Reading

The Man Box

By Gordon Lewis

> **"The man box"** is an idea initially conceived in the 1980s by Paul Kivel of the Oakland Men's Project and then further developed in the 1990s by A Call to Men founder Tony Porter. It refers to the set of societal norms and expectations that place pressure on boys and men to think and act a certain way if they want to "fit in," such as being strong, successful, tough, and in control and limiting emotions. These heterosexist norms and expectations can be communicated through families, peer groups, school, work, and the media, starting from a young age. Consequences for not subscribing to these social pressures can include bullying and ostracism from groups.

We're all average boys: hard working in school, spending every minute together in the summer, and doing our best to pretend we don't have a worry in the world. The facts are no different as the sun is beginning to set on a warm July evening. Sam and I say goodbye to Ben, stepping out of our best friend's house.

"My sister is going to pick me up while we're walking, is that O.K.?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Actually, she can probably drive you home, too."

"Sounds good," says Sam, but lacking his usual upbeat, comedic energy. Neither of us says anything else, but I'm O.K. with it, we just keep walking. I look around, admiring the still, peaceful park as the warm summer breeze brushes across my face. The crickets are chirping and an owl sings along between the soft hum of cars rolling along nearby. It's nature's tune of serenity.

I almost forgot Sam was with me until he asked, "Can I ask you kind of a weird question?"

"Sure," I say, expecting a joke in poor taste as per usual.

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to," he says before asking.

More hesitantly, I say, "O.K."

"Do you have someone that you talk to about like deeper stuff . . . Like more emotional stuff?" Silence hits us like a brick wall: The crickets stop chirping, the owl stops hooting, even the cars stop driving by. It's deafening. I'm only shocked at the question because it's Sam, one of the happiest and funniest people I know.

I'm wondering. My disappointment takes over just as quickly as my hope fades as I fail to come up with a name. In the end, the closest thing I can think of is the book I occasionally write in when I'm feeling sad or stressed.

"Huh," I say quietly, "I've never really thought about that, but I guess not."

"Yeah, I didn't either, but at camp we did activities and had talks that led to more emotional conversations." I'm silently both jealous and proud of him, but it's mostly jealousy.

"It's funny," I say, "in English we always joked about that TED Talk guy talking about the man box, but it's actually so true. We shouldn't feel like we can't talk about deeper stuff like that."

"Yeah," laughed Sam. Silence drapes over us again, but this time it's more comfortable. I'm lost in my thoughts trying to think of what to say next, but there's too much. I've never had an opportunity like this before. However it's not shocking or overwhelming, even though it's with Sam of all people — instead it's therapeutic.

The silence is broken once again by Sam:

"Like I never told you guys that my parents got divorced."

"I'm-I'm sorry," I say, "That really sucks." I'm disappointed in myself for not saying more.

"It's O.K.," Sam says, but I know he's lying. I can feel his sadness.

Drowning in my thoughts, I try to pick out something to say. But there's too much to say. There are too many options after being silent for 16 years.

Headlights appear in front of us, and for a split second I'm relieved, but it rapidly turns into regret.

Knowing it's Rose, I quickly tell Sam, "If you ever want to talk again just let me know."

I say hi to Rose, masking my solemn, thoughtful mood as tiredness. The warm breeze gives my cheek one final kiss; nature resumes her number, and the cars roll by again as Sam and I reluctantly step into the car.[1]

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1 "The Winners of Our Personal Narrative Essay Contest," *New York Times*, January 7, 2020.