

“Man Up”: Observing the Social Construction of Boys’ Masculinity

Elan Justice Pavlinich

KEYWORDS: Baseball, competition, play, violence

Toby gave his Aunt a big hug before he rounded the bend of the cement dug out and joined his teammates of eight-year old boys. The paved and dusty floor was littered with pleather gloves, each decorated with athletic insignia or super heroes, strewn along with caps, all black and yellow, each one indistinguishable from the others, apart from the initials marking the tags on the inside to ensure that each cap corresponds to one particular player. The boys stirred in the shade, scuffling about, pushing, jabbing, laughing. They craned their heads upwards, squinting into the sun to see the faces of the coaches, all men with stubble shading their faces just below the imprints of crows feet around the eyes, and light wisps of silver sprouting from their temples. The men talked sternly about nothing in particular, breaking the monotony of their poker faces with periodic and abrupt sounds that registered as something seeming like amusement. Most of the boys kept their distance, but maintained their attention on the menfolk. They feigned interest in their conversations about work, the renovations on Main Street, and the recent political scandal, but actually none of them understood the significance of any of this. Not the boys, nor the men who uttered these trivialities. The only strand of fascination that the young ones gleaned from this meaningless exchange of words was that this was guy talk. This is the stuff about which men converse. Performing comprehension equates to a kind of currency, and so if one acquires the currency, deploys the proper cues, one might be able to buy one’s way into manhood. To talk with the big boys is to be one of the big boys. Toby kept to the corner in the shade, where he would not be assaulted by roughhousing, or lose his cap.



From this huddle, one of the coaches turned his head in the direction of the boys. Facing them, but not looking at them, he formed a small shriveled opening with his mouth and spit a streaming arch of filth that hit the cement of the dugout with a splat, congealed in an instant, and made of itself a point of convergence for the gaze of every lad looking for cues to compose their own identities in the image of the father. The pool of spit soon grew as each uniformed youth attempted to demonstrate the precision of his own expulsion of spittle. Some stood directly over the bubbled gob, as clear streams ran down their chins and dribbled with patters that sounded like footsteps creeping closer to their mark. It was something more than a demonstration of personal corporeal control, or the ability to aim and move matter in accordance with one's will. For some, it seemed, that by combining his own bodily fluid with that of the father's was like concocting an elixir. If his spit mixed with his spit, then they were one and the same. Toby watched nervously, and swallowed the lump in his throat.

Later, well enough into the game's innings that the spectators had forgotten how many were left, parents exchanged small talk, compared teachers, and took regular breaks to shout the name of their particular child whenever he took to home plate for an opportunity to crack the ball. Toby played shortstop when it was his turn in the field. He enjoyed this position because after the thrill of the game wore off in the first three innings, he was able to turn his attention to the soft dirt between first and second base. It was smooth, running through his fingers, and he thought to himself that if the granules were only a bit smaller this dirt would be more like liquid, a burnt-orange pool on which they could barely stand. He liked these moments of peace in which he could be alone in spite of the clamor and structured play around him, where he could feel the breeze and enjoy the simplicity of the clear sky and the soft dirt. Just then, an abrupt wind broke his self-indulgent solitude, and he realized that it was the game ball that had soared by his head. The shouting of teammates and parents pressed in on him. From the opposite direction another body moved quickly by him. It was a runner. Toby missed the ball aimed at him, and the runner gained second base. "Get your head in the game!" his mother shouted from behind a chain-link fence on the sidelines.

"Man up," the coach said from the central location of the pitcher's mound, like an authority bearing down on him, both of them playing their part in some play-

ground panopticon. Toby felt ashamed and afraid, like he had failed. The social order saw his flaws. He was a dreamer, and there was no time or exceptions made for a young man who could not engage the other fellows in their assigned tasks. Between first base and second base, he wanted that soft dirt to become liquid and permit him to sink and hide.

Toby averted his eyes from the father on the mound and strained to suppress his tears. Avoiding the feeling of emptiness opening in place of his guts, he focused all of his attention on the next play. The coach softly pitched the ball at the next batter who swung awkwardly, relying of chance to connect his bat with the baseball. It did. With a sharp peel, the ball arched upward into the air, culling the attention of all those young men in uniform to squint past the oversized brim of their baseball caps, and calculate the trajectory of the plummeting mass. It came down in the outfield just before the batter made contact with first base. Toby intently watched his teammates scuttling to retrieve the ball as one boy in left field picked it up, looked deliberately in his direction, aimed and threw. The ball hit Toby's glove with a satisfying thud as the runner jogged past him towards second base. Coerced by the command to "man up," Toby put all of his strength behind his throw. He centered on his target with feigned but hopeful precision and hit his mark perfectly. The ball held Toby's shame and regret, but the dull thump that it made on impact resounded in his mind and echoed over the feelings of dread that he had only recently experienced. The runner went down into the dirt, instead of Toby, just after the ball took his breath from him by striking just between his shoulder blades. Toby was overjoyed. The runner was overcome. He was lifted by Toby's coach – just like a baby, Toby thought. The coach delivered the downed runner, gasping for breath and stained by tears mixed with fine burnt-orange dirt, to his mother on the other side of the chain-link fence.

The rest of the game passed quickly as Toby soaked in the exhilaration of accomplishment. He felt like he had earned his rank as a team member, as one of the other boys, but special. His mark was not composed of a pool of collective spit that would evaporate from the cement. His mark was made on the skin of the opposing team. He was accepted by them, as one of the boys. His claim to manhood was announced to every witness on and around the baseball diamond with the gasps and cries of that fallen runner.

Toby's peers congratulated him after the game. The coaches had very little to

say beyond announcing the next time and place for their next practice session. With an orange slice in one hand and a juice box in the other, Toby trundled over to his Mom, and Aunt, and Grandmother. He asked if they could go out for a special treat, to celebrate his achievement like the coaches who met up at the tavern across the street for beers after the boys' game.

His Aunt took him to a local fast food chain where he got an ice cream cone for wearing his uniform in the restaurant and all of the meals from the kids' menu came with a little toy. This week the toys were either miniature automobiles or pocket dolls with freely moving strands of hair and fluorescent wings. Toby told his aunt that he wanted the fairy. They looked so pretty and fun. In his mind, the idea of pushing a piece of plastic across the floor while supplying revving sounds seemed so boring. Where was the toy car to go? How much fun is it to pretend to be seeking out a destination? And, should the toy ever arrive, would it not then be rendered obsolete. No, the fairy was more appropriate for him. Fairies represented possibility. Their wings were transportation, and once they arrived they had the means by which to facilitate imaginary dialogue, action – an entire narrative potential was embodied by the fairies.

Toby's Aunt let him order his own food. He enjoyed this responsibility. He even got to hold the money so that he could pay for everything. He felt smart and special as he informed the clerk that he wanted a kids' meal with a fairy. The young man behind the counter looked puzzled, like he hadn't quite heard the request. Toby felt self-conscious again, like maybe he wasn't ready to order his own food, like he was unintelligible or deficient. The clerk's eyes moved toward Toby's Aunt for comprehension. She nodded her head in affirmation and the young man processed their order. Toby not only paid for their meal, he also received the change, and counted it back to his Aunt as they waited for their food to be placed on the counter before them.

They sat together at the table and Toby parceled out their food while his Aunt asked him what he thought about today's game. She seemed concerned, but he was not. He was proud, and he was excited to unwrap his new toy before he started eating. With his Aunt, the rule was always that the toy was to be placed on the table, and only after he had made his best effort to eat everything would they then go outside and play with whatever the latest plastic loot happened to be that promotional season. So Toby pulled out the bag and was excited to see the bulbous

shadowy eyes of a human face looking at him through the plastic. He was anxious to stretch that bag to point of tearing so that he could free the glittering wings that were hastily crammed into the packaging. With the toy set aside he removed the other contents of the box, including a burger, some fries, and something else. Something wrapped in plastic at the bottom of the box.

It was another toy. Toby was thrilled! In an instant his mind leapt to the possibility of fairy friends. Now that he had two, they would each have someone with whom they could speak. They could fly around the room, singing songs to which only Toby new the lyrics. At night they would sleep together just above Toby's pillow on the headboard of his bed, so that he could look up at them before following their glittering wings into dreams.

He inspected the newfound treasure to see if his friends would be identical twin fairies, or if they would be entirely dissimilar. He had already hoped that this one would have the bright pink dress to go with the bright green dress of the other one whom he had already placed on the table. Instead, he saw shiny red. It was a car. The clerk called over to them from the other side of the counter. He explained that he wanted Toby to have both toys because he assumed that when Toby got home he would feel bad because he had picked the wrong toy. Toby didn't understand. The plastic car in the plastic bag didn't seem to amount to much. It did not signify anything the way that the fairy had. Toby felt bad when he looked at it. He felt bad about himself. Toby had not realized that he was wrong, but now he felt it.