



## Growing Up Too Fast

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A boulder of hard coconut drops shot across the room.

Omar stung the backs of heads with paper missiles, fired from his RubberBand sling shot.

Missiles of lunch foil launched overhead. Economics class was a warzone.

“I not playing!”

“I will hit you eh!”

Boys cursed out loud on the classroom battlefield.

The only one who sat still was in front of the class. The one always late to start and in a hurry to end. He read the newspapers casually in front of us, reading the paper from back to front because the sports section was the most interesting. Occasionally, he forgot his newspaper on the desk. One day we opened it and saw the *Punch* magazine of topless women inside the pages. John discovered it first. He opened the centrefold and thirty boys hovered over him with glowing eyes and expert commentary on the nipple sizes and areola analysis. I was busy scribbling mental notes as the boys who lost their cool pointed and described aloud what they saw with sweat streaming from the corners of their foreheads.

We did not learn anything in Math because Mr. Griffith beat us. But we learnt nothing in Economics because Mr. Simmons never taught us. The story has it that the scar by his eye happened when he parted a fight and was punched in the head by one of the boys. His glasses frame broke and cut the side of his face. Since then, he saw nothing that happened among the boys, far less intervened. So, we made plans for the hour, text-messaging lyrics with girlfriends in other

schools, *all fours* card gambling, or gossiping about our week and weekend plans. Killing time, wasting time and wasting education were on our schedule for the day.

Omar, the prince of swagger, sat next to me in Econ class. He was a pretty boy and he was popular among the girls. By fifteen, he had had sex more than one hundred times. So he said, so we thought. I would not believe it if it was another boy. I did after-school classes with him and girls routinely approached him, gave him their number and followed his lead. His father had a small vacant apartment to the back of the house. He was known to have girls over to that little room and he had sex with the autonomy and sense of freedom only adults had. All the other boys had to time their parents' absence or choose a friend's house that was usually vacant and hopefully had air conditioning.

On his evening walk, Omar drew a New Era fitted cap that matched the colour of his sneakers from his Jansport bag. He tilted the beak of the cap and put his stud earring on his left ear, the one he smuggled in his front pocket. From under his vest he lifted his thin gold chain with a crucifix.

We were counting every day we got closer to manhood like the emerging hairs on our chins. In spite of our declarations, school uniforms told everyone we were boys. So, we innovated the uniform, pressed the collars, and removed the shirt from inside the pants, anything to look cooler. The extension road was always a kind of slow crawl, a kind of Clint Eastwood, Western, dangerousness. I used to think that the sun was a man that looked out for boys, so it came down harder and made us squint our eyes to look more daring and mysterious. It was a good look anyway. Few of us could walk like Omar.



Whether recounted as memoir or pure fiction, boys had to learn to speak about their adventures and fantasies, always in the language of conquest. Some told stories about sex at midnight in a drain on New Year's day, doggystyle positions as Spragga Benz performed on the jeweller in *Shottaz* and the pleasure and risk of sex after school followed by purchasing 'morning after' pills for unplanned ejaculations. The only sex we were allowed to vocalise was that between boys and girls. There was a certain violence in the words we used to describe sex, we said: beat it, chop it, cut it, wood it, swords it, scrape it, licks it, done it out, knock it, live inside it, bull it. Every girl or woman who was not related to us was an object, an "it". We spoke of sex as destruction and violation.



One wasteful afternoon in Econ class, I asked Omar, "When was your first time?"

"Fucking or doing anything?" he asked.

"Anything."

"In Toco," he said quietly. "We used to go up to a house for a long weekend and spend time on the beach. My father and his friends had the house full. One of his friends made me go down on her. I was eight. I had to suck her box different times. You could say that is the first time I do anything."

He never reported it to an authority or parent. His father was a police officer; he said he knew he'd never understand. I chuckled in half-smile confusion. Was he the luckiest eight-year old because of that woman? What would I say if the father's friend in Toco was a man? I was too young to understand Omar's account with my crooked smile. We never had any other conversations like that again, Omar and I. I did not ask him any questions.



Sex was imagined as the natural domain of a man, even a small man. The pornography we looked at, versions of sexual experiences we heard and retold and the lexicon of sex itself, put us in the position of dominance, the one to put a woman in a chokehold or the recipient of aggressive sexual strokes. I heard a DJ scream over the microphone one night,

All woman who pum pum tight, who pum pum clean, put your lighter up. All of the man the man who only watch woman because you not a batty man, put your lighter up. All of the man who play cricket in her belly, hit she for six, put your lighter up.

Early on, my father told me to resist the pressure from peers to have sex. He also explained that I, like all my brothers, was not allowed to drop out of school to “play father.” There was no formal curriculum on sexual education but there were the teachings in the Economics class, in the declarations by the DJ, by the words of my father. My peers also taught me that adults, if they had their chance, wanted us. For years, I had not made the connections between more serious experiences with women who groped me, the one invited me to her place to assist me with writing and grabbed my penis under the table, or the times I thought I was special for courting the attention of female authority and being kissed on the lip too many times from an older woman in my youth.

I never cried in the corner of a room. I never had reason to say “no” or “stop” because I was not physically pushed against a wall. I still can’t get myself to name or fully explain what happened. “These *things* happen”, I said to myself. I have to remind myself that, just like girls who were preyed upon by drunken uncles, maxi taxi conductors and teachers, boys were too. There was no luck. It was the very idea of manhood that we subscribed to that led us to respond to sexual abuse with a smile, to think we should greet it with the joy of a lottery pick

when it was a woman, and to see the child as a failure when he was victimised by an older man, to listen to Omar's story and think of him as lucky.

I used to be too afraid to be left behind, with no stories to tell for boys together in a circle around me holding on to every word. I was afraid of not taking control of every minute and authoring each moment in my life. But now I know that people, especially children, do not have absolute control over their lives, the pen is never always in their hands.



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