

**HOW
TO
BUILD
A GIRL**

CAITLIN
MORAN



EBURY
PRESS

ONE

I am lying in bed, next to my brother, Lupin.

He is six years old. He is asleep.

I am fourteen. I am not asleep. I am masturbating.

I look at my brother and think, nobly, 'This is what he would want. He would want me to be happy.'

After all, he loves me. He wouldn't want me to be stressed. And I love him – although I must stop thinking about him while I'm masturbating. It feels wrong. I am trying to get my freak on. I can't have siblings wandering into my sexual hinterland. We may share a bed tonight – he left his bunk at midnight, crying, and got in next to me – but we cannot share a sexual hinterland. He needs to leave my consciousness.

'I have to do this on my own,' I say to him, firmly, in my head – placing a pillow between us, for privacy. This is our little, friendly Berlin Wall. Sexually aware adolescents on one side (West Germany), six-year-old boys on the other (Communist Europe). The line must be held. It is only proper.

It's little wonder I need to masturbate – today has been very stressful. The Old Man didn't get famous, again.

Missing for two days, he returned this afternoon, just after lunch, with his arm around a dishevelled young man, carbuncular, in a thin, grey, shiny suit and a pink tie.

'This, *cock*,' my father said, fondly, 'is our future. Say hello to the future, kidders.'

We all politely said hello to the cock, our future.

In the hallway, our father informed us, in a cloud of Guinness, that he believed the young man was a record company talent scout, from London, called Rock Perry – ‘although he might also be called Ian’.

We looked back at the man, sitting on our collapsing, pink sofa in the front room. Rock was very drunk. He had his head in his hands, and his tie looked like it had been put on by an enemy, and was strangling him. He didn’t look like the future. He looked like 1984. In 1990, that was an ancient thing to be – even in Wolverhampton.

‘Play this right, and we’ll be fucking *millionaires*,’ our father said, in a loud whisper.

We ran into the garden, to celebrate – me and Lupin. We swung on the swing together, planning our future.

My mother and my big brother Krissi, however, stayed silent. In our front room, they have seen the future come – and go – before. The future always has different names, and different clothes, but the same thing happens, time after time: the future only comes to our house when it is drunk. The future must then be kept drunk – because the future must, somehow, be tricked into taking us with it, when it leaves. We must hide ourselves in the fur of the future, like burrs – all seven of us – and ride its ass, all the way out of this tiny house and back down to London, and fame, and riches, and parties, where we belong.

So far, this has never worked. The future has always, eventually, walked out of the door without us. We have been stuck now, on a council estate in Wolverhampton, for thirteen years – waiting. Five children now – the unexpected twins are three weeks old – and two adults. We have to get out of here soon. God, we have to get out of here soon. We cannot hold on being

poor, and not-famous, much longer. The 1990s are a bad time to be poor, and not-famous.

Back in the house, things are already going wrong. My mother's hissed instruction to me, 'Get in that kitchen, and bulk that bolognese out with peas! We've got guests!' – means I have now served Rock a plate of pasta – I curtsy a little, when I hand it over – which he is shovelling into his mouth with all the passion of a man who desperately wants to sober up, aided only by *petit pois*.

With Rock trapped by the hot plate on his knees, my father is now standing, unsteadily, in front of him, doing his pitch. We know the pitch by heart.

'You never *say* the pitch,' the Old Man has explained, many times. 'You *are* the pitch. You *live* the pitch. The pitch is when you let them know you're one of *them*.'

Looming over the guest, my father is holding a cassette in his hand.

'Son,' he says. 'Mate. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm a man of ... taste. Not wealth. Not yet – heh heh heh. And I have gathered you here today, to lay some truth on you. Because there are three men without whom none of us would be here today,' he continues, trying to open the cassette box with booze-swollen fingers. 'The Holy Trinity. The alpha, epsilon and omega of all right-thinking people. The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The only three men I've ever loved. The Three Bobbies: Bobby Dylan. Bobby Marley. And Bobby Lennon.'

Rock Perry stares up at him – as confused as we all were the first time Dadda said this to us.

'And all every muso on Earth is trying to do,' Dadda continues, 'is get to the point where they could go up to these

cunts, in the pub, and go, I hear you, mate. I hear you, mate. But can you hear *me*? You go to them, “You are a buffalo soldier, Bobby. You are Mr Tambourine Man, Bobby. You are the fucking walrus, Bobby. I know that. But I – I am Pat Morrigan. And I am *this*.”

My father finally gets the cassette out of the box, and waves it at Rock Perry.

‘Do you know what this is, mate?’ he asks Rock Perry.

‘A C90?’ Rock asks.

‘Son, this is the last fifteen years of my life,’ Dadda replies. He puts the cassette into Rock’s hands. ‘It doesn’t feel like it, does it? You wouldn’t think you could put a man’s whole life in your hands. But that’s what you’ve got there. I guess that makes you like a fucking giant, son. Do you like feeling like a giant?’

Rock Perry stares down, blankly, at the cassette in his hand. He looks like a man who feels quite confused.

‘And you know what will make you like a *king*? Putting this out, and selling ten million copies of it, on compact disc,’ Dadda says. ‘It’s like alchemy. You and me, we can turn our lives into three fucking yachts each, and a Lamborghini, and more fanny than you can beat off with a stick. Music is like magic, cocker. Music can change your life. But before it does – Johanna, go and get this gentleman a drink.’

Dadda is now talking to me.

‘A drink?’ I ask.

‘In the kitchen, in the kitchen,’ he says, irritably. ‘The drinks are in the kitchen, Johanna.’

I go into the kitchen. Mum’s standing in there, wearily holding a baby.

‘I’m going to bed,’ she says.

‘But Daddy’s just about to get a record deal!’ I say.

Mum makes a noise that, in later years, Marge Simpson will become famous for.

‘He’s asked me to get a drink for Rock Perry,’ I say, carrying the message with all the urgency that I feel it deserves. ‘But we don’t have any drink, do we?’

My mother gestures, with infinite fatigue, to the sideboard, on which stand two half-full pint-glasses of Guinness.

‘He brought them back. In his pockets,’ she says. ‘Along with that pool cue.’

She gestures to the pool cue, stolen from the Red Lion, that is now propped up against the cooker. In our house, it looks as incongruous as a penguin.

‘It was in his trousers. I don’t know how he does it,’ she sighs. ‘We’ve still got one from the last time.’

It’s true. We do already have a stolen pool cue. As we don’t have a pool table – even Dadda can’t steal that – Lupin has been using the first stolen pool cue as Gandalf’s staff, whenever we play *Lord of the Rings*.

This conversation about pool cues is interrupted when, from the front room, there is a sudden blast of volume. I recognise the song instantly – it’s Dadda’s latest demo, a song called ‘Dropping Bombs’. The audition has obviously begun.

Until very recently, ‘Dropping Bombs’ had been a mid-tempo ballad – but then Dadda found the ‘reggae’ setting on his Yamaha keyboard – ‘The fucking Bobby Marley button! Yes! Get in!’ – and has re-worked it accordingly.

It’s one of Dadda’s ‘political’ songs, and it’s dead moving: the first three verses are written from the point of view of a nuclear bomb, being dropped on women and children in Vietnam, Korea and Scotland. For three verses, the bomb impassively imagines the destruction it will cause – destruction narrated by Dadda, using a ‘robot’ microphone effect.

'Your skin will boil/And the people will toil/To make sense of it all/And crops from burnt soil,' the robot-bomb says, sadly.

In the last verse, the bomb suddenly realises the error of its ways, rebels against the American forces that made it, and decides to explode in mid-air – showering the astonished, cowering people below with rainbows.

'I was blowing people up – but now I'm blowing minds,' the last chorus runs, accompanied by a haunting riff played on Yamaha keyboard-voice number 44: 'Oriental flute.'

Dadda thinks it's his best song – he used to play it to us every night, before bed, until Lupin started having nightmares about burning kids, and started wetting the bed again.

I go into the front room, carrying the two half-full glasses, curtseying, and expecting to find Rock Perry enthusing wildly about 'Dropping Bombs'. Instead, I find Dadda shouting at Rock Perry.

'That's not on, mate,' he's roaring, over the music. 'That's not *on*.'

'I'm sorry,' Rock says. 'I didn't mean—'

'Nah,' Dadda says, shaking his head, slowly. 'Nah. You can't say that. You just don't *say* that.'

Krissi, who has been sitting on the sofa all this time – holding the ketchup bottle, in case Rock Perry wants tomato sauce – fills me in, in a whisper. Apparently, Rock Perry compared 'Dropping Bombs' to 'Another Day in Paradise' by Phil Collins, and Dadda has become furious. This is curious, because Dadda actually quite likes Phil Collins.

'But he's *not a Bobby*,' Dadda is saying – lips tight, and slightly foamy. 'I'm talking about the *revolution* here. Not fucking – *no jackets required*. I don't care about fucking jackets. I don't *have* a jacket. I don't *require* you to not require a jacket.'

‘I’m sorry – I just meant – I actually quite *like* Phil Collins ...’ Rock is saying, miserably. But Dadda has already taken the plate of pasta off Rock, and is pushing him towards the door.

‘Go on then, you cunt,’ he says. ‘Go on. You cunt. Can fuck off.’

Rock stands in the doorway, unsteadily – unsure if this is a joke or not.

‘No – you can *fuck off*,’ my father repeats. ‘You – fuck-y off-y.’

He is saying this in a Chinese accent. I’m not quite sure why.

In the hallway, my mother approaches Rock.

‘I’m so sorry,’ my mother says, with a practised air.

She looks around, for some way to make it better – then picks up a bunch of bananas, from a crate in the hallway. We always buy fruit in bulk, from the wholesale market. My dad has a fake ID card, which asserts the holder that he runs a corner shop in the village of Trysull. My dad does not run a corner shop in the village of Trysull.

‘Please. Have these.’

For a moment, Rock Perry stares at my mother holding out a bunch of bananas. She is in the foreground of his vision. Behind her is my father, carefully turning up every setting on the stereo to its maximum.

‘Just ... one?’ Rock Perry says, trying to be reasonable.

‘Please,’ my mother says, pushing the whole bunch into his hand.

Rock Perry takes them – clearly still utterly bewildered – and starts walking down our path. He’s only halfway down when my father appears in the doorway.

‘Because – THIS IS WHAT I DO!’ he shouts to Rock.

Rock starts a gentle trot down the path, and crosses the road in haste, still carrying his bananas.

‘THIS IS WHAT I DO! THIS IS ME!’ Dadda continues

to shout, across the road. The neighbours' net curtains are twitching. Mrs Forsyth is out on her front doorstep, with her customary disapproval. 'THIS IS MY FUCKING MUSIC! THIS IS MY SOUL!'

Rock Perry gets to the bus stop, over the road, and very slowly crouches down, until he's hidden by a bush. He stays that way until the 512 arrives. I know, because I go upstairs, with Krissi, and we watch him from our bedroom window.

'What a waste of six bananas,' Krissi says. 'I could have had those on my cereal all week. Great. Another irredeemably bland breakfast.'

'MY FUCKING HEART!' my father bellows, after the departing bus – banging his chest with his fist. 'You know what you're leaving here? MY FUCKING HEART!'

Half an hour after the shouting – when 'Dropping Bombs' ends, after its triumphal, twelve-minute-long finale – my dad goes out again.

He is going out to top up his heart, back in the same pub he found Rock Perry in.

'Perhaps he's going to see if Rock left behind a twin that he can also abuse?' Krissi, says, caustically.

The Old Man doesn't come home until 1am. We know when he comes home, because we hear him crash the van into the lilac tree, on the drive. The clutch falls out, with a distinctive crunching sound. We know the sound of a clutch falling out of a Volkswagen caravanette. We have heard it many times before.

In the morning, we come downstairs and find, in the middle of the front room, a large, concrete statue, in the shape of a fox. The statue does not have a head.

‘It’s your mum’s anniversary present,’ Dad explains, sitting on the back doorstep, smoking, and wearing my pink dressing gown, which is too small for him, and which reveals his testicles. ‘I bloody love your mother.’

He smokes, and looks up at the sky. ‘One day, we’ll all be kings,’ he says. ‘I am the bastard son of Brendan Behan. And all these cunts will bow down to me.’

‘What about Rock Perry?’ I ask, after a minute or two of us considering this inevitable future. ‘Are you going to hear from him again?’

‘I don’t deal with bullshitters, kidder,’ my father said, authoritatively, pulling the dressing gown over his balls, and taking another drag on his cigarette.

We find out later – through Uncle Aled, who knows a man who knows a man – that Rock Perry is, indeed, a man called Ian, who is not a record company talent scout at all, but in fact a cutlery salesman, from Sheffield, and the only ‘deal’ he would ever be able to sort out for us is an eighty-eight-piece canteen of electroplated cutlery, £59, with an APR of 14.5 per cent.

And so that’s why I’m lying in bed, next to Lupin, having this tiny, quiet wank. Half from stress, half from pleasure. For I am, as I have recorded in my diary, ‘a hopeless romantic’. If I can’t go on a date with a boy – I am fourteen, I have never gone on a date with a boy – then at least I can go on a date with me. A bed-date, ie: a wank.

I come – thinking of the character Herbert Viola in *Moonlighting*, who I think has a kind face – pull my nightie back down, kiss the sleeping Lupin, and go to sleep.