

# The Manly Thing

Patrick Boxall

**M**y friends and I are talking about doing the manly thing.

We are twenty-eight and drinking pints and it's been ten years since we were together in this pub.

We are trading and topping stories, making things up and putting each other down.

We are lawyers and accountants and athletes and musicians and in marketing and medicine and we are *just* teachers, though some of us haven't learnt a thing.

We have fucked and fought and found our way, or a way, and we're in way over our heads.

We've been apart for years and we're a part of something bigger and we don't know what to do.

We are eight or twelve or seventeen and we are singing

the school song on a Thursday morning.

We sing: *the fight is lost or fairly won.*

We sing: *the manly thing is being done.*

We are singing loudly, singing proudly, surrounded by mentors and men whose definition of the manly thing has now landed them in prison.

We are surrounded by men who only have eyes for boys, and boys who know what a man *should* be but are blind to what men are.

We are surrounded by men who are more than *just* teachers, by men who fought in court and lost but not as much as those that trusted them.

We are in university and invincible and we are alphas and betas and snorting Charlie off a toilet in the bowels of a sandstone fortress.

We drink cheap wine out of necessity and beer out of funnels and the Kool Aid out of tradition.

We are navigating blurred memories and blurred lines and to some they are equally pliable.

We need to get something off our chests, but we would never dog the boys.

We're driving drunk and driving fast and we're invincible but our friend in the passenger seat isn't.

We're locked up in a single cell and every single cell wishes we'd said something other than she'll be right, because in the end, she wasn't.

We're learning about consequences and we're learn-

ing too late and we're getting second chances and finally realising not everyone does.

We are in the workplace and we are invincible, and we are climbing up the corporate ladder.

We're grinding, we're hustling, we're following our passions and we are making six-figure salaries with views across a shimmering city skyline.

Or that's what we say, like everyone else.

We are balancing work and a life lived for the weekends we write off.

We are supportive co-workers watching colleagues smash glass ceilings and we are supportive husbands smashing glasses against the wall.

We are ducking responsibility as she ducks for her life and we are sleeping with our friends' shaking partners on the floor because we've only just realised that we don't know what we're capable of when there's no-one else around.

We don't know what we're capable of, but we know what we can do.

We can walk through the park at night and make it home safely.

We can listen to music instead of footsteps that keep pace with our own.

We can say no as a statement instead of an invitation to change our minds and we can speak up but we're not sure what to say.

We're winning bread and bringing home the bacon  
and still we don't feel full.

We are hungry but we don't know what to eat and we  
are wary of adverse reactions.

We drink six packs and sculpt them, but we can't do  
both and we can't choose between them.

We want to stand for something more than a preg-  
nant woman on the train, but we can't pull ourselves up  
with this weight on our shoulders.

We are manspreading and mansplaining and man, we  
are keeping our mouths shut and sitting on the fence  
with our legs crossed.

We are sitting on the fence after our friend swung  
from one with his heart broken before his neck.

He couldn't hold onto love and he couldn't find it in  
us because we wouldn't show it.

We're shouting *not all men*, but we all know one.

We're shouting *not all men*, but we've all been one.

We're shouting *not all men*, but we've all lost one.

Instead of doing the manly thing, we are talking  
about it.

Right now, that seems more important.

**Patrick Boxall** is a writer, editor and expedition guide. He has written for Intrepid Travel and Lonely Planet. His fiction was published in *Going Down Swinging*. His story 'Blitzkrieg' won the Stuart Hadow Short Story Prize 2020. When he's not writing, he's walking; either across countries or to his local pub.