been made— if not absolutely safe — at the very least considerably safer. I was thinking to myself a while ago as I was walking in downtown Kitchener and I had passed the umpty-umpty apprehensive pedestrian who was eyeing me warily, fearfully (since I am large enough and fit enough to look as if I could do severe bodily injury to most of the people that I pass on the street), I was thinking: How often do they get that apprehensive, wary, fearful look on their faces? How afraid are they? Are they afraid every waking minute of the day? It seemed to me that they were and are. And that seems so completely unnecessary to me.

I hope I'm not telling tales out of school here, but my mother is a very fearful person. I think most mothers are, for the reason that I outlined: they are so fearful on behalf of their children that they have an inclination to make themselves permanently fearful. I think my mother is less afraid than she used to be. I certainly hope so. As I said to her once (quoting something I had read somewhere): "The great thing about being permanently fearful is that your fear will eventually be justified." That is, if you are fearful or apprehensive or every waking minute of every day for five years or ten years, eventually something bad will happen to prove that you weren't worried for nothing. I can understand women being cautious, taking care, taking pains with their safety. I can even understand if such caution gets out of their control and makes them fearful, visibly fearful, wherever they go. That's an individual choice to be made. What boggles my mind is when I see males in the same condition. I feel like saying: What do you think I'm going to do? Beat you up? Rape you? Pull out a gun? Have you so little rational control of your thoughts and emotions that you really think something is going to happen to you on King Street in a small town in Southern Ontario? Of course I can't say that — I'd scare the little fella into a heart attack before I had five words out of my mouth.

To me, it seems that this is the most regrettable net effect of trying to make the maternal nature into a template for society, to move it outside of the home, outside of the one-on-one mother-and-son relationship and take it to a society-wide level. I think it is far more destructive than smoking bans (second-hand cigarette smoke — in my view if a human body is so fragile that second-hand cigarette smoke is going to cause it to shrivel up and die, then second-hand cigarette smoke is going to be the least of its problems) or censorship or banning a chemical additive because consuming its body weight in the additive caused cancer in a mouse. To me this is fearfulness out of all reasonable — hell, out of all unreasonable proportion.

Inside the home? Well, I can only speak from my own experience, obviously. And here I can agree with David Groenewegen's original point. The fear that a mother generates in

her child is only one part of the equation, one part of the fountainhead resource of a mother's love. Certainly it is out of love that a mother is so apprehensive, so fearful on her child's behalf. If a mother errs in making her child too fearful she does so with the best of motives of wanting what is best for her child — a healthful and long life topping the list.

But I think David G.'s point, the positive side of the "mama's boy" is better reflected not in the fear that she imparts to him, nor in the love which is the fountainhead source of everything maternal, but in a mother's belief. To David's list I could probably add a dozen names off the top of my head, and I would be willing to bet that each of them had mothers who believed in their abilities, who encouraged those abilities, who believed in them when they themselves didn't know that belief had anything to do with achievement, when they could see nothing in themselves to believe in or so little in themselves that belief seemed unwarranted, excessive, or at least disproportionate. Belief of that kind is not unwavering, not unshakeable. It would be nice to say that it is, but, alas, waver it does, shake it does with each disappointment, each wrongful act. But it does always restore itself, is always restored. Why? How? Well, not being a mother, I'm sure I don't have the first clue.

To me, it is the fundamental flaw in attempting to use the maternal nature as a template for society-as-a-whole. Fear is exportable. You have only to watch a newsmagazine show on TV, read a newsmagazine or a newspaper to see that magnified fear is, indeed, exportable. Left unchecked, magnified fear can turn into fascism or can certainly endorse fascistic impulses and programs without batting an eyelash. Where safety comes first, it is very easy to make individual human rights, individual human liberty a close second, then a not-so-close second, a quite distant second, and so on. My mother has said on several occasions that she wouldn't mind giving up some freedoms if it meant that greater safety would be the result. I shudder when she says that, of course. I can't help but shudder when anyone says that or something like it. But I never doubt for a minute that she is sincere in saying it and that her motives are completely unselfish and her intentions are good. But it does indicate to me the exact limits of where the maternal nature can be applied to society without unraveling everything that the paternal nature has built, brick by costly brick, century by century in its philosophical progress from the cradle of the Tigris and the Euphrates to the Constitution of the United States of America.

It is unfortunate for all of us that the far more valuable commodity, belief, is not exportable. It would be hard to imagine how a community of mothers could instill belief in a community of sons. Impossible, in fact, since it would lack the crucial element of the one-on-one relationship. "All of we mothers believe in all of you sons" just doesn't seem capable of bearing fruit, does it?

Would that it were!

Would that my mother could have the kind of belief in the abilities of every aspiring cartoonist out there that she had in mine! Would that Julia Lennon could have believed in a hundred or even a dozen dreamy-eyed boys filling notebooks with squiggly little

drawings and nonsense verse! Would that Gladys Presley could have seen Captain Marvel Jr. in even three other dirt-poor boys in Tupelo, Mississippi!
Alas, it doesn't work that way. It never has and it never will. What is the secret? What is the proper balance of love and belief and fear and every other element of maternal love that goes into making an over-achiever "mama's boy"? What is the proper diet? What needs to be said and when?

Who could even pretend to have the answer?

I am convinced, however, that the one-on-one relationship and belief in the *individual* boy is central to the equation.

Next: "Mama's Boy" part three.

part three
MAMA'S BOY

Dave,

Re: "Mama's Boy," part one:

As usual, you have a way of pointing out the obvious (once popular opinion can be beaten into submission). Of course that's how "choosing up sides" functions. No wonder it has endured so long, despite the crusade of Dear Abby to have it abolished in gym classes. And yes, I sucked at sports until I was at least ten years old. And I remember the first time I actually caught a long third- down pass (American football sorry, I don't have any hockey stories). I was literally so stunned that I caught the ball that I didn't run for the touchdown! But from five or so yards away, we did get it on the next play. And I got chosen a little higher in the order the next time. I couldn't hit worth a shit in baseball, but I began to excel in the outfield. I even heard one of the "cool" guys explaining to another why he picked me for his team. First guy: "You picked *Hart*?" (Implication: *He sucks!*) Second guy: "Sure. He's a great fielder." Yes, earned praise is much sweeter than everyone-feel-good blatherings could ever be. (1)

Now, as to the overthrow of the sorting-out process by women and mama's boys: there's a clue to this in your recent Aardvark Comment about reason losing touch with wisdom and thus inevitably being overthrown. Your argument assumes that the keepers of the sorting-out process have the best interests of the community in mind — or at least act in those best interests even if they do so unconsciously. There are several ways in which this process has become dysfunctional, making its overthrow by the out-groups (only two of which are women and mama's boys) inevitable.

The reason that "knowing one's place" sounds so oppressive is because it has been used that way so often. The same language which suggests that "real guys" put assholes and mama's boys in their place is also used to keep people in particular racial, ethnic, and religious groups from aspiring beyond their imposed ghettos. (2) Aren't lynch mobs just a

mechanism for keeping uppity blacks from thinking they are white? Isn't gang rape a way of reminding a woman what her place is? A case could be made for either of these being simply the "natural consequences" of stepping outside of one's role. But this is not the same as a player who sucks wishing he were treated as an athlete. This isn't: "You aren't good enough at the sport." It is rather: "Don't even think about playing if you know what's good for you." It seems to me that Oscar Wilde was efficiently "sorted out," as were my Jewish cousins in Germany who dared to think that they counted as Germans. (3)

There are two dysfunctional elements here: methods and motives. By methods I mean that getting picked last may be a harsh but natural consequence of sucking at sports, but lynching is not an acceptable means of enforcing separation of the races. (4) It's not sufficient to say that the black man in question should have known his place. The bulk of humanity has rebelled against the notion that lynching is an acceptable tool. If "sorting out" suffers for this, it is the sorters who ceased the problem. Using your example of Uncle Cliff's broken (glp) arm: you understand how suffering a broken arm with no one believing him "served him appropriately" to learn not to be a cry-baby. But would you advocate "If you don't stop crying, I'll break your arm!" as equally appropriate? There is a significant difference. (5)

It is not only the methods which are in question, but the motives. You say that "even teams" is the object. But, sometimes, it shifts to "making sure my team's stockholders are guaranteed a payoff" When money replaces sportsmanship as the motive for sorting out, uneven teams no longer defeat the purpose of the game to the sorter, but guarantee it. Again, the sorting-out process malfunctions. It is in this way that the love of money is the root of all evil — because with money involved, "even teams and a good game" are no longer high on anyone's priorities. Hidden agendas of the sorters erode confidence in the entire process. (6)

Without knowing which of those examples you might actually agree with, I have to say that there is certainly a case of "Who watches the Watchmen?" going on here. You see the process as having fallen to an assault by the jealous. I see it as having been overthrown by the oppressed after an excess of arrogance. (7) If "real guys" were doing such a good job of sorting out, they shouldn't have let hotshots and assholes run the process, thereby guaranteeing a backlash. The sorters lost their moral authority among the "sorted out" by abusing the process with suspect motives and overly brutal methods, or, at the very least, by allowing it to be abused so. (8)

Having said all that, I mainly wanted to comment on this: "Super-hero comic books are tailor-made for mama's boys." Ouch! To use your own phrasing Bullseye, Dave. That one really, really hurt.

You'd have called me an overly brooding mama's boy well into my college years, and I often identified with the panel of Peter Parker muttering, "Someday, I'll show them all!" in *Amazing Fantasy* #15. I also, even then, realized that that was a panel for a typical super-villain origin, rather than that of a hero. But therein lies my observation. Does

Spider-Man really miss the point? (9) I'm not sure you've made your case. The moral of the origin of Spider-Man as far back as his first appearance is:

"With great power comes great responsibility." I'd say that should be the motto for anyone in your "real guy" category. Peter Parker does not become a star athlete or even use his strength to beat up Flash Thompson. He seems to sense exactly your point (either that or Stan Lee does): that if he is to win acceptance among his peers, it must be as himself, not as a super-hero. And you know what? Eventually he does. He loosens up and makes friends with Harry Osborn and Flash Thompson, not to mention Mary Jane Watson and Gwen Stacy. Over the course of the first hundred or so issues of Amazing Spider-Man, Peter Parker does mature and take his place as a real guy. And he doesn't use his powers to cheat. No better example can I think of how a guy should be.

Iron Man might have been a hotshot, and he sometimes bordered on asshole, but mama's boy? Here was the ultimate "guy who knows who he is." And when he faces adversity — shrapnel in the heart — he uses his own ingenuity to overcome the problem. He becomes a super-hero in the process, but do whining mama's boys really think they can bypass the sorting-out process by stumbling across a functioning suit of armor? Stark had to design and build the armor. And in all other ways, Tony Stark was as "guy" as it gets. I'm having trouble placing any of my late '60s-early '70s favorites as mama's boys. The closest I can get is the very early Don Blake as Thor. But, even then, the strip sn changed from Thor beating earthbound villains (uneven teams) to Thor as mythological god facing other mythological gods (even teams, sorting out).

Johnny Storm: hotshot, maybe asshole, but mama's boy?

Reed Richards: real guy, head in the clouds, but knows his place.

Ben Grimm: real guy, whines at first but gets over it.

Bruce Wayne: real guy, even if Fredric Wertham thinks he's a homosexual.

The definitive super-hero is, of course, Superman. And yet, until the mid-'70s or so, Superman the comics were not about Superman, they were about a world in which Superman existed. Until Stan Lee proved them wrong, comics writers seemed to think it impossible for their readers to identify with the heroes. That's where the teenage sidekicks came in. The stories weren't about heroes, they were about someone who had a hero available to get him out of tight spots. Batman AND ROBIN. Green Arrow AND SPEEDY. Aquaman AND AQUALAD. Superman didn't have the similarly costumed, teenage sidekick following him around, but he did have Jimmy Olsen and his signal watch. To me, this was the ultimate reduction of the hero from the subject of the story to pet muscle. Jimmy Olsen, the protagonist, gets into all kinds of trouble, but has the power to "invoke" Superman to get him out of it. That is the extent of Superman's involvement. The 1950s Adventures of Super-man TV show took this to the extreme, even without the signal watch. The stories were about the wacky adventures of Lois and Jimmy. Superman was only a deus ex machina to get them out of trouble at the end.

To a lesser extent, all Superman stories (not just the signal-watch ones) were about us regular folks who had Superman around to enforce the way-things-should-be. I never had the sense that we the readers were supposed to think about being Superman, so much as to think of haying Superman around and on the side of “good.” The lesson, and the comfort I took as a young child, was that good will triumph. This was a comfort to the defenseless, but also a warning to the arrogant. Don’t be lad, or you will be thwarted. Don’t even bother, because the result is inevitable. Rather than bypassing the sorting-out process, Superman was the sorting-out process incarnate. If people acted as if Superman existed, the world would be a much better place.

I can’t claim more knowledge of comics history than you have, Dave, so I expect that I missed your point somewhere. If you’re talking about 1990s super-hero comics, I can’t claim to have much knowledge of them anymore. It took several readings of Reads (and the ensuing LOCs) to begin to understand what you were talking about there, so I don’t expect I got this one the first time either. I just thought I’d write while the motivation was hot, so to speak.

Keep giving us Hell.

Larry Hart

P.S. I absolutely agreed with everything you said in *Comics and The Mass Medium* about television not benefiting comics — except that in my own personal case, the Adam West Batman led to Batman comics, which led to 1970s Marvel, which kept me interested through the current independent age. But I still see your point, even though it was wrong in my case, which just goes to show that some stories are false (or “false” or FALSE) even if they are true!

First of all, thanks for writing. I had pretty much given up on the “Mama’s Boy” series of essays out of a pure sense of futility. Why bother? Did I think I was going to get through to some Mama’s Boy out there? Reassure mothers? The only ones who would have the least inkling of what I was talking about would be other men. They know who they are and what they are, so there was nothing to be served in addressing them. As for the rest? It’s pretty obvious that they believe they know everything there is to know about men, and they certainly exhibit no interest in dissenting viewpoints — particularly from men. So, your letter gives me a chance to do part three without having the inescapable awareness that I’m just singing in the shower (as it were). I did have quite a bit more to say on the subject, but — given my own belief that it will be at least a hundred years before the opinions

of men are welcome in society — I’m going to limit myself to the appreciation of my own mother that I intended all along for part four and use your letter as the foundation for part three. Let’s call it: “The Annotated Hart”

1. Yes, exactly. You got elevated from your previous place to a slightly higher place through your own efforts. The only one who could do that is someone above you in the pecking order.
2. You misconstrue “place” in the sense that I intended it. You don’t get put in your place; you are in your place. In a real sense you are your place. I don’t think it is possible to keep people from aspiring. If you are an aspirer and a hard worker, you will get somewhere. Maybe not where you want to go, but you will raise up yourself and your place as well.
3. I think the “victim card” can only be played so far in the game of life. I think the evidence is irrefutable that if people are aspirers and hard workers, they will raise themselves up and their place as well. Historically, I’m sure there are just as many white, heterosexual, gentile men who have been told: “Don’t even think about playing if you know what’s good for you.” Trade unionists, communists, socialists, and reformers of all kinds and in every imaginable society. In my view, the genuine aspirer and hard worker either finds a way around oppression and suppression or accepts the consequences (however grievous) for the sake of those who will come after.
4. Nor, I think, is the separation of races a desirable or a sensible goal or accomplishment. I think you’ve gotten, little carried away, Larry. You seem to be implying that my idea that each and every person has a place which is theirs to improve upon, stay at, or fall from is an endorsement of lynching. It is exactly the adopting of insensible extremes of anecdotal evidence in place of reasoned discourse — the frantic urge to hit the nearest and hottest “button” to refute an opposing idea — that reinforces my view that there is no genuine debate going on in society, merely emotional reflex response in predictable sequence.
5. There is, indeed, a significant difference. You ‘re just reaching for the nearest hottest button instead of considering what I had to say.
6. I’m always dumfounded by this line of “reasoning.” I take it as a given that people who are mindlessly obsessed with accumulating as much money and as many material possessions as is humanly possible — I would include fame here as well — are just, well, pitiable. I would assume that any reasonable person (I don’t think wisdom is required) would see them the same way. Rather like a person who weighs six hundred pounds. Clearly, there is something wrong. In the latter case, with food. In the former case, with money and worldly goods. “Even teams and a good game” are high on the list of priorities for those who are wise — or even reasonable. I like having a secure income and a certain level of material comfort. I aspired to have that, and I worked hard to get it. I hope I get to keep it. I assume if I aspire to keep it and work hard to keep it, I will get to keep it. If a Donald Trump or a Ted Turner erodes your personal confidence in capitalism, then I think the choice you have made to let them do so reflects more about yourself than them. Would you let a six-hundred-pound person erode your confidence in groceries and nutrition?

7. I see it both ways. All men have been overthrown for the excesses and arrogance of a few — except the ‘few’ haven’t been overthrown. I can’t say that I see this as inappropriate. On the contrary, as I said at the begin above fling, I anticipate that it will be at least a hundred years before men’s views are considered by society once more. As a gender, I think that is a suitable repercussion for our failures as men. I do think there are a lot of women and mama’s boys and... well, all the rest who want to be Donald Trump or Ted Turner, and talk of equality just attempts to obscure that fact. Would you react differently to a six-hundred-pound person if he were Asian, or gay, or black, or a woman? My reaction would be the same. Clearly, there is something wrong.

8. And what a relief it will be to all of us when everyone who isn’t a white, heterosexual man puts everything right — since “they” are incapable of anything but the purest and most altruistic motives and “their” methods are as soft as a mother’s breast — whoever “they” are.

9. On the super-hero thing, I apologize for not being clearer in part one of “Mama’s Boy.” I’m sure the fault is mine — I do write all this stuff at the back of the book as an afterthought to the book itself and it isn’t as polished as a result, I don’t think, most of the time.

What boggles the minds of boys who are becoming men about boys who are still ardent about super-heroes is the sheer unbelievability of it. At the age of nine or ten, the former chaps get a charge out of someone juggling five tanks but they apply it to their own lives at a more sensible level. “I ran twenty laps yesterday, I’m going to run thirty — or try to run thirty — today.” They seek to improve themselves physically, push their own limits, and achieve their own goals.

I wasn’t talking about super-heroes as real or even “real” people. I find it extraordinary that you can write about them that way or think that the first part of these essays dealt with who among the super-heroes was a mama’s boy. Many other commentators have pointed out that super-heroes don’t have mothers. Either their mothers have been killed, died of old age, or perished in some natural disaster. No, what I was talking about was how the super-heroes are wish fulfillment for mama’s boys, objects of fantasy who are better than everyone else, stronger than everyone else, nobler than everyone else, more attractive than everyone else. Whatever notion has been carried forward in our little community that these monsters... resemble human beings in any way, shape, or form, I believe, can only be attributed to the (let me restrain myself here) singular nature of the singular psychological profile to which they appeal. I’ll restrain myself still further and refrain from speculating on the nature of that psychological profile which appears to demand that the “identification object super-hero” must have dead parents to fulfill its prescribed unction.

It seems to me that what you’ve written goes some way towards explaining something I find virtually inexplicable — how anyone can see super-heroes as intrinsically noble, i.e., “good will triumph.” Even in what you’ve written, that’s not what you’re saying at all. What you are saying is that you imagine yourself on the “side” of the strongest one who

can enforce the “way-things- ought-to-be.” To me, that is just wrong-headed. Why is Superman good? Because he is, would seem to be your answer. The German people thought that way in the 1930s. And your cousins and millions of others were the victims of exactly that kind of wrong-headed sensibility. “We are on the side of the strongest one who can will, and is enforcing the way-things-ought-to-be.” Whether you are talking about Nietzsche’s Superman or George Bernard Shaw’s Superman or Siegel and Shuster’s Superman or Hitler’s Superman, the essential concept, to me, is unsound it is always founded on the idea that superior power implies a higher nobility of purpose, a greater goodness, the misapprehension that an individual man through the achievement of paranormal, extranormal, or supernormal feats is better suited to judge between contending viewpoints. That is, that superior power implies keener ethical insights.

I mean, if you were talking about God, I’d be right with you, Larry. I’ve been saying for some time that whether people believe God exists or not, if they all behaved as if He did exist, the world would be a much better place.

Here’s a little hypothetical question I like to put to atheists. Just for the sake of argument, let’s say that God does exist. Even better, since you are unable to conceive of anything larger than yourself: let’s say that you are God. For all practical purposes, relative to your own life (leaving aside self-deception and denial) you are. You see everything that you do, you know everything that you think — all of your secret conceits and grudges and hidden longings and loathings, every moral and ethical boundary you transgress. Now, as God, what do you think of you? Almost invariably they say that they would hate themselves. Now that should tell you something. Why do you conduct your life in such a way that if there were a God, He would hate you? Where do you find value in indulging in behaviour that — if you were God —you would find abhorrent?

I can see value in pursuing that line of reasoning and, believe me, pursue it I do. To my dying day, I hope.

But, in my view, any line of thought that begins with “If Superman or Spider-Man or Iron Man really existed...” has to be centered on power rather than ethics and the repugnant notion that superior power implies superior ethics. It seems to me a repulsively degraded form of Messianic Judaism and Messianic Christianity — the idea that you were not put here to behave better, to improve things where you think you can improve them, to develop a better and clearer understanding of distinctions between right and wrong, to do the former and not do the latter, but rather you were just put here to wait for the day when someone very big and strong and working marvels and wonders and astonishments would come along and kick everyone else’s butt until they all bow down to you and your group -whether that group is Jews or Christians or comic- book fans or science-fiction fans or NASA or NOW or USA or UK or any other letter combination you have adhered to.

I can see no value, none, zip, bubkiss, nada, in pursuing a line of thought that begins with “if Superman or Spider-Man or Iron Man really existed...”

In my view, that notion of “heroism” or, even worse, “Heroism” allows fantasists of any age to walk past a homeless person on the street begging for quarters — albeit with the steely resolve that if that building across the street collapses, they will be the first one over there dragging the wounded to safety, or if someone snatches that old woman’s purse, they’ll chase the guy for ten blocks and hold him until the police come. It seems to me that focusing on “heroism” or “Heroism” implies that doing what is right and not doing what is wrong is of lesser importance, has less impact, and that it suffers by comparison with “heroism” or “Heroism.” My question for the fantasists hinges far more on how much money they have in their pocket as they are passing that homeless person. Let’s say five bucks. Four singles and four quarters (for the Canadians, four loonies and four quarters). The fantasist is headed for the bus. Bus fare is \$1.00. He or she plans to buy a chocolate bar on the way — another buck. How much does he or she give the homeless person? To me, the distinction between right and wrong would be: Right: something Righter: a few quarters. Even more right: any amount that leaves enough left for the chocolate bar and bus fare. Righter still: four dollars, leaving enough for bus fare. As right as you can be: all five bucks and walk home. It isn’t “heroic,” but it is right. It is doing good. If your mind Just went: it’s not a homeless person, it’s just a bum who’ll spend it on liquor, or a lot of those homeless people are just lazy... well, to me that internal debate is the individual territory of drawing sharp distinctions between right and wrong. Walking past the homeless without giving anything is an ethical choice. Just giving them a quarter is an ethical choice. Just giving them a dollar is an ethical choice. Just giving them three dollars is an ethical choice.

Let me put it another way —you’re willing to run ten blocks after a purse-snatcher. How much money is in the purse? How badly does the old woman need it? Isn’t it within the realm of possibility that the homeless person needs one or two dollars at least as much as the old woman needs the ten dollars in her purse? Why do you see the former case as something to be rationalized away and the latter case as something that needs immediate “heroic” efforts on your part? Couldn’t be that you’re thinking of the old woman pouring forth gratitude, of bystanders like Jack Kirby background characters running up doing: “Did you see that?” “He ran after that guy for ten blocks and TACKLED him —just like in the movies” and much backslapping and Well dones all the way around could it? Maybe get your picture in the paper, here comes the 6 o’clock news crew, blah, blah, blah? To me, in that case, you’re not really interested in doing good, you’re interested in attention and fame and glory. That’s the hazard that I see in focusing on “heroism” and “super-heroism,” Larry. Hey, you did tell me to keep giving you hell.

Next Issue: “Mama’s Boy” part four.

part four
MAMA’S BOY

This is starting to sound like a bad Marx Brothers routine. “Well, lasta issue you remember I said I no do the part four of the Mama’s and the Boys on account of my mother, she’s in Florida on a vacation. Well, my mother she come back from vacation just-a few days ago. But, guess what? Now I’m-a go to Florida on vacation, and my

mother she stays here. So, I'm-a no finish part four of the Mama's and the Boys like I 'rn-a said I would. I'm-a finish it in wry head, but Kim Preney he say I'm-a no can print what is in your head, Dave, and guess what? Thatsa true."

Fortunately, I ran across this in the Charles Schulz interview in *The Comics Journal's* 200th issue, which emphasizes one of the central points of the "Mama's Boy" series of essays. Congratulations to Gary Groth and the Legion of Gloom on their anniversary. Quotes reprinted without permission:

Just to set this up, Gary is trying to get Mr. Schulz to indict himself for agreeing to have lunch with Ronald Reagan, when Reagan was governor of California, since Schulz has identified himself in the interview as a liberal. Always interesting to read someone confronting Gary's singular notions of integrity for the first time. Gary offers that Jules Feiffer would not have gone — or might not have gone, appearing to imply that there is integrity in not agreeing to have lunch with someone you disagree with politically. "But that's... insulting," Mr. Schulz replies. "That's beyond politics, isn't it?" It is only good manners to accept an invitation from someone who is ahead of you in society's pecking order, and the Governor of the state in which you reside is, well, ahead of you in the pecking order if you are a cartoonist. Mr. Schulz is clearly caught flat-footed. Good manners are... what is the word?... beyond politics? above politics? supersedes politics? Mr. Schulz quotes a story from Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* wherein her father instructed her to stand up when a man was coming by, saying, "This is Senator So-and-So coming by," and telling her after-the-fact that "the position deserves respect." I can well imagine the blank Grothian stare that greeted this little tidbit. Mr. Schulz attempts to amplij5' the observation. "I think to use your own personal views to say to the President of the United States, I'm not going to come, that's childish." Mr. Schulz attempts, I would speculate, to deflate the blankness of Gary's reaction by extrapolating the Ca4fornia pecking order into a United States of America pecking order. Clearly the look on Gary's face states eloquently that f the President's views did not match Gary's own (and who could picture any President measuring up to Gary's idiosyncratic notions of integrity?), the President would find himself one short for dinner on the night in question. "Again, I don't want to get into that," Schulz concludes his immediate thought. One empathizes with his situation. Where to from here? Why am I having to defend going to lunch with the Governor of my state when he asked me to? What can I say after I say that it would be insulting not to go? Gamely, Mr. Schulz gives it a try: "I would have given anything in the world to have met Genera] Eisenhower. What an honor: What a tremendous feat he had commanding D-Day. The decisions he had to make were just unbelievable." Blank blank blank look from across the tape recorder. Mr. Schulz is forced to fall back on a generalization: "And a lot of other people I'd like to meet just for that..." "reason," I suspect he was going to say, but it would appear that the blankness of Gary's reaction had finally sunk in. Mr. Schulz had gone from discussing the Governor of California to the President of the United States to the most rarefied heights of the Charles Schulz Pecking Order — Dwight David Eisenhower — and nothing was having an impact. Nothing. Mr. Schulz retreats from the loftiest heights to the practical necessities of the question, his lunch with Governor Reagan:

“Reagan was a very thoughtful person.” Gary’s opening he’s been waiting for. “That’s hard to believe (laughs).” Mr. Schulz is reputed to have the patience of a saint, and certainly at this point it was — to this reader’s eyes — being tried to the breaking point for any lesser man. “No, extremely thoughtful. Very personable, and he would never forget you. Now, just in the little bit of contact I had... Joyce and I had ‘lunch with him and Nancy didn’t arrange it, he didn’t arrange it — some press secretary’ said, ‘They should have a Peanuts day in California or something.’ So we went up there and had lunch with them.” It is interesting to me, and I think very admirable, that it takes this much time for Mr. Schulz to bring up that he was being considered for an honour by the Governor of his state. Such a genuinely modest spirit. Did it take place? What exactly was involved? What did Charles Schulz and Ronald Reagan talk about that led Mr. Schulz to characterize Mr. Reagan as “thoughtful”? Gary’s follow-up question: “Now, would you have done that with a public figure with whom you completely disagreed?” Schulz’s reply: “Like Barbara Boxer? (laughter)” Groth: “There you go.” If you can’t get Charles Schulz to criticize Ronald Reagan, hey, any port in a storm. “I don’t know because she’s never invited me. I suppose, just out of curiosity The thought remains unfinished. Schulz has too good a grasp on his own reality, as I read it, to spend any amount of time or effort answering hypothetical questions. Back to the factual: “— well, I went down to Clinton, and I’ve attended things for Senator Feinstein, and things like that.” By my inference, Charles Schulz is saying that he completely disagrees with President Clinton and Senator Feinstein — or, more probably, he is in greater disagreement with Clinton and Feinstein than he was with Governor Reagan. Safe from Gary’s hypotheticals for the moment, Mr. Schulz appears to remind himself that this is (theoretically, anyway) his interview. “But getting back to Reagan just to show what I’m talking about, several months later, after he was no longer governor, he and I and a few other people were honored as fathers of the year. We went down, and he was surrounded by some people. And I was lead (sic) over there. And he looked down and he said, ‘Sparky. It’s good to see you.’ He said, ‘Nancy. Come over here. Look who’s here. Sparky’s here.’ Now, how many politicians and governors are going to do that? He remembers.” What a wonderful story. One of those happy little accidents that inexplicably makes its way into every Gary Groth interview. I mean, can you just picture Charles Schulz being welcomed by Ronald Reagan, picture them smiling at each other, giants in their respective fields in the 20th century? You’ll have to just picture it, because Gary’s turning the wheel hard-to-port “I don’t want to sound too cynical, but couldn’t that just be the kind of professional schmoozing the politicians (Even the patience of a saint has its limits, and Schulz interrupts, though I for one would have completely understood if he had asked Gary and his tape recorder to leave his office at that point.) “No, that’s just the way he was. And he called me when I was in the hospital and had heart surgery.” “Wow,” I’m thinking at this point, “is that right? What year was that? How long before the White House? Hold it. Was Reagan in the White House?!” Hard-to-port, Mr. Groth, sir. “So you think it was genuine.” Can I add a (sneer) stage direction in my copy? Oh, wait. There’s no question mark on the end, so the sneer is implied. Sorry, Gar. You’re right.

“He’s taken a terrible beating from the press and other people, just nastiness. (Jimmy) Carter was the same way. I was the Easter Seals Chairman. We went to Washington and

had some friends that went with us, and they had to hang back, as I went in to meet Carter. We had our picture taken, with the little girl who was on the poster. And then we said thank you. He asked if there were any folks with me. And I said, "Oh, this is my wife. And her son. And some friends." And he said, "Well, I'd like to meet them." He went over and shook hands with them. Again that was the sort of person he was." Now, I'm no mental giant, but I think I can see the linking theme of the two stories. Both men impressed Mr. Schulz because they both treated him very nicely, and they treated him very nicely for the exact reason that they were nice beyond the bounds of what was required of them in the situation — especially if one considers the disparity of their respective places in the societal pecking order. Schulz was impressed. Reading about it, I am impressed. Well, two out of three ain't bad. Gary at least allows Schulz to steer his way out of a very awkward exchange without another gratuitous slight. "I don't think I've met any others." Presidents, Gary. "Shook hands with Clinton. I talked with Bush on the practice tee at the AT&T." But he had lunch with Ronald Reagan. Just the two couples, Gary. There might even be a nice little anecdote or two since it was, like, an intimate lunch. You 've spent two columns of type denigrating the whole thing; why not take, oh, say, a paragraph or two and see if Ronald Reagan didn't tell Charles Schulz a funny story or express interest in some aspect of Peanuts? Just, you know, something.

Sorry, I got carried away there. Anyway, here we are at "Mama's Boy" part four. Charles Schulz shook hands with Clinton and talked with Bush on the practice tee: "But I'm out of that whole realm. Comic-strip artists are not regarded as celebrities in that way. We don't get the medal of freedom and all that sort of thing. They proposed it for me; I don't think we even came close. Last year on the 100th anniversary of the comics, all the cartoonists wrote to Senator Feinstein to promote it."

Ready?

"But that's all right. I know my place. (laughs) And it doesn't bother me."

Charles Schulz. Knows. His. Place. He is a multimillionaire, possibly a billionaire, Snoopy and Charlie Brown went to the moon, he is read by 200 million people every day. But. He knows his place.

Okay, I'm off to Florida. You kids play nice. Don't have the TV on too loud, and don't answer the phone after 11 o'clock.

part five
MAMA'S BOY

Just spoke to my Dad to set up a dinner date for Tuesday and told him that I had finally gotten to this part of the "Mama's Bay" series.

"Oh. boy," he laughed. "This is the one she's been dreading."

“Well, you can tell her that she hasn’t any reason to dread It. I think she ‘ll like it. I think you both will.”

Even over the phone, I could tell that he was unconvinced.

“I’m going to give her an advance copy and tell her that she’s more than welcome to add anything to- it that she wants. I’ll run it in italics so everyone knows what part is me and what part is her.”

He laughed again. “Can she take stuff out?” Razor- sharp as always.

I laughed right back. “I’m open to negotiation. I’ll certainly be open to paraphrasing the way I said something We ‘ll treat It as if I’m a book author and she’s my editor. We’ll., negotiate.”

(This proved as I hoped it would, unnecessary.)

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for waiting. The conclusion of the “Mama’s Boy” series of essays:

Okay. My Mum.

My mother is perfect. And I say that not in any sentimental fashion but rather as a statement of widely accepted fact. Widely accepted by everyone except my mother, that is.

She tries. As best I can sum u my mother’s view of herself, that would be it. She tries. “I try,” I can hear her say — high note on the “I” musically plummeting to the “try.”

This infuriates my father.

I really hate to bring Dad into this because it would be nice to just talk about my mother here, but they really have one of those “old-fashioned,” “till death do us part” marriages that were so much the rule for centuries and have only, in the last few decades, shown indications of possible inclusion on the endangered species list. It infuriates my father that my mother can’t acknowledge that she is perfect (I think) for the exact reason that my father is the most critical person that I know, a born fault-finder who has honed his critical faculties to a razor sharpness. Bluntly put, my father scares the shit out of everyone he has a conversation with. You know when I write about something that you think you have a very clearly defined opinion about, and by the time you’re done reading it you feel like a fool because I’ve just made mincemeat of your opinion in a few pithy paragraphs? I got that from my Dad. Not so much genetically (I don’t think) as from spending the first two decades of my life wading around in the mincemeat of what used to be my opinions, starting to build a philosophy around the few un-minced opinions I

had managed to defend successfully against my father's samurai scalpel of rhetorical precision (as it were).

So, when my Dad is of the unshakeable conviction that my mother is perfect, you can be certain that it is not a conclusion arrived at lightly, nor that prodigious energies have not been expended in the last fifty or so years in finding a weak link, an Achilles' Heel or a previously overlooked skeleton in one of my mother's immaculately maintained closets.

My personal opinion is that my father is infuriated by mother's failure to acknowledge her own perfection, because to do so would make her an "egotist" and, ergo, not perfect. Even repeated attempts to retrench his position and to get her to acknowledge that she is a "good" person have met with repeated failure. The impasse reasserts itself every time that I have occasion to listen to them revive the argument My father tells my mother she is a good person. My mother says she tries. My father says there is no "try" about it. She is a good person. My mother says she tries. My father says, "Horseshit" ("horseshit" is a favourite expression of my Dad's at the crux of any argument) and challenges my mother to come up with anything about herself which is not "good." My mother quite cheerfully offers up any one of a number of character traits about herself that she is genuinely concerned about, that she is meditatively self-critical about. She starts to, anyway, but my Dad will have none of it, and they reach the aforementioned impasse — my mother discussing what to her is a stubborn and ineradicable stain in the fabric of her life and my father dismissing it as an inconsequential piece of lint. *Imaginary* lint.

Fifty years of this. The mind boggles.

Anyway, some months ago I was having dinner with my parents and mentioned to my mother that one of the wisest — make that Wisest things — she ever said to me about being a parent was: "You start off winning all the battles, and then you win some of the battles and lose some, and you end by losing all of the battles." That is, with your kids. Even as I type it here for the first time, I am drawn to the term "battles" and the implied acknowledgement that the parent child relationship does constitute warfare of a sort; an adversarial relationship on a very small scale. A canvas of harmony and progress punctuated with eruptions of the conflict never far below the surface. Of course, the real Wisdom of it; to me, is the acknowledgement that the ultimate goal is, to "lose" the war. Particularly in the context of this series of essays, it seems to me to be a blueprint for *not* creating a "mama's boy," but, rather, creating an autonomous man.

I asked her if she had come up with the distillation herself or if she had read it somewhere. No, it was her very own.

I had suspected as much, but it was nice to have it confirmed.

The ensuing discussion concerned itself with the middle bit; that is, picking the battles you are going to win and picking the battles that you have decided to lose. No surprise that this was arrived at through extended discussions behind closed doors between Mum and Dad, weighing the pros and cons, trying to arrive at a measured and temperate verdict

on the sujet du jour. I expressed sympathy at that point. Sympathy not a little marked with admiration for a willingness to take on the grueling process of raising a child. I have more than enough to handle in my own life, drawing distinctions between what I will and won't allow myself to do or not do. Even imagining myself in the situation of having to make those calls for someone else well, frankly, I can't imagine it.

"Well," my mother said with an amused twinkle in her eye, "I was fortunate that you kids didn't push me too far."

The discussion continued at that point; but I was having difficulty concentrating, I admit. Interior thought processes were going on: considering why it was that my sister and I hadn't pushed my parents too far. Growing up in the late sixties and early seventies with youthful rebellion in the air, we were both very far from rebellious by nature. It seemed to me as I considered it that the resilience implied by knowing that they were going to — had decided they had to — "win some of the battles and lose some, and end up losing all of the battles" meant that my parents were very difficult to rebel against. Examples leapt to mind. I could have shoulder-length hair, but I had to keep it clean. My room could be as messy as I wanted, but I had to keep the door closed. There was so much "give," so many concessions to my (and my sister's) individuality and autonomy, that the battles, when and where they came, hinged on distinctions between right and wrong. If we were not allowed to do something, it was because it was wrong in my parents' eyes. A flat "no" was so unusual that I always figured there was a good reason for it. I certainly never had anything to contribute to the discussion at school when friends would talk about what assholes their parents were.

Simultaneous with this, my father mentioned something about our family discussions around the dinner table. That set off a new round of interior thought processes which made concentration even more difficult. I had forgotten the old family discussions, can't remember a single one specifically, but I did remember the sensation of it. One minute it was 5:30, and the next minute it was 8:30 or 9:00. Somewhere in there the four of us had sliced and diced and fine-tuned and poked and prodded some ostensibly innocuous subject which had been raised in passing, just a stray remark, until there was no aspect of it that had been untouched, it seemed. The launch point was usually when my Dad would say, "Let me play devil's advocate..." and would proceed to adopt a completely contrary stance to accepted and conventional wisdom. It was immaterial whether he believed it or not; the point was the intellectual challenge of trying to prove him wrong.

Dragging myself back to my mother's Wisdom, I asked if they remembered any particular battles with me that they couldn't decide whether to win or lose. I was surprised, but I shouldn't have been.

Comic books.

I'm pleased to say that I am not one of the legion of comic-book people who bears the scar of "my mother threw out my comic books." Maybe that's why I can be a little more sympathetic to a sensibility that would find it necessary at some point. Again, my interior thought processes went off on another trajectory, really seeing the comic-book childhood

from a parent's side of things. "My mother threw out my comic books." It's almost always the mother. You don't hear: "My parents threw out my comic books" or "My Dad threw out my comic books." Since my thoughts were largely focused on the maternal side of reality, a new insight popped into my head. Fire hazard. Fire safety brochures with their list of no-nos. One of which is to dispose of old newspapers and magazines. I had to smile at that. Why not just come home and say, "Hey, Mom! Look at this great box of oily rags that Tommy gave me! Now I've got two thousand oily rags down in the basement instead of one thousand! Isn't that great?" This was followed by another quick insight — the badly socialized childhood of the comic- book fan. When you're getting to the age when you're supposed to be getting interested in girls, getting ready for marriage and parenthood, it's not hard to see how a mother could get worried about you spending Friday and Saturday night sitting in the basement reindexing your Fantastic Four collection.

For those of us who got hit hard with the "comic-book flu," it's very difficult to see how really, really unnatural it is. When I was ten or eleven, there were about a half- dozen kids in the neighbourhood who were collecting comic books. By the time I was thirteen I was the only one. I can certainly understand how it would provide my parents with no end of "behind closed doors" conversation fodder. Comic books were not a hobby of mine. A hobby you could understand. If I went out on dates and hung around with friends and spent a couple of nights or the occasional weekend in the basement, that would be one thing. But comic, books were all that I was genuinely interested in, all that I thought about, all that I did. On the pro side of the discussion? Well, he's not really hurting anybody — at least he isn't mixed up with drugs or getting himself arrested. On the con side? Jesus, what is it with that boy? Is he *ever* going to grow out of it?

Well, not so far. But I guess there's always hope.

It was really only because my mother is and was perfect; I think, that I was able to see the down side of maternalism clearly enough to come up with the Cirinists and, tangentially, the Kevillists. It was only because she is and was such a good person that false matriarchal notes and excesses of feminism stood out, by contrast, for me as they began to multiply and contradict each other without a single voice being raised in opposition. It was only because she did try, because she does try, and because she will try until her dying breath — seeing the other side of the argument, always seeking the elusive middle course between extremes in the interest of everyone being included — that adversarial maternalism and adversarial feminism had me muttering "horseshit" under my breath, and then out loud and in print some time before I was aware that anyone else had seen that something was not kosher in Milwaukee.

My mother never "bought into" the idea of day-care, as an example. It tugged on her heart strings — even the two-decades old memory of it tugs on her heart strings — to see a neighbour's children at pm-school age bundled up in snowsuits climbing over the fence to go to another neighbour's house to be minded for the day, well...

To my mother there was just something wrong about that Pre-school children should get up in the morning and be able to scuff around the house in slippers and pajamas, watch

cartoons, read comic books, play with their toys. And that was definitely the life that my sister and I had.

Of course, my mother had no intention of being just a housewife and mother. She firmly intended to go back to work once my sister and I were in school, and she did so. People who are perfect, or good, or who try (just to cover all the bases) to see the elusive middle course, in my experience, tend to luck into ideal situations to a greater extent than those folks who don't have the aforementioned attributes. My mother ended up getting a job as a school secretary, which became her career for more than thirty years. So profound (I don't use the term lightly), so profound an impact did she have on the staff and students at each of the three schools she worked at that the flood — flood — of written tributes from her co-workers on the occasion of her retirement was more than a little overwhelming for someone (God bless her) whose self- assessment has never risen much above "I try." The outpouring of goodwill dwarfed the previous high watermark of acknowledgement — when she had been awarded Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest Women's Committee Woman of the Year honours in 1980. Many, many anecdotes of my mother having said to someone the right thing at the right time, which they had never forgotten and which had comforted them, motivated them or reassured them in a moment of despair, anxiety, or apprehension. So many lives that she touched, so many people she affected so deeply and upon whom she made such a lasting impression just by being who she is —just by "trying."

And none of this, no part of her career, was at the expense of her family. Far from it. As a school secretary, her vacations were the same as her children's vacations. For all intents and purposes, my sister and I had a full- time mother. When we were home before 9 a.m. and after 4 p.m., she was home. When we were home for a week she was home for a week. When we were home for two months in the summer, she was home for two months in the summer. It was an ideal situation all the way around. Ideal for my mother, ideal for her co-workers, ideal for her family. How many jobs are there for a wife and mother of which that can truly be said? Very, very few, I would maintain.

So when I write about Cirinists and Kevillists, the matriarchy and feminism, I write from a singular vantage point of having seen and having been a product of the perfect balance of each — genuinely effective Motherhood and genuinely effective Feminism, where neither effectiveness was diminished by the other.

Outside of the fixed parameters of my own mother's accomplishment, everything, in my view, gets a little skewed (to say the least). To even begin to address the singularity of my experience is to introduce large questions. Was I privileged to have a mother who struck the right balance? Is having a full-time mother a privilege? Is it a right? The distance between the two terms could fill many, many volumes of hair-splitting distinctions and still arrive at no proper conclusion, I think. There is no easy solution and no apparent "formula" which can be extrapolated. Every mother should get a job in the public school system if she wants to work and have her job not be at her family's or her own expense? The corporate world should rearrange itself so that positions held by

mothers have exactly the work/vacation ratio and parameters of the school year? The former is impossible and the latter (I'm sure we can all agree) extremely unlikely.

Anyway, my mother pulled it off. And made it look easy.

I just thought that all of you. . .and she. . .should know that that is what I believe.

I love you, Mum. Thanks.