

Has anyone ever seen the film “About a Boy”? If you haven’t you should. About a Boy is an adaptation of Nick Hornby’s 1998 novel. The film is one of Hugh Grant’s more fabulous depictions of foppish English manhood. As I wrote “foppish” I realised I ought to look it up to make sure I definitely understood its meaning. Hugh Grant’s character in About a Boy is called Will; the namesake of the character he also played in Notting Hill. Photographs of the interchangeable “Will” could easily appear alongside the dictionary definition of “foppish”...you get the point. Anyway, About a Boy is probably as good a metaphorical reference for this period of global pandemic as any. People are so aptly referring to the pandemic as “strange and troubled times”. Has anyone noticed that by the way? That regularly emails are received with newly developed tropes; “I hope you’re well in these strange times” etc. We even feel the need to acknowledge how odd this all feels in our email correspondence, despite the fact that it’s perfectly obvious how odd it is, and you’d have to be living under a rock (buried deep in the ground) to miss the fact that we are living through the most catastrophic public health crisis in about a century. If anyone wants a reference for that I’d advise you not to Google “Spanish Flu”. It doesn’t really bare making comparisons.

Where were we? About a Boy and the hapless Will. The film premiered in 2002, so I don’t think any of this needs a spoiler alert. Will is a cynical immature young man (according to IMBD) who lives off of the royalties of a catchy Christmas song that his Father wrote and (presumably) made millions from. As a result of this, Will lives a pretty docile lifestyle. He wouldn’t know what a 9 – 5 was if it arrived at his front door and introduced itself. He measures out his time in “units” of half an hour. The activities he fills those units with range from going to the gym to watching re-runs of television shows. He has a particular propensity for obsessive coffee making. His most eventful days involve dating the most recent attractive female in his life that he isn’t committed to. Apart from that last bit (for social distancing prevents us), we could all probably find uncomfortable similarities between Will and ourselves in lockdown. But that’s the issue isn’t it (for some of us). The lack of activity feels “uncomfortable”. There’s a sloth like reality to our lives at the moment and depending on one’s personality type, that may sit more or less comfortably. Does anyone have a gnawing ache that they “should” be being productive? How many of us have baked sour dough, started a home fitness regime or become budding vegetable gardeners? If you answered yes to any or all of the above, should that feel any more or less recognised as an achievement than those who answered no? Hands up if you’ve sat on the sofa eating all the cake and made friends with the Majestic delivery driver? (Other wine merchants are available).

The thing about Will which makes About a Boy one of Grant’s more endearing films, is the introduction to his life of Marcus. Marcus is a 12 year old boy who has moved to London with his overbearing Mother Fiona, following his parents’ separation. Fiona is pre-occupied with living a sustainable and eco-friendly lifestyle, and doesn’t recognise Marcus’ apparent need to be a 12 year old boy who “fits in”. Enter Will (stage left) who Marcus begins to spend time with. Will and Marcus are acquainted after Marcus rumbles Will’s most recent plot to find a date; attendance at the parenting group “SPAT” (Single Parents Alone Together) which Marcus’ Mother (and her attractive female friend) attend. In case it isn’t perfectly obvious already, Will does not have a child. Hence, he is missing a key component for attendance at SPAT. The quid pro quo of Marcus effectively keeping this quiet is that he gets to “hang out” with Will. I should say, there aren’t any obvious safeguarding checks undertaken on Will, so for now we have to suspend our disbelief and assume Will isn’t a schedule 1 offender. I will try not to spoil the ending, but what follows is a story of personal growth for both man and boy, culminating in Will having permitted Marcus to feel more like a teenage boy, whilst Marcus teaches Will to be a more caring and generally “connected” individual. The plot thickens of course because what we actually see is Fiona becoming more and more depressed, until she attempts suicide. She is discovered by Marcus. By the end of the film, Fiona is en route to a pretty successful recovery and an extended group of unlikely friends spend Christmas together in a much happier scene than our protagonists experienced an hour and 45 minutes ago.

In the final scene of the film, Marcus is now about a year older. We find Marcus, Will, Fiona and a new extended family (some of whom were acquired from SPAT) together at Christmas. Marcus delivers what ought to be credited (in this correspondents humble opinion) as the defining line of the film;

*“I used to think two wasn’t enough. Now there were loads of people ... I don’t know what Will was so upset about. All I meant was I don’t think couples are the future. You need more than that. You need back up. The way I saw it, Will and I both had backup now. It’s like that thing he told me Jon Bon Jovi said: “No man is an island”.”*

If you excuse the obvious misquote, doesn’t he have a point? There have been numerous points during this whole horrendous episode that I have been grateful for my “back up”. The corona-coaster of emotions (as it’s been termed) leads me quickly to feel guilty for even writing about gratitude. I risk being “one of those smug people”. In the midst of a global pandemic and untold grief for some, it may be that posts all over social media about being “hash-tag-blessed” aren’t always the most helpful. But there is something in that as well. If individually or collectively we are even wondering whether our joy (if we are lucky enough to feel it at the moment) should or could be expressed more considerately, that seems to be a level of kindness which isn’t always obvious in the hum drum. There aren’t many silver-linings, but perhaps kindness is one?

Some days I feel absolutely fine. I’m pleased for the slower pace of life, and I’m grateful for my home and my partner. Other days I am a whole mass of contradictions. For the comedy value, the most recent of these is the sheer relief of eating a lunch each day which isn’t a sweaty sandwich from the Court canteen. This is followed sharply by the pang of nostalgia I feel for those halcyon days in said Court canteen, chatting to my friends at the Bar, fuelled by awful machine made coffee (which my pupil supervisor insisted had “at least trace elements of caffeine”) and KitKats. On a slightly more prosaic note, the issues with the Court canteen are nothing compared to the practical reality of the fear some of us feel on an almost daily basis about our loved ones. There is a quiet dread that I experience, lurking somewhere below my sternum, that my Grandfather might begin to cough, or my step-children could become ill. David Mitchell (of Mitchell and Webb fame) sums this up perfectly for me. He’s spent a considerable amount of time expressing his undying love for his wife Victoria Coren-Mitchell in the press. His public displays of affection are delivered with such sincerity, wit and comedic timing that one can’t help but be pleased for them. In his memoir “Back Story”, Mitchell speaks at length about the many “upsides” of him having fallen in love with Victoria, someone he plainly considers to be his soul mate. All of that, says he, is tempered by the following:

*“The downside is the fear of something happening to her. The pressure of there being two bodies in the world that I want to keep from harm and only being able to watchfully inhabit one of them. I wonder if you know what I mean. I hope you do, for your sake. It’s a worry I’ll have to learn to live with because I’m definitely out of wishes”.*

That must be right. And it must be transferable. It doesn’t really matter for me whether it’s romantic love or any other flavour. Parents, children, Aunts, Uncles, friends, extended family ... any of us who are lucky enough to have any of these probably, at some point, feel a quiet fear which is more or less prevalent depending on climate. And in this climate, we could do with a section in the weather forecast after the news at 10, which correlates levels of fear across the country for our loved ones with the extent of the crisis on any given day.

This week is Mental Health Awareness week. For some of us, what is going on at the moment might be more difficult to keep organised than for others. Arguably, it’s really quite dreadful for everyone. It seems to me to make sense not to compare dread. I’m not sure it is entirely worthwhile pretending that everything is ok because “there’s always someone worse off”. Everything is relative to the crisis that we’re in. If you haven’t baked 17 sour dough loaves, or developed a wash board stomach, that really is fine. If you’re completely ok one day and a total mess the next, that’s equally fine. A fabulous therapist once suggested to me that it is helpful to “manage state, manage thoughts”, in that order. There is something reassuring about just concerning ourselves with base needs and instincts. If you’re stressed,

hungry or tired, it makes complete sense to manage that before you start to unpick the thoughts around that or flowing from it. So eat, nap, walk, bathe! I cannot recommend a bath highly enough at the moment. Maybe it's comforting because there aren't many scenarios post-birth that we're wrapped up in warm liquid? There's probably something hindbrain about it. If you can't manage state or thoughts, or either, call for backup. We are uniquely placed at the Bar. There aren't many (and by "aren't many" I mean zero) other commercial organisations in the world who think it is a good idea to take more than a handful of self-employed people who argue for a living and ask them (without any employment hierarchy) to work together in a sort of utilitarian middle class version of a workhouse that we call "Chambers". Apparently our Chambers archives (and I'm likely to get in trouble for releasing some kind of commercially sensitive information here), records a heated debate one Chambers AGM about the brand of toilet paper used and whether a move to a more inexpensive brand was a sensible business decision. You literally couldn't write it. Except somebody did. More to my enjoyment. There is a slightly dysfunctional familial link created by those we work with. It isn't quite as institutional as the armed forces, probably only because of what I consider to be an inherent lack of organisation and a dose or two too much of chaos which pervades some of my favourite members of the Bar.

The moral of the ramble? If you haven't spoken to someone in a while, check in. It might be all the difference they need.

Mental Health Week is supported by the NHS campaign "Every Mind Matters", which can be found with a quick Google. The Samaritans continue to support those who need them, and can be reached on 116 123. Their number is free, won't appear on phone bills and is available 24/7.

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