

# Girls and Boys

written by Guest Contributor | August 6, 2019



## Desire and Power in High School

Giddy Aphrodite races for candy, followed by her big sister Athena, solemn in her gray helmet and shield, bearing a homemade spear bound with gold duct tape. "I could kill her if I wanted to," Athena reminds us, gracious with power and wisdom. She has a wee stuffed owl taped to her shoulder. Although she is nine she comports herself with the dignity of a goddess, while Aphrodite ties a polka-dot fleece around her shiny pink, faux-Grecian robes, gleefully counts fifty-three pieces of candy, and ditches her laurel wreath because it's itching her ears.

A few days later, I find my mini-goddess of love singing along to Taylor Swift's hit "Shake it Off," watch her shimmy a hip-hop dance learned in PE from the adorable, shorts-wearing gym teacher, Mr. C.

"Practicing your rock star moves?" I ask.

"Actually, I don't want to be a rock star anymore," Carmen says.

"You don't?" I feel dismayed at this abrupt change of heart, how quickly children cast off their old selves.

"No. I get stage fright." She looks at me and shrugs. This seven-year-old realism shows unexpected self-awareness: the girl's natural exuberance does shut down in front of a crowd, unlike her sister, who adores the spotlight.

"What do you want to be now?"

She doesn't miss a beat: "A fashion designer, a jewelry maker, or a hairdresser."



Meanwhile my oldest sketches a diagram labeled Fourth Grade Popularity Map, a series of concentric circles around a star. The girl at the center is a thick-lashed brunette named Caitlin whom my child played with at recess for one week in first grade. I've seen this Queen Bee in the halls with her giggling acolytes. She possesses that elementary school *je-ne-sais-quoi*—a precocious allure paired with a cool hint of meanness. I ask Emma where she herself is on the Popularity Map and she points to a stick figure on the outermost circle without seeming to care.

She's proud of her drawing, how she's rendered the complex social dynamics of school into figurative geometry. She seems genuinely unfazed by her outlying position—if anything, she wears it like a badge of honor.

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Driving back into the high school parking lot after 23 years was a kind of time warp. The sprawling brick building still looked like a prison, a fixture I'd once fantasized about demolishing with a rocket launcher. I found an empty spot facing the football field and checked myself in the rear-view. Took three deep breaths. Applied rose-tinted lip balm, not lipstick—nothing to mark me as trying too hard. Nothing too grown-up or, god forbid, Cougarish.

I was visiting the AP English class to read and talk about poetry, and the return felt symbolic, a Phoenix-from-the-Ashes moment: the nerd come into her own power, returning to the scene of her deepest unhappiness (those murky halls and battered lockers) with her first book tucked in her bag. I thought it mattered what I wore to AP English. I'd even Facebooked the question and polled my friends: a classy dress, or jeans and boots? Jeans, most people voted, so there I stood in my premium denims, tapping my harness boots outside the locked doors.

I had to be buzzed in by the front office. I was a stranger now; I required a visitor badge. A palimpsest of memories overwhelmed me, set off by the checkered floors, the smell of cleaning polish and chalk dust. I passed the band room where we hid on days we skipped gym in tenth grade, the smallest of transgressions for which we never paid. Suddenly, around the corner, thronged a clan of girls in tiny black short-shorts, wearing red fringed tee-shirts over visible bras, talking and laughing in face-paint and glitter, long shiny hair hanging down their backs.

It was Spirit Day, and there was about to be a Pep Rally.

Those two words sent a shudder of dread through my limbic brain. A Pep Rally—when I'd sat on the wooden bleachers with my Nerd Herd friends, fluffing my bangs with a sense of failure as we watched the five hottest soccer boys perform "Faith" by George Michael for the Air Band contest. Jason and Mark and Matt and Jimmy and Shawn wore Aviator glasses, leather bomber jackets and faded Levis, the letters F-A-I-T-H taped to their respective asses. Slim-hipped Jason Elliot was the cockiest of them all and strutted around like he was on MTV, lip-synching to perfection, a high school superstar who incited ardor and fear.

I remember my father telling me some people were destined to hit their peak in high school and I shouldn't let the bastards get me down. But I didn't care, I wanted to hit my peak at 14, 15, 16 . . . I wanted the easy sexuality of the popular girls, wanted to wear it off-the-shoulder like a fluorescent tunic from The Limited, flaunting my unearned prettiness in the middle of the cavernous gymnasium.

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Striding along in my black boots, the long gray hallways took me right back. I was on the outside, looking through a wire-screened window into the girls' locker-room. Dim light diffused the damp tunnel leading from the big gym to the showers. Shrieks, giggles and water splashing, the tiled floor scudded with a veil of mildew. The popular girls stripped off their soccer jerseys and paraded around in bras and panties. Jessica Harris shook out her black curls and unhooked her push-up-padded black satin, even for a soccer game—while I faced the corner wrestling my Champion racer-back over my head.

The horror of high school evokes visceral shame. The cool boys loping through the halls like a wolf pack, the humiliation of being invisible to them when I longed to be noticed, sought out, even hunted—but I was an honors-class girl in prairie skirts and shaker-knit sweaters, raising my hand every day in AP English, carefully retyping my Hamlet essay at night.

Jason Elliot was the King of the Jocks and I understood that he was an asshole. We heard he scrawled **AIDS KILLS FAGS DEAD** on the chalkboard in Mrs. Dunham's homeroom and never even got detention. All lean blonde swagger,

Jason leered his dirty smile at the prettiest junior high girls and once famously said about seventh-grader Jessica Bruni (a leggy colt with liquid brown eyes, lean as my own firstborn): "Yeah, I'd fuck her— even though she doesn't have any hair on her pussy."

This was high school. You'd think I would know better. You'd think I would run the other way and find a nice boy who sang in the chorus, cross-country skied, and did all his Algebra homework, another college faculty brat like me. In fact I did find that boy—his name was Thomas but my friends called him The Tall Wonder. After I joined the ski team, I fell in love with him and for nearly eight months we did Everything But—third base in his parents' VW Vanagon with The Smiths *Louder Than Bombs* blasting our theme song: *Ask me, I won't say no, how could I?* But when TTW left for college, he did not write or call and I was alone again in autumn without a container for my longing.

That October my Nerd Herd friends went en masse to the Homecoming Dance. My mom drove me to the mall and we scoured the stores for a tolerable dress—a black velvet mistake with a swathe of electric-green tulle draping its padded shoulders. It was 1988— we wore our hair feathered or permed and our clothes too baggy. Heather Wang's mom chauffeured us to Friendly's where we packed into a booth and picked at fried food in our ill-fitting formalwear, our self-consciousness like a second skin.

At Homecoming it was the senior soccer captains who reigned. Jason Elliot and Matt Salazar danced effortlessly amidst a flock of gorgeous girls, taffeta and cleavage on display. The guys had taken off their sport jackets and loosened their ties and mirrored each other in loose-limbed ease, sweaty Alpha males radiating sexual charisma. I kept stealing glances at them from my spot in the Nerd Herd dance circle, where we did our usual little side-to-side boogie. They were clearly half-drunk, not enough to be pathetic but enough to grease every movement with lust.

*I'm down with OPP yeah you know me . . .* The Soccer Kings glided over to sandwich Bitch Queen Melanie Chambers in her fuchsia strapless, grinding against her with arms in the air. Melanie pursed her lips with a surprised look, like "Oh you bad boys," but she played along and kept the hip-hop beat and the three of them moved in sync like a music video, like they were born to the exhibitionist glory of a dance floor ménage-a-trois.

I watched shamelessly, not hiding my envy. I couldn't help what I wanted—to be caught in the middle of a Jason-Matt sandwich, their hips locked with mine as the room pulsed with music, *Joy and pain . . . Sunshine and rain . . .* I closed my eyes and surrendered to the fantasy, never mind that I wasn't going to the after-party, that I'd never been invited to those kinds of parties. I planned to sleep over at Heather's house after the dance. We'd rehash the night and watch *Pretty in Pink*, stay up past 2 and sleep as late as we could, make scrambled eggs and eat toast with blueberry jam in the sunny breakfast nook. It was sweet, homemade fun and I always enjoyed it, but it could never replace the thrill of sex or regret.

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I thought it mattered what I wore to AP English. But it was seventh period on a Friday and the whole building hummed with anticipation, a rhythm building like a distant army marching.

I had forty minutes to talk about poetry to a group of seniors clad entirely in red and white. Greylock jerseys, sweatshirts, varsity jackets— I was the only one not in school colors.

“You should’ve gone in your graduation gown,” joked my brother after the visit, and sadly I realized he was right.

I’d been debating for weeks whether I could read the class my poem “Wanting It,” a charged lyric about high school power, desire and identity, set in those very same halls. How bizarre that the institutional brick maze which defined my life for six long years existed now as it did in memory, unchanged since its 1960 construction.

Mr. Daniels, the jeans-wearing English teacher, sported a red Greylock sweatshirt himself. When he gave me the thumbs-up, I cleared my throat and read the risqué poem (albeit with less bravado than usual), but my delivery didn’t matter because the students weren’t looking. They all stared intently down at their desks, studying the Xeroxed lines. I wasn’t expecting the strained silence afterwards, nor the question one boy asked, a lanky senior in a Santa hat and red opera gloves, his face concealed by red paint.

“What’s the secret graffiti?”

“That’s sort of the point,” I said. “It’s a secret. The speaker doesn’t understand it, even though she wants to. And the graffiti is written in lip gloss on the locker-room wall, so it’s invisible. No one can read it. No one gets the social dynamics of high school. Does that make any sense?”

Santa Hat shrugged. The rest of the class seemed mildly satisfied. I could sense their impatience tinged with lethargy, the slow minutes clicking by on the wall clock, countdown till the last bell released them to the Pep Rally.

So I read them another poem, this one about sixth grade, billing it as a nostalgic homage to 1980’s fashion. I knew they’d had “80’s Day” earlier that week. Nothing dated me as much as this fact. For them, the outfits we’d worn were costumes, not memories, the way we’d once dressed up as hippies in bell-bottoms, reducing our parents’ lived history to Halloween attire.

“What did you guys wear for 80’s Day?” I asked. “Fluorescent?”

“Stirrup pants and big hair,” one boy said.

“Izod Lacoste shirts with the collars turned up,” said another.

“Pastels, long jackets—the Miami Vice look,” Mr. Daniels added.

None of the girls were talking. Not what I'd envisioned when I planned the visit, since it was the girls I wanted to reach, the ones who believed they weren't enough. Three of them sat in a row by the windows and watched me but did not speak. I read the stanza about Ralph kissing me at the sixth grade dance at the Little Red Schoolhouse (still down the road but now defunct), and a slim lad in a cross-country windbreaker raised his hand.

"Is that all you write about, you know—girls and boys?"

I half-laughed at his daring. I wanted to defend my material, reply with dignity: "Of course not. I write about the great subjects of Poetry—love, loss, the passing of time..." But I admitted he was right: I was obsessed with desire, although I also wrote a lot about the weather.

The stamping pulse of the Pep Rally vibrated the building. The bell rang like a spell breaking and it was amazing how quickly those kids disappeared, shouldering their backpacks in a horde of red and white. Then I was alone with Mr. Daniels in my boutique denim, two adults with children of our own, lovers of literature who spoke the same language. My outfit hadn't mattered, though maybe the poetry had. I was a grown-up now—a mom, not a siren—and thus invisible to the next generation.

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Here's the secret I haven't told you: I hooked up with Jason Elliot, King of the Jocks, not once but several times. I still dream about him occasionally—he enters my sleep like we're in high school and I'm always sneaking around trying to get with him alone. One night I went to his room in a rambling hotel and we rolled around in our underwear on the rug until he had to go find some other girls—the popular clique, dressed glam and ready to go clubbing. I knew he was using me but I didn't care. I was shameless with desire; respect and reciprocity had nothing to do with me. Feminism had flown out the window like a lost songbird while I lay prostrate on Jason's carpet, hungry for his hands on me again.

In real life, he's an actor in New York, moderately successful, with a cameo in *Batman* as his claim to fame. When I googled his headshot, I saw he'd cultivated the rugged look, his strong jaw grown stronger with age, adorned with a salt and pepper goatee.

I remember the first time I talked to him alone. I'd played the voyeur for years but suddenly we were face to face at the Senior Sleep-out on a bare hillside up on the Taconic Crest, the beer on his breath a mild aphrodisiac that gave me the nerve to speak.

"What are *you* doing here?" I asked. I was the senior now, it was my class sleep-out—a late-spring rager in a notorious field hidden from the main road, a secret from cops and parents alike. Jason had already gone off to college—why was he crashing this party?

"I wanted to look at the stars," he said, gesturing to the indigo dome above us pinpricked with light. I laughed.

"That's a good line," I said. "Romantic. It must work on all the girls."

"But not on you," he said, grinning.

"I like my seduction a little more original."

I couldn't believe it. I was standing in the twilight flirting with Jason Elliot, who claimed to have grown more sensitive at Hobart, outgrown his offensive high school behavior, changed into a person of substance, an Artist. He was majoring in theatre, reading the works of Shakespeare. We lay back in the damp grass beyond the party's epicenter, lame as usual: a keg and a campfire, a few pickup trucks, boys chugging while drunk girls danced around a boom-box. We watched couples slip away to hook up in the shadow of the spring woods. I could have gone with him then but an uncharacteristic sense of propriety came over me, a kind of willful pride— not to betray how much I'd wanted him, not to seem easy or slutty in his eyes.

Hard-to-get was not my game but I played it with Jason for a few years on and off, when we ran into each other in town on vacations. We shared intense conversations on barstools and dirty-danced at The Red Herring, kissed briefly in an alleyway behind The Purple Pub. One sloppy New Year's Eve, I toyed with him again at a party on Park Street, in the overheated house of a popular girl who'd hated me in high school. The red vodka Kool-Aid had gone straight to my head, dissolving the old boundaries. I was having fun, feeling pretty. A fine sugar snow sifted down outside as Jason led me into the garage and pressed me up against the wall where the father of the house hung his tools. We made out among the wrenches for a few torrid minutes until my ex-summer-boyfriend Shawn Smith pulled him off me and slugged him. A posse of kids gathered to watch and cheer as Jason and Shawn, former soccer captains who'd once rocked the Air Band contest, fought each other over me.

Reeling alone in the snowy yard, I started to cry. I'd gotten what I thought I'd wanted but I felt cheap and trivial, dismissed by the macho performance. To top it off, I was too drunk to drive home. I called my mom for the first time begging for a ride, and she came to get me in the Chevy Suburban without a guilt trip or an inquisition. Sheer relief as she pulled into the driveway of the now-shameful party-house, her glittery bumper-sticker shining in the streetlights. MAGIC HAPPENS.

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In my revisionist history of high school, I remained an outsider— the unpopular honors-class good-girl with her face pressed to the glass, always looking in at the cool kids' lucky fun. The scenes I've curated spool by to a kicking 80s soundtrack—Prince, Depeche Mode, Simple Minds— pure synthesized sex and loneliness. In the movie of my adolescence, I'm the unseen victim,

some outcast-nerd love child of Ally Sheedy and Anthony Michael Hall conceived on the set of *The Breakfast Club*.

"I never really believed that was the whole story," said my skeptical husband. I'd come back from a weekend reunion with Stacey and Sarah, my high school best friends, who'd reminded me of our senior year antics, my wildfire instincts, how I'd driven across the county late one night to hunt down a college guy who'd treated me like garbage.

In Stace's Ford Fiesta we'd blared Madonna and sped through the sleepy mill town of Dalton, Massachusetts. We parked by the guy's house and before I could lose my grit or my rage, I strode up to the door, rang the bell, and when he appeared, bleary-eyed in his white pajamas, I slapped him once—twice—hard across the face. My friends said they could hear the second hit from where they hid in the bushes, trying not to giggle.

"Di, you are bold as shit!" Stacey yelled as we jumped back in the car, and for awhile I felt it— I felt bold and lucky and invincible. I got in early to an Ivy and captained the girls' ski team to a state championship and wrote secret love poems in my English notebook. But I didn't have a boyfriend, nor the slimmest possibility of one, and had to accept a sympathy date to the prom with the short, unsatisfying Mick Benedetti. Is that why I needed to change the story looking back, create a simple myth of unloveliness rather than the complex lived experience it all was?

In the Senior Superlatives issue of *The Greylock Echo*, my classmates voted me *Most Likely to Succeed*, a dubious honor and fraught with anxiety, since I had no clear direction in life and couldn't imagine what adult "success" might look like. I wore a button-up cream blouse to the photo shoot and posed with Steve Haverback, the male Most Likely clad in jacket and tie, reading the *New York Times* in front of the Mt. Hope mansion. A sliver of me was proud and the rest embarrassed. I knew it was a sham appointment, knew we were both puppet presidents. All the power resided in the cabinet: just open the paper and read the Superlatives everyone prized—*Best Looking, Best Body, Best Hair, Best Eyes*— all the posts locked down by the popular clique.



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"You should come check out the Pep Rally," Mr. Daniels said in the now-empty classroom.

I tried to find an excuse, but he interrupted.

"The whole vibe is different now, there's this genuine school spirit. The sports teams make up dances and we have wacky contests between the classes and the teachers. Real positive energy. It'll be fun!"

So I found myself walking down the eerie route to the gym: past the auditorium, past the band room, past the art studio and the home ec. room, where we'd made buttery popovers, sewed stuffed animals and learned about fallopian tubes and the life cycle of a pimple. Why they showed us puberty movies during home economics I never understood, but it left a residue of humiliation over everything we baked.

*Boom Boom Chh! Boom Boom Chh!* A thousand feet stamped in a steady rhythm, a low hum of cheering swelled to a roar. Past the glass cases filled with shiny trophies, past the multi-purpose room and into the gym, bleachers packed with red and white faces screaming their lungs out. Nobody noticed me skirt the sidelines behind Mr. Daniels, because the Senior MCs were already taking the mic and rousing the crowd to yell louder. Testosterone emanated from the senior class bleachers—the biggest guys all jammed together trumpeting their power and pride.

I lasted about fifteen minutes, long enough to watch the *Wrap Your Teacher Like a Mummy* toilet-paper contest, and the Boys and Girls Soccer teams doing separate choreographed dances to Taylor's "Shake It Off." They looked like kids but they danced like pop stars, especially the girls' captains—sashaying around in ripped shirts and short-shorts, long locks swinging, hips shaking to the beat, confident in their hotness and flair, vamping it up for the audience. Some girls did look a bit awkward out there, but they were flanked by their teammates and everyone was dancing, grooving in a swirl of confetti. I took out my phone and shot a quick video to show to my girls. *This was my high school, I'd tell them. This was where I read poetry today. The kids there love Taylor Swift, too.*

I'd like to say I didn't give a shit anymore about popularity or prettiness, that I'd resolved all my adolescent demons in one afternoon. I'd like to pass on to my daughters the kind of guts it takes to get up and dance in front of the whole school, or the other kind of guts—not to care. But they're still in single digits and seem to believe they're cool. Polyester goddesses with pumpkin-totes of candy, fearless outliers on the Popularity Map, they remain untouched by the fire of social scorn. I'm waiting, waiting—only a few more years. Somehow by seventh grade, I learned my chief value lay in my sexual currency. Somehow I gave over my power to boys. It's taken me decades to

start to reclaim it. I want to spare my girls this fate but the world is the world. Middle School lurks on the horizon like a low-pressure system, dank and murky, the realm of Ophelia. May they both keep their heads above water.

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Image Credit: Jeff Woodward

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